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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Rebuilding the Bachelor's Degree

By *Jeffrey J. Selingo* | APRIL 13, 2016  PREMIUM

Steven Voss for The Chronicle Review

**B**y the time Dylan Greiss arrived at Emerson College in Boston his freshman year, he had already interned at MTV as part of an apprenticeship at his New Jersey high school. He knew he wanted a career in film editing, but first he had to follow the route of most college freshmen and plow through a litany of required general-education courses.

For Greiss, the classes were "tedious and dull" and lacked any connection to the outside world of work that he had tasted as a high-school senior. The hands-on capstone courses in his major — those featured in admissions materials of most of the colleges he considered, including Emerson — wouldn't come until near the end of his undergraduate career.

Greiss knew that learning about the world beyond film editing would prove important to his career eventually. But like many 18-year-olds he didn't understand why the undergraduate curriculum mostly hewed to a bifurcated model, with lecture-heavy introductory courses followed by experiential upper-level courses, and — from what he could tell — a limited amount of transfer of knowledge between the two.

"I felt like I was wasting time and money," Greiss told me. "I was taking a steady diet of courses that didn't give me a chance to show what I knew or prove that I could translate that to other tasks."

After three semesters at Emerson he dropped out and enrolled in a six-week boot camp for film editing in New York City. In doing so, the 22-year-old Greiss joined more than 2.2 million twenty-somethings in the United States who have left college short of a degree. Young adults in their 20s represent the largest slice by far of the U.S. population with 60 credits and no credential, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

I met Greiss while researching a book about the often difficult transition today's young adults face in landing a good job and navigating career paths after graduating from college. What I heard from him echoed what other recent graduates had told me about the

shortcomings of their bachelor's degree: that it failed to provide them enough time for hands-on learning or the space for creativity and independent thinking — the qualities most in demand by employers today.

Complaints about the state of undergraduate education didn't come from just students, however. Employers I interviewed lamented that their recent hires with newly minted bachelor's degrees were underprepared, complaints that are nothing new, of course, but that seem to have grown louder in recent years. And I heard from dozens of faculty members at all types of institutions who were frustrated with the either/or arguments pitting liberal education against professional training that have come to define the debates over curricular reform efforts.

What I concluded after nearly two years of interviews with employers, recent graduates, career advisers, and professors was that efforts to simply reform the undergraduate course catalog are not enough if we hope to prepare students for a future where automation threatens to increasingly displace college-educated workers. A desperate need exists for wholesale reform of the baccalaureate degree.

Until now, fiddling with the actual structure of the four-year degree has been mostly off limits — except for a few experiments with a three-year version at a handful of colleges. Institutions are reluctant to change the inner workings of the bachelor's degree because they are unsure exactly what part of its complex formula leads to success.

Think of the original bachelor's degree as the foundation of a house built in the middle of the 17th century. It consisted of courses derived from the classic liberal arts. Over the following decades, the curriculum grew and evolved. Courses and majors were built on top of that foundation as if the builder just kept adding more and more rooms to the house. Today, the house lacks a clear sense of any architectural identity, is in parts structurally unsound, and is at risk of collapsing under its own weight.

## The four-year degree reflects historical circumstance more than it does a consideration of

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Clark Kerr, the former president of the University of California, once observed that a college's curriculum is how institutions distinguish themselves. While it may be a statement about "what, out of the totality of man's

## what a 21st-century graduate should be.

constantly growing knowledge and experience, is considered useful, appropriate, or relevant" at the time, undergraduate catalogs have seen far more additions than subtractions. In

the 1970s, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education found that the typical large university offered more than 2,000 courses. Smaller liberal-arts colleges usually had a thousand courses listed, basically one for every two or three students enrolled. Faculty members who saw themselves as keepers of the curriculum felt that they could teach anything they wanted as long as they could find a few students to fill a course.

Over the last decade the number of academic majors has grown by 20 percent, according to a list of academic programs compiled by the U.S. Education Department. And as the bachelor's degree grew to include internships, new course requirements for majors, and remedial classes for students who were not really prepared for college-level work, it was all crammed into the four-year window. After all, the public was demanding that more students graduate on time.

The bachelor's degree was supposed to enrich your knowledge, make you a better citizen, help you figure out what you wanted to do with the rest of your life, and then land you the job that would start you off on that career trajectory. But the credential was never designed to serve the millions of students of varying academic capabilities and professional interests it now does each year, nor was it intended as the sole training mechanism for a job.

