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Colleges should consider halving the gen-ed curriculum requirements (opinion)

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On my campus, as very likely on yours, we've recently emerged from a difficult if not well-intentioned struggle over deep general-education revisions. Raised on a Midwestern farm, I confess to being of a don't-fix-it-if-it-ain't-broke mind-set, but even I can admit the old-fashioned distribution model baked into our gen-ed curriculum had grown a bit moldy around the edges. While we ultimately decided on a new nexus model more relevant to a digital age, the battle left me asking why gen ed itself wasn't on the cutting board.

It sounds heretical, perhaps especially to me, a faculty member based in the humanities, but it's been my observation over the years that the unquestioned and often outmoded fixtures that institutions fight to preserve are sometimes those that have the weakest rationales, which may explain our sensitivity and defensiveness where they are concerned. Just as travel agents once fought bitterly to keep their monopoly against the rising threat of internet-based travel bookings, and defensive real estate agents brought out the heavy artillery in an attempt to defeat the creeping threat posed by online for-sale-by-owners, it's worth asking if America's colleges and universities need struggle so desperately for the 40 to 60 gen-ed credit hours they often require.

Even a 40-credit-hour requirement, for example, amounts to one-third of many students' total required credits, or roughly the equivalent of one to one and a half years of tuition. Given the College Board's calculation that average tuition and fees for the 2017-18 academic year averaged $34,740 at private nonprofit four-year colleges and universities, the cost to complete a general-education program could be in excess of $50,000.

The math is imperfect, but it still raises the question: As important a contributor to civil society as gen ed may be -- and as emotionally tied to its long-standing virtues as many of us are as teachers, scholars and mentors -- can we adequately justify its hefty price tag to our most financially needy advisees, many of whom are working one and sometimes two part-time jobs to help foot the tuition bill, to say nothing of room and board?

A product of a humanities education and a liberal arts professor myself, I can easily articulate the time-honored virtues of general education: it creates better-rounded individuals, develops more engaged critical thinkers and citizens, builds common cause and community around a shared set

of concerns, and so on. But during an era of record student debt and continuing retention and demographic challenges, it's worth asking whether we might find ways to reduce gen-ed mandates by half. Putting gen ed on a diet may enable some students to graduate a term, if not a year, early, thereby lessening the debt load they carry into a difficult job market.

Making gen ed lean wouldn't necessarily mean surrendering our most sacred outcomes -- writing, critical thinking, scientific and mathematical literacy, physical education, service learning, and community engagement -- but better incorporating those outcomes into existing majors. For example, suppose a new, streamlined gen-ed package required one rather than two composition classes, while asking students to enroll in a writing-intensive course within their major or minor to make up the difference. Granted, such hybrid intensives may prove more difficult to administer and staff, but their necessary economies would no doubt stimulate and incentivize interdisciplinary invention.

For example, I know a senior mathematics professor who piloted a course in the mathematics of square dancing. While even he would admit the course presented students quantifiably more mathematics than physical education, its innovative transdisciplinary curriculum got students moving, thinking and quantifying, all while tapping their toes.

While far from a panacea, and problematic in their own right, internships, co-ops, student-faculty research, undergraduate theses, student teaching, study abroad and other substantive outside-of-class commitments could, if properly sanctioned and supervised, help students acquire core competencies in areas like writing, communication and quantitative reasoning. Why couldn't more established internships with proven corporate and nonprofit partners be preapproved to meet a gen-ed requirement? Rather than charge students a full three or four credit hours of tuition for an internship taking place off campus that requires little if any on-site faculty supervision, low-overhead credits like these could be offered at a discounted rate. Or, as an alternative, corporate internship sites could compensate students for a portion of the tuition cost incurred in return for their labors.

Before we devote scarce faculty and administrative resources to building a bigger, better, more enlightened mousetrap, perhaps it's time to set students free by reducing gen ed's appetite for increasingly expensive credits. Yes, we must be careful, lest, like the travel agents of yore, we argue ourselves right out of a job, but surely we can acknowledge that enlightened self-interest has limits. The credit-hungry gen-ed revision packages under consideration at so many campuses this academic year may be giving faculty a free pass on necessary innovation and needlessly harming students' pocketbooks while damaging something far more valuable: their good faith.

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