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SUNY trustees OK back-to-basics plan for general studies

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Kim Asch THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Courses in U.S. history and Western civilization are back in vogue at the State University of New York, where trustees have approved a policy requiring students to take classes in the two subjects as part of a new general-education curriculum.

Despite faculty opposition, trustees voted Tuesday for the back-to-basics plan in an effort to raise academic standards at 29 four-year colleges in the system. SUNY's 30 community colleges will be encouraged to adopt the requirements.

The **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, a national organization that supports strong curriculums, praised the action as a "blow to the trend toward mediocrity."

National Association of Scholars President Stephen Balch, who has attacked the weak standards at public institutions of higher education, called SUNY's plan "the beginning of a nationwide movement to restore substance and integrity to undergraduate general education."

But members of the faculty decried the move, saying the trustees are trying to micromanage them.

"I'm not happy at all," said Vincent Aceto, president of the SUNY faculty senate. "It's an attempt to return to a traditional, one-size-fits-all canon for the liberal arts."

While several SUNY campuses require some courses, Provost Peter Salins said the "Chinese menu" design of current distribution requirements gives students

"too much choice." For example, a course on the history of tap dance has been offered in the past to fulfill the history requirement.

"General education has been debased and driven out and replaced by multiculturalism and cultural relativism," said trustee Paul R. Perez, co-chairman of the board's general education subcommittee. "Those who oppose general education or anything that's rigorous are saying at heart there is no course of study more valuable than another. We took a stand to say we disagree."

Under the new plan, freshmen entering in the fall of 2000 must complete 30 credit hours, or 10 classes, in the following subjects: American history, communication, reasoning, foreign languages, humanities and the arts, information management, mathematics, natural sciences, Western civilization and other world civilizations.

Many details remain to be worked out before the new requirements take effect. Mr. Salins said he plans to establish a university-wide task force to establish broad guidelines flexible enough to accommodate the goals and objectives of individual campuses, which will appoint their own committees to help implement the plan.

Faculty will design the courses, write the syllabuses and approve the text books. Still, Mr. Aceto said he and other faculty leaders felt excluded from the process - the general-education proposal they submitted last January was "ignored," he said.

"I've worked at SUNY for 30 years as a faculty member and I've never experienced so much disrespect as I did yesterday," he said, referring to the meeting in Brooklyn where the trustees voted on the new requirements.

Trustee Candace de Russy called students the real victors. "The general education requirements will help provide students with the basic knowledge they need to fulfill themselves personally, to participate in this free society and to prosper economically."

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