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September 2, 2009 by Mark Bauerlein

## The State of General Education

At Emory University, undergraduates working through the courses that they need to take outside their major in order to graduate can find guidance in the college catalog. There, they learn that they must complete a certain number of courses in different subject areas, but “no rigid program for either degree [BA or BS] is prescribed by Emory College.” Students do, in fact, have lots of discretion in their college career. “Each student,” the catalog assures, “must design a program of study suited to individual interests and needs.”

But only a few sentences later appears a statement that runs against the individualist creed. The section “General Education Requirements” begins, “These courses provide for a common core of academic experience for Emory College students.” The term “common core” is a loaded one, with echoes in Core Knowledge Foundation, Common Core, and the Association for Core Texts and Courses, which advocate a body of knowledge and works that all educated adults should know.

A few pages later in the Emory catalog, however, that assertion is withdrawn. Under another section headed “General Education Requirements” appears a primary qualifier: “The general education component of an Emory undergraduate education is organized to present an array of intellectual approaches and perspectives as ways of learning rather than a prescribed body of content.”

“Ways of learning” is another loaded term that works squarely against “core knowledge.” It shifts away from content and toward method, interpretative angle, cognitive orientation, and the like. The hope is that as students take required courses in history, literature, art, science, and math, they will absorb the ways of thinking that go with each one. The topic matters less than the approach.

It sounds viable to professors who spend their lives examining various approaches, but let’s be honest about how it appears to 19-year-olds. They see such an “array” as merely a bunch of random, disconnected courses outside their major. The courses they finish don’t cohere into a “core” or a “common experience.” They’re just a bunch of heterogeneous hoops to pass through. When students can fulfill their humanities requirement by choosing from a list of 47 courses (shown in subsequent pages in the Emory catalog), we should drop the language of “core” altogether.

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This is why the American Council of Trustees and Alumni gave Emory an overall grade of “C” in its review of general education requirements at 100 top colleges across the country. It’s entitled “What Will They Learn?” ACTA’s summation of its survey:

“Instead of a limited number of courses, broad-based in focus, institutions now typically demand that students take courses in several wide subject areas—the so-called distribution requirements. Within each subject area, it is not uncommon for students to have dozens or even hundreds of courses from which to choose. ... Once distribution requirements become too loose, students inevitably graduate with an odd list of random, unconnected courses.”

Why do colleges not tighten the requirements, then? For the obvious reasons. One, students like having more choice. Two, faculty either don’t believe in, or are scared to declare, what every graduate should have read, studied, and remembered. For all too many of them, the worst trait is “prescriptive.”

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