The modern four-year degree reflects historical circumstance more than it does an open-minded consideration of what a 21st-century graduate should be.

**T**he first colleges in the American colonies — Harvard University, the College of William & Mary, and Yale University — imported much of their structure from Europe: the four-year degree, the organization of the curriculum into courses with finite time blocks, even the titles "freshmen," "sophomores," "juniors," and "seniors."

Harvard actually started with a three-year degree but had switched to a four-year plan by 1654, and most of higher education followed, of course. By today's standards, the undergraduate curriculum was quite limited, consisting largely of courses seen as the best preparation for lawyers, ministers, and statesmen: grammar, rhetoric, logic, astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music. Most people entered careers through apprenticeships, where they studied with a master teacher and practiced new skills as they learned them. The college degree was certainly not the admission ticket to a profession that it is now.

After the American Revolution, however, colleges expanded their curriculum to respond to a growing nation. But as they added programs, colleges rarely culled any of the courses that already existed. Religion expanded to include philosophy. Then the social sciences, such as economics and sociology, were added.

In 1828, Yale released a widely cited report on the curriculum that said students should study a variety of topics to develop all areas of their minds. By the middle of the century, though, the president of Brown University, Francis Wayland, worried that higher-education institutions were going to become obsolete if they focused solely on exercising students' brains. Wayland worried, in particular, about the need for civil engineers to build railroads.

Thus started the debate over the purpose of college — should it provide a broad education or training for a job? — that continues to this day. The land-grant colleges created by the Morrill Act in 1862 eventually became behemoths in their states, adding programs in mechanics, engineering, and manufacturing to their agricultural curriculum. The number of vocational majors took off over the next century, as programs and entire schools within universities were created in education, business, public administration, and journalism.

As individual disciplines outlined their own degree requirements, students' experiences differed vastly, depending on their major. An engineering student might need 100 credits to complete a major, while a history major might need only half that many. That fractionalization of the undergraduate experience led to a backlash in the first half of the 1900s. Many colleges added a core curriculum that all students had to follow, usually in their first year. As enrollments grew with the arrival of the baby boomers in the 1960s and 1970s, a required list of courses fell out of favor with students and faculty alike. It was replaced by "distribution requirements," where students had a choice of courses to take within a broad area.

The bachelor's degree that emerged at the turn of this century intensified the debate about the purpose of college. Today employers want graduates pretrained for a job. That, along with the economic insecurity of today's job market, has resulted in a flight away from the liberal arts on campuses — the number of B.A.'s awarded in the humanities has fallen to its lowest level since 2003.

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Practical degrees are more in vogue. Business is the most popular undergraduate major now, and colleges have revamped their academic programs and added more pre-professional programs (even in narrowly tailored areas such as social media) to make degrees more likely to lead to a job. Freshmen responding to an annual survey conducted by researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles now list getting a better job as the most important reason to go to college. A decade ago, the top reason given was learning about things that interested them.

With college seen as the only means to a job, enrollment in higher education has surged. So too have the number of college dropouts, because campuses often welcome students who don't have the academic chops to finish a degree. Today, only 33 percent of students at

public colleges get their bachelor's degree within four years; 57 percent graduate within six years. The numbers are not that much better at private colleges. Just over half of students graduate in four years and 65 percent within six years.

Why do so many students struggle to graduate on time or at all? Some of them arrive on campus with aspirations that never match their talents. A student may want to be a nurse but run into trouble with biology, or aspire to be an engineer but fail math. Many are overwhelmed by the seemingly endless options, choosing trendy majors over ones better suited to their personalities and skills. Or like Dylan Greiss, they fail to see the relevance of introductory courses and leave.



Meanwhile, as the cost of college has spiraled ever upward and median family incomes have fallen, Americans are increasingly questioning the value of a degree. The recent Gallup-Purdue Index, for instance, found that only 38 percent of recent graduates strongly agreed

that their higher education was worth the cost.

For undergraduate education to remain relevant in a 21st-century economy where jobs and careers are expanding and contracting at alarming speed, the bachelor's degree needs to be more agile and adaptive and less of a commodity that is delivered at graduation. Several projects underway offer a road map for a future bachelor's degree that better captures learning outside the classroom, provides deeper experiences earlier in an undergraduate's career, and is less discipline-focused.

