

# Learning the Value of Liberal Arts

By Jay Mathews

Washington Post Staff Writer

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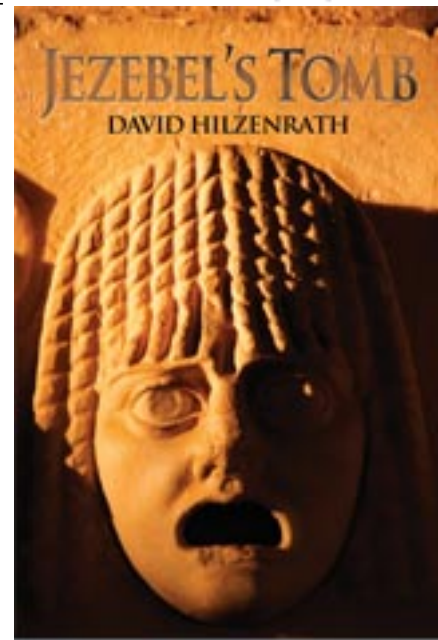
I am upset that my daughter won't take an economics course, and that her college won't make her do so. You will be surprised how few of our nation's finest colleges -- I have a list of 50 in front of me -- require general economics for graduation. But let's first consider the broader issue of liberal arts courses in today's colleges and universities.

Consider, for instance, this recent statement from Princeton University about its core requirements, the standard term for universities' efforts to give their students a rich dose of the major subjects of human inquiry, which is what universities were originally created to do:

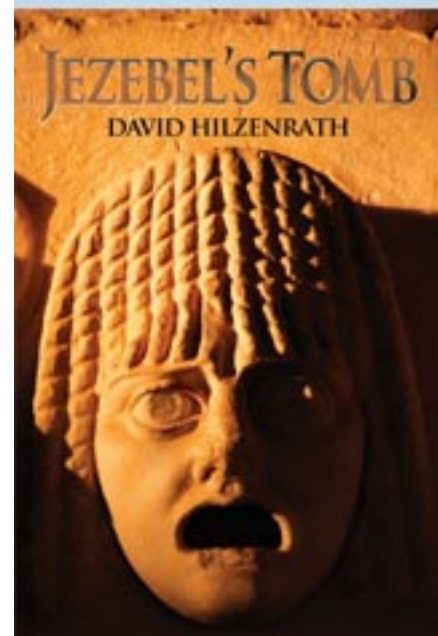
"The University requirements for graduation transcend the boundaries of specialization and provide all students with a common language and common skills. It is as important for a student . . . to engage in disciplined reflection on human conduct, character, and ways of life or to develop critical skills through the study of the history, aesthetics, and theory of literature and the arts as it is for a student . . . to understand the rigors of quantitative reasoning and to develop a basic knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of scientific inquiry and technological development."

Sounds great, don't you think? If you were a confused but hopeful parent skimming the Princeton course catalogue, you would get the impression that its undergraduate program was designed to give your child the very best and deepest of courses. This is Princeton we are talking about. How could you not believe them?

And yet, when Barry Latzer, senior consultant for the Washington-based American Council of Trustees and Alumni, inspected the actual core requirements at Princeton, he found something quite different. The university did have composition and foreign language requirements that took those two subjects seriously, but when Latzer looked at five other areas the council



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considered important -- literature, government and history, mathematics, sciences and that favorite of mine, economics, they were very disappointed.

Did Princeton require a literature course that did not focus on exotica or just one author? No. Did it require a comprehensive course in American history or government? No. How about college-level math? Sorry. Astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology or physics? Nope. Economics. Forget about it.

What made it even worse was that if you scanned the college literature, and were, like me, too lazy to slog through the fine print, you would think that Princeton undergraduates did have to take a mathematics course under its Quantitative Reasoning requirement and a natural or physical science course under its Science and Technology requirement.

And you would be wrong. Latzer found that Princeton did not actually have a serious mathematics requirement because, he said, "the Quantitative Reasoning requirement may be satisfied by such courses as Math Alive (focuses on the mathematical concepts behind important modern applications, such as bar codes, CD-players, and population models); The Universe (astronomy for the non-science major; no prerequisites past high school algebra and geometry); and Computers and Computing (introduction to computers and computer science; emphasis is on understanding how computers really work.)"

And as far as the science requirement went, he said, "the Science and Technology requirement may be satisfied by Freshman Seminars such as Sound, Music and Physics, or by courses in Anthropology or in the multidisciplinary program in Environmental Studies."

A Princeton spokesman failed to provide a response to the report.

Latzer's report, ["The Hollow Core: Failure of the General Education Curriculum,"](#) graded 50 colleges and universities on how many of the seven subjects the council considered essential to a liberal arts education -- writing, literature, foreign language, U.S. government or history, math, natural or physical science and economics -- were actually required. Princeton did lousy, a grade of D. But only two Ivy League colleges, Columbia and Dartmouth, did any better, scraping by with a gentleman's Cs.

