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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Liberal to the Core

Harvard wants to lower its standards, again.

Friday, May 14, 2004 12:01 a.m.

If only Harvard were more liberal.

No, that's no misprint. We mean "liberal" as in "liberal arts." Recently the university initiated a review of its curriculum by asking itself what it will mean "to be an educated woman or man in the first quarter of the 21st century." Judging from the recommendations that emerged from this review--the first in three decades--the answer is a mishmash of more science, more choice and more study abroad.

We don't mean to pick on Harvard. According to a study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (www.goacta.org), America's leading colleges and universities have largely abandoned the idea that there exists some common body of knowledge and skills that all graduates ought to master. If Harvard gets more attention, that's only because its prominence ensures that the way it defines undergraduate education will affect the debate elsewhere

The ACTA study notes that most of the 50 universities it surveyed--from the Ivies and Seven Sisters to the Big 10--continue to pay lip service to the idea of a liberal education. But in practice a liberal education has come to be defined by a "smorgasbord approach" that undercuts that mission. Cornell, it notes, boasts that "there is no course that students must take, and there are nearly 2,000 from which they may choose."

It helps to recall that even the "rigid" Harvard core requirements that are now to be made more "flexible" were dismissed as "core lite" back in the 1980s by William Bennett, a Harvard alum and, at the time, the secretary of education. While we find it encouraging that Harvard wants to see more science and interdisciplinary course requirements, in practice any emphasis on expanded student choice tends to work against the raising of standards.



This is not to say that there aren't solid courses and fabulous instructors at Harvard or anywhere else. But when, say, a Barnard student can satisfy her literature requirement equally with a course in Shakespeare or "Writing Tibet," universities are in effect abdicating a role we once assumed defined their mission: providing direction. An education, after all, is not simply about acquiring specialized knowledge. It's about cultivating skills and the perspective that allow for informed judgment and continued learning.

There was a day when a liberal education was thought to be a good inoculation against fads and fuzzy thinking. Perhaps the worst thing we could say about these latest conclusions from Cambridge is that Harvard seems to be jumping on a bandwagon rather than leading it.

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