

YOU HAVE  PREMIUM ACCESS

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

NEWS OPINION DATA ADVICE JOBS **DEAN**  RENEW  
Individual Subscriber SECTIONS

FEATURED: Most Republicans Think Colleges Are Bad for the Country. Why?

How to Talk to Famous Professors

Presidential

Search

**The Conversation**July 21, 2014 by **Matthew Pratt Guterl**  
Opinion and ideas.

## Why We Need an Open Curriculum

A few weeks ago, a student came to say goodbye. She brought along a younger friend, recently offered admission to my university, who was trying to decide whether to come to Brown or go to Duke. Given all that Duke could offer, the friend wondered, “Why come to Brown?”

We didn’t talk much about majors, or alumni networks, or the social atmospherics of the campus. Instead, we talked about curricula.

Duke’s general-education requirement “encourages breadth and depth, and balances structure with choice”; the full philosophical explanation runs to 1,800 words, and that doesn’t even include the list of courses that count for the “Areas of Knowledge” or “Modes of Inquiry” requirements.

Brown’s curriculum, by contrast, can be sketched out on a small cocktail napkin: roughly 30 classes, a writing requirement, and a major concentration. The university doesn’t just give students a little choice here or there. Brown abolished “general education” in 1969 and replaced it with what the university called the New Curriculum, then a radical experiment in student-centered learning. The result has been a culture of risk taking and academic experimentation, enriched by close advising partnerships with faculty members and other students.

I came to Brown after a long stretch at a respected public university. After being at Brown for a few years, I can assure you that the adventurous student who emerges at the end of four years here is built differently from most other students.

“Duke versus Brown” has an elitist ring to it, of course. But the basic contrast between their curricula is more broadly resonant than that. Google “General Education requirements” and a dizzying set of maps, schemas, and pie charts appear. Do the same for Brown’s New Curriculum, and you’ll see images of the student activists who proposed it and who organized a vast campus effort to carry it out. These aren’t just stylistic differences: They represent foundationally opposed philosophies of coursework.

General education is always alluring, at least to university presidents. In moments of chaos, everyone at the top loves a plan. And this, right now, is surely a moment of chaos. The federal government is proposing a ranking of universities and colleges. New digital platforms threaten to break down the bricks-and-mortar approach to learning. Public agitation about student debt and college tuition is on the rise. And the humanities, again, are in crisis. In this

### About This Blog

Posts on The Conversation present the views of their authors. They do not represent the position of the editors, nor does posting here imply any endorsement by *The Chronicle*.

Questions? Ideas? You can reach us here [opinion@chronicle.com](mailto:opinion@chronicle.com).

### Archives

Select Month

### Recent Posts

The Teaching Compact

The Growth in College Costs Is Slowing, Particularly for Poorer Families

An Adjunct’s Farewell

How to Remove Bias From Peer Review

Save the Academic Conference. It’s How Our Work Blossoms.

All But Hired: Changing Incentives for Graduate Time-to-Degree

How Sweet Briar Can Save Itself

My Nomadic Class

The ‘Story Behind the Story’: Making Lit Matter

A Field Guide to American Higher-Ed Reformers

Follow **The Conversation** through your favorite RSS reader.

landscape, general education is a “time-tested” educational ideal and, increasingly, a sort of diplomatic maneuver, its presumption of rigor addressing public concerns about accountability and quality.

The idea is old: enforced, broad-based learning across what is generally thought of as the liberal arts. Mandatory requirements across categories of courses—categories with names like “Foundations,” and “World Languages and Cultures”—create the sensation of choice within the practice of constraint. Without some kind of firm structure, the thinking goes, students will just follow a fad, a job market, an easy grade. They’ll be cloistered in their specialties, their particular interests. They’ll emerge narrow-minded.

