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Report hits 'dumbing down' of top Virginia colleges

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Carol InnerstTHE WASHINGTON TIMES

Virginia's most esteemed colleges allow students to choose from "a hodgepodge of narrow, dumbed-down, and trivial courses," an organization of concerned scholars says.

A rising tide of electives and a dearth of specific core curriculum requirements afflict the institutions, according to a report being delivered today to the State Council of Higher Education of Virginia by an organization of college and university faculty dedicated to high academic standards and academic freedom.

"Higher education in Virginia is subject to the same dumbing down that we are seeing in colleges and universities across the country," said Michael Krauss, president of the Virginia Association of Scholars, who prepared "The Troubling State of General Education: A Study of Six Virginia Public Colleges and Universities."

"In a state which gave birth to Jefferson's conception of an educated citizenry, it is simply shameful that schools are failing to provide the kind of general education that is needed for our graduates to be involved and educated citizens," he continued. "Virginia, with its impressive array of colleges and universities, should be resisting this trend."

The report was endorsed by the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** (ACTA, formerly the National **Alumni** Forum), a group also dedicated to academic freedom and excellence.

It examines curriculums at six Virginia institutions - George Mason University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Virginia State University, the University of Virginia, and the College of William and Mary. Two-thirds of Virginia's undergraduates attend these institutions.

The report charges that these schools are failing to transmit "essential knowledge" in basic subjects such as English, history, science and mathematics, and it calls on the higher education council to examine other state schools and to strengthen core curriculum requirements in the state.

The University of Virginia, for example, has no single course requirement demanded of every student. Engineering students have no freshman writing requirement, and those in the liberal arts have no separate math requirement.

"This eye-opening report reveals education in disarray," said ACTA President Jerry L. Martin. "The result is an academic cafeteria that allows students to live on intellectual junk food."

Lynne V. Cheney, ACTA chairman and former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, warned that students "who reach the end of their college years without knowing basic landmarks of history and culture are unlikely to be prepared to make the complex choices today's life demands."

The report contrasts what the Virginia Association of Scholars calls "today's nearly meaningless requirements" with the rigorous general education provided students in the past.

The educational goals set forth in the 1997 catalogues echo those of 1964 by defining the major subject areas of general education requirements as English composition, foreign language, the humanities, the social sciences, mathematics and natural sciences, according to the report. But the elimination of mandatory courses, proliferation of course choice, the steep increase in courses without prerequisites and the rise of full exemption from general education requirements are all hallmarks of the

The average number of available courses has more than doubled from 623 in 1964 to 1,516 in 1997 - a 58 percent increase. There were on average 76 undergraduate courses available without prerequisite in 1964. That has risen to 275 in 1997, with most in the humanities and social sciences. In 1964, electives made up about 19 percent of the undergraduate requirements, or about six courses. In 1997, they made up 27 percent, or about nine courses.

Continuing, the report states that in 1964 there were an average of 26 course options available for 19 course requirements. Today there are 109 courses to choose from to meet 18 general education requirements.

Other report highlights:

- * Core requirements ranged from a low of four at George Mason and Virginia State to six at Virginia Tech and 11 at William and Mary.
- * The four requirements at George Mason and Virginia State now can be satisfied with 419 and 52 courses, respectively. William and Mary's 11 requirements may be satisfied from among 360 courses.
- * George Mason and Virginia Tech require no foreign language, while Virginia State and William and Mary require two years unless a student can show proficiency by exam or high school completion.
- * George Mason and Virginia State have no math requirement.
- * In 1997, only the University of Virginia and Virginia Commonwealth University still had a specific history requirement that made up an average of 2.5 percent of their graduation requirements.
- * Non-science majors can fulfill science requirements by taking courses tailored specifically for them, such as William and Mary's "Principles of Biology for Non-Concentrators."
- * Even the amount of time students and faculty spend in the classroom has undergone a substantial decline, from an average of 194 days in 1964 to 158 days in 1997.

"Instead of expecting less, it is time for our colleges to insist on high standards and academic excellence," said William J. Bennett, co-chairman of Empower America, former secretary of education, and member of the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni's** national council. "Too many of Virginia's colleges and universities . . . are producing graduates who lack an understanding of core ideas and knowledge necessary for an educated citizenry."

The study builds on previous reports documenting the decline of academic standards in higher education, including "50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students" by the NEH; "Integrity in the College Curriculum" by the Association of American Colleges; and "The Dissolution of General Education" by the National Association of Scholars.

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