Two schools, Brown and Vassar, never even tried -- they say for very good reasons -- and got zeroes. Ten schools also earned Fs by requiring only one out of seven subjects: UC-Berkeley, Colgate, Cornell, Iowa State-Ames, Mount Holyoke, Nebraska, Northwestern, Penn State, Smith and Wisconsin-Madison. Forty eight percent of the 50 schools got Ds and Fs.

Only one, Baylor, got an A, with requirements for six of the seven subjects. Wallace Daniel, dean of the its College of Arts and Sciences, said the school "is opposed to narrow specialization, to breaking the world into separate parts and viewing them as isolated." Those

specialized courses are, sadly, what most university professors want to teach, which I think is the principal reason why so few colleges require many general courses. Baylor may be saved by its retro image -- no coed dorms, for instance -- which attracts a student body more interested in the classic academic subjects.

The Web site of American Council of Trustees and Alumni says it is a nonprofit educational organization "committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability on college and university campuses." Some college officials call it a conservative organization, and its national council does include people who would fit that definition -- former U.S. Education secretary William J. Bennett, The Public Interest co-editor Irving Kristol and U.S. Circuit Judge Laurence H. Silberman. But there are also council members that I would consider left of center, such as former Colorado Gov. Richard D. Lamm and The New Republic Editor-in-Chief Martin Peretz.

There is no denying how much fun it is to read Latzer's report. My favorite part reveals the crafty escape hatches from courses of substance built for undergraduates who don't want their colleges, egged on by parents like me, telling them what they have to take. You can meet the math requirement at the University of Illinois, for instance, with a course called "Principles and Techniques in Music Education," or the composition requirement at Nebraska with a course in "Instructional Television," or the math requirement at Cornell with the course "Reasoning About Luck" which "uses high school algebra."

And the list of courses that meet humanities or social science requirements is a treat: "History of Comic Book Art" (Indiana), "Love and Money" (Bryn Mawr), "Ghosts, Demons and Monsters" (Dartmouth), "Campus Culture and Drinking" (Duke).

The report argues that a serious liberal arts education is necessary because graduates need analytical, writing and quantitative skills to pursue their careers, even though 62 percent of the schools surveyed required no college math and 30 percent don't require a serious writing course. It says being an educated citizen requires a serious American history or government course, although only 14 percent of the sample required one. Having a rich life, Latzer said, requires an appreciation of great literature, but only 12 percent of the colleges studied "required a survey of significant works by numerous authors of acknowledged stature."

To be sure, many students arrive in college having taken Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes that would meet the council's requirements if they got good scores on the AP or IB tests, but get no credit for them since their colleges do not require such survey courses.

The best college class I ever had was the History and Civilization course required for all students my freshman year at Occidental College. Of course that was 40 years ago and it no longer exists. When I transferred to Harvard my sophomore year, I discovered that the core requirements there were much weaker than Occidental's, and now Harvard seems on the

verge of diluting them even more.

Most colleges reject the American Council's criteria. Meg Lauerman, spokeswoman for Nebraska, said she thought her school's entrance requirements ensured that students got much of what they needed in liberal arts in high school, and at the university students get "a menu of courses which contribute to the concept of a liberal education."

Mark Nickel, spokesman for Brown, notes that his university's distaste for the whole notion of core courses has helped make it very popular with very bright students. "By any reasonable measure, Brown's curriculum has been a brilliant success: alumni satisfaction, graduating seniors' admission to graduate and professional schools, student honors and achievements, consistent top-20 national placement in various independent quality ratings, size and quality of admission pools," he said.

Which is also the argument made by my daughter Katie in defending the loose core requirements at Pomona College, where she has just finished her freshman year. No, she says, she is not going to take an economics course. But she tells me not to worry because she will pick up what she needs along the way, since so many of her courses are interdisciplinary, such as her Sociology of Immigration course that included international relations, assimilation theory, networks and social incorporation of immigrants. "This system allows students to take the classes that they really want to take," she said, "without having to enroll in a 100-person Macroeconomics course . . . where all they will learn is how to fall asleep without being caught."

I admit I did snooze occasionally in Ec 1 my sophomore year, and I didn't understand all that was said even when I was awake. But some of it sunk in, and I think has been useful to me, both as a reporter and as a voter.

But who cares? As Katie often reminds me, I am very old now, and defending the liberal arts as I once knew them may be a lost cause. Latzer said economics should be required because "it is hard to see how someone can compete successfully if he or she does not understand such fundamentals as the law of supply and demand or how the costs and benefits of diverse courses of action can be evaluated and compared. Whether one is introducing a product, creating a new business, or managing a national economy, understanding economics is no longer optional -- it is essential."

Maybe so, but let's get back to the question I started with: How many of those 50 great colleges on the Latzer's list require a general course in macro- or micro-economics, taught by faculty in the economics or business department?

Zippo. Nada. Not a single one. History of Comic Book Art is less stressful, after all, and doesn't require any math.

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