“Regardless of major, career plans, or personal goals,” insists Indiana University (my old home), “graduates should excel in the essential skills of oral and written communication, critical thinking, and quantitative analysis. Every student should leave ... with a broad knowledge of the social and natural world, a keen sense of self, an awareness of our membership in a global society, and understanding of what it means to be thoughtful and responsible citizens of the community, state, and nation in which they live.”

To build a better student, general education is thus an all-encompassing (and well-intentioned) form of intellectual engineering.

The architecture establishes what is “essential” for students to learn, and requires that they take it up, usually at the start of their lives as undergraduates. Its focus is breadth, not depth. The result is an intricate set of requirements, and students often adopt a mercenary approach to each semester’s classes, seeking out the ones that fulfill multiple obligations—“doubling up,” as the saying goes.

Advising in these contexts generally is a matter of making sure that students simply meet the requirements to finish on time. Guiding them to completion can trump a focus on individual awakenings and, in the worst-case scenario, produce a sort of “plug and chug” approach. This leaves the intellectual growth of each student to be managed, at worst, by an impersonal structure and can turn checklists into false equivalents for major breakthroughs.

The problem is that anyone can follow a map, even if the route is hard.

*Making* a map, though, is tougher. It asks a lot of students and members of the staff and faculty. And it doesn’t always work out perfectly. Franconia College, born in 1963, offered a campuswide, collaborative “core” that unmade the conventional college degree and encouraged the self-creation of individualized curricula. The college closed in 1978 but had an impact on the lives of young men and women that cannot be measured simply by degree-completion rates. Hampshire College, the famously freewheeling liberal-arts institution that emerged from the same historical moment, requires first-year students to basically construct their own general-education curriculum, “to develop competence in the four core cumulative academic skills.” Not surprisingly, roughly 20 percent of Hampshire’s freshmen leave after their first year.

Brown's open curriculum resulted from a yearlong, student-led study of its general-education requirements during the same period. A group independent-study project (a GISP, in Brown lingo), led by Ira Magaziner and Elliot Maxwell, found that the focus on distribution requirements had led to a troubling "contradiction" and "fragmentation." Courses that originated in departments were not related to each other philosophically or pedagogically, and students were left to sort it all out themselves. The existing curriculum was thought to be too "elaborate," with too many moving parts. Finally, the rote quality of instruction in the larger introductory courses inhibited "the development of the capacity to think."

Students in the GISP preferred to focus on "individual development" as opposed to the transmission of "a certain body of knowledge and skills," which they saw as "the essence of a narrow professionalism." What they wanted, in short, was a humanistic focus on self-discovery.

I'm struck, reading their 400-page report, by how fresh and relevant it still is. But not just for students at places like Brown. After all, why should risk taking—and its intellectual rewards—be for only the few elite institutions? Or a few small, funky colleges? We should be fostering self-discovery and critical thinking for every student—approaching them as adults capable of making informed, exploratory choices and not as "kids" who require helicopter parents to monitor their progress.

As we debate the value of a college degree and the extraordinary costs for working- and middle-class families, we should also interrogate the basic structure of the undergraduate curriculum. By this I mean both the increasingly elaborate general-education requirements found almost everywhere and the philosophy about student learning that undergirds them. The emphasis on structure and rigidity to enforce breadth has consequences. We've turned a handful of elective courses into the equivalent of "free time" and pushed students to hustle through their first few years as if they were working off a checklist.

The open curricula of Franconia, Hampshire, and Brown aren't perfect, but they deserve to be considered as alternatives that can be put into place at a wide range of institutions.

Parents need to think about the interior work of the curriculum and understand that what is learned in pursuit of a college degree is more than the sum of courses taken. And faculty members and administrators need to be asking themselves: What sort of student emerges from our curricula? A student who can follow a map, or a student who can make one? Because we sorely need more of the latter. And, as much as I love teaching at this place, they shouldn't all come from Brown.

*Matthew Pratt Guterl is a professor of Africana studies and chair of American studies at Brown University.*

[Return to Top ↑](#)