**I**n a red clapboard house across the street from Georgetown University's main campus, the university has established an academic incubator designed to reimagine the undergraduate experience.

The Red House is a cramped space filled with posters dotted with sticky notes and elaborate drawings of models showing how students move through their undergraduate years. The chief architect of what happens in the house is Randy Bass, vice provost of education, who still teaches undergraduates. Bass is a strong advocate for liberal education, but he maintains that the traditional bachelor's degree could include a better mix of both broad learning across the disciplines and the kinds of experiences that can strengthen professional development.

The problem, as he sees it, is that many relevant learning experiences students have outside the classroom — service learning, undergraduate research, and internships — often don't contribute to the credits included in the price of a degree. "We only charge for a portion of what students see as the value, and too often these experiences remain disconnected from the curriculum," Bass says.

The discussions at Georgetown aim to strike out those inefficiencies, and at the same time, marry practical skills and broad education. One idea would combine a liberal-arts bachelor's degree with a professional master's degree, roughly within the time frame of four

years. Several colleges already offer combined degrees, of course, but they typically take five years, and the master's experience is usually bolted on at the very end, almost as an afterthought.

Instead, in one version Georgetown is considering, the entire track to the degree would be different. Professors would identify the competencies students needed to learn throughout the curriculum, whether in a fraction of a course or outside the walls of the university in internships or projects. For example, for a combined degree in Social Justice Communication, competencies might include "responsible and ethical messaging" and "working with diverse constituencies."

"That stuff that has been on the margins of the curricular experience could now be built into this new degree," Bass said, "closer to the center of what we do."

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## **The most valuable new degrees will provide a mix of academic disciplines, workplace experiences, and hands-on projects.**

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If such a combined degree comes to fruition it probably won't be less expensive than the four-year degree is now, but Bass believes it will add more value for some students. About a third of Georgetown seniors already go part-time in their last semester because they have completed their degree requirements. Another third can go

part-time but don't. In the future, this kind of combined degree could make use of that extra time.

Traditionalists keep asking Bass where in his model the bachelor's degree ends and the master's begins. But this model envisions it as one integrated experience, where the undergraduate studies shrink over four years as the work associated with the master's grows. "Maybe, over time," Bass says, "we would be creating a new kind of liberal-arts degree."

A second approach to a reimagined bachelor's degree is emerging at Arizona State University, where I teach. It aims to "flip the curriculum" by shifting engaging learning experiences to the first year of college instead of making students wait until their senior year for the project-based work that is a hallmark of capstone courses and that students at small liberal-arts colleges often get in their freshman year. In doing so, Arizona State hopes to demonstrate that intimate learning experiences can be infused throughout the curriculum even at large state universities and at the same time improve its freshman retention rate, which now stands at 84 percent.

Backed by a \$4-million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the university is testing out a bachelor's degree across 11 majors in which students learn nearly half of the subject matter for their academic program through a series of cohort-based projects instead of a specified schedule of classes. Engineering students might build a robot, for example, and learn the key principles of mechanics and electronics from faculty members as needed

during the project. If students are struggling with a concept, professors could pull together an impromptu class or students could learn on their own using other resources, such as free online courses offered by other colleges.

The design of the project-based degree at Arizona State focuses on how students actually learn, says Elizabeth Capaldi Phillips, the university's former provost and one of the leaders of the grant. In a traditional course-based degree program, students might study a concept in the fourth week of a semester, but not use it until two semesters later, by which time they probably have forgotten what they learned. Or students have no idea how a theory is applied in the outside world as they are learning about it, so they quickly lose interest. By learning a new concept while working on a project, Phillips says, "you use it and you know why you use it."

A third design for a modern bachelor's degree is one that is more "modular" than today's, allowing students to pick and choose how they reach the end point so they are no longer constrained by arbitrary limits on course hours, semesters, or academic years. Imagine this future degree as a Lego set. Most people build the picture on the outside of the box, just as most students today follow similar routes to a degree. But think of everything else you can build with the pieces inside a Lego box. Consider the possibilities for piecing together a degree that better responds to the motivations for going to college and develops the skills needed in the work force of tomorrow.

The most valuable of those degrees will provide a mix of academic disciplines interwoven with workplace experiences and hands-on projects. That is the idea behind the Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation at the University of Southern California. It's a joint venture between the music producers Iovine and Young (better known as Dr. Dre), who designed the popular Beats headphones and sold the company to Apple for \$3 billion. The goal of the program is to blend three disciplines that historically students wouldn't have been able to get in one program: art and design, technology and engineering, and marketing and business.

In 2013, Iovine approached USC with a \$70-million donation for the academy because he was worried that innovation was at risk in the nation's schools. To him, everyone was being squeezed through the same narrow pipeline to college and then starting off with large, generic general-education courses that stuffed their brains with abstract concepts and rewarded the accumulation of random facts.

"The kid who's going to have an advantage in the entertainment industry today is the kid who speaks both languages: technology and liberal arts," Iovine told The Wall Street Journal soon after the program enrolled its first students. "That's what this school is about."

He hopes the program will spawn the next Steve Jobs, or at least fill a critical need for creative and tech-savvy leaders across industries. One spring afternoon near the end of the program's first year, I

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visited students who were part of the inaugural class. The program is housed in a large rotunda on the top floor of USC's student center, a space known as the Garage, which is filled with 3-D printers, hacksaws and laser cutters to fabricate products, and lots of whiteboards. Hardly any wall is straight, a reminder for everyone — both figuratively and literally — that here students can't be boxed into classrooms or majors.

The program's students hang out in the Garage at all hours of the day and night, eating meals as well as taking classes. Every few weeks they are divided into groups and given a challenge to solve. Their first challenge was to model what the music experience for listeners might look like a decade from now. After that the students worked on designing wearable medical devices, a skateboard plan for USC's campus, and an electronic overlay that enables blind people to use smartphones.

The program requires students to spend much of their senior year setting up a business prototype, although most of them have done that and more by the time they finish their first year. One the students I met, Arjun Mehta, cofounded a company in seventh grade called PlaySpan that eventually turned into a product for digital payments and was sold to Visa for nearly \$200 million. He then started another company that built an online learning platform for students and teachers.

Mehta told me he seriously considered skipping college altogether until he found out about the USC academy. For Mehta, USC offered the best of both worlds — an informal and a formal curriculum. He'd have the freedom to forge his own path, yet would also signal his seriousness and discipline by earning a much-needed college degree.

It's a pathway that Dylan Greiss and millions of other undergraduates wish they had, but even the USC program serves only two dozen of the 3,000 freshmen who enrolled at the university last year. When I caught up with Greiss recently he told me that eventually he wants to earn a bachelor's degree. For now, though, he has no regrets about his decision to leave college. Since then he's worked on the editing crew of almost a dozen films while some of his college classmates have now graduated and are struggling to find jobs in their field.



As colleges revamp their curricula, some academics have expressed concern that students will be educated too narrowly, losing the breadth of a traditional general education. But the reality is just the opposite. By marrying broad-based theory with hands-on practice from the moment students enter college they will more easily recall and transfer their learning from one context (the classroom) to another (a research project or an internship). Engaging more students in learning from Day 1 of their freshman year will only strengthen general education and encourage more students to remain in college and graduate with a degree.

Of course, general education is also meant to equip students with an understanding of the wider world and a sense of civic responsibility. Whether it still does that is debatable. As Michael W. Clune recently observed in an essay in this magazine, colleges have gutted broad-based education as we know it with "faux interdisciplinary courses, slashed distribution requirements, and the practice of using AP credits to fulfill those that remain." The development of the whole student increasingly happens as much outside the traditional classroom as in it.

Employers I interviewed in a variety of sectors understood the critical need for broad, liberal learning, even if they didn't always use the language of higher education to describe it. Indeed, they told me that what will define success in the future is the ability of college graduates to tolerate ambiguity in their jobs. The best of liberal education provides that nimble intellect. The jagged pathways to a bachelor's degree that are the basis of the experiments to reimagine the undergraduate experience provide students even more opportunities to practice their navigation skills before they enter the work force.

The problem right now is that the traditional college curriculum waits too long "to put students in over their heads," as Alan Snyder, associate provost at Lehigh University, told me. So too many recent graduates approach their job descriptions the way they did a syllabus in college: They want concrete, well-defined tasks.

These questions about the utility of the bachelor's degree come at an auspicious time. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences has convened a three-year Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education "to ensure that individual Americans receive the education they need to thrive in the twenty-first century." Its task, as well as that of every American college and university, is to ask whether the basic structure of the bachelor's degree — which still reflects the thinking of colonial days and the needs of the Industrial Revolution — is out of sync with a society that has become much more complex in the ensuing centuries. The answer to that question is yes.

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