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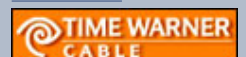
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Education Supplement: Fall 2004

by **Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow**

Aeschylus or Swahili?

The changing notions of what students need to know

August 3rd, 2004 11:15 AM



(illustration: Paige Imatani)

**F**or today's undergrads, freshman year's first reading assignment—the course catalog—can be its most overwhelming. These doorstops often contain upwards of 2,000 classes, in departments from African American Studies to Zoology. As options multiply, many colleges are seeking to balance priorities: choices versus requirements, specialization versus breadth, traditional disciplines versus newer fields. They're asking, in the words of Kathleen Breidenbach, academic dean of Lang College at the New School, "What does it mean to be an

educated global citizen in the 21st century?"

Answers vary, but soul-searching is on the rise, as evidenced throughout the city's colleges. This year, Columbia made substantial changes to its core curriculum for the first time since 1947, notably a stricter science requirement. Columbia also, after years of student agitation, approved a comparative ethnic studies major. In spring 2005, Eugene Lang, the liberal arts division of the New School, will pilot the first requirements in its 20-year history, albeit with monikers like "Reading New York City" and "Sophomore Colloquium on Social Action," hardly a capitulation to the canon. CUNY has launched a system-wide General Education Project to encourage intellectual coherence and strengthen the quality of the undergraduate education. In the past couple of years, Harvard and Yale have also undergone the first comprehensive reviews of their curriculum requirements in decades.

In April, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni published a report called "The Hollow Core," reprimanding U.S. universities for failing to ensure a genuine general education. The report assessed 50 colleges on whether they require foundational classes in writing, literature, foreign language, American government or history, economics, mathematics, and natural or physical science. Yale and Harvard got D's, and even Columbia scraped by with a C. Two branches of CUNY, Hunter and Brooklyn, received B's, among the highest marks from these unforgiving red pens.

Barry Latzer, a professor at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice who was the report's primary author, laments the ascendancy of distribution requirements, which students may satisfy with any course in a relevant department. He compares this system to "one of those buffets you can get at a greasy spoon, where you have all kinds of choices but they're all cruddy," as opposed to the "prix fixe meal" that is a core curriculum. "Selections are going to be made no matter what," Latzer notes. "The

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question then becomes, how does one select? Is it going to be eeny-meeny, or is it going to be what experts suggest?"

A core curriculum—specific introductory courses that all students must take—has a number of purported benefits. One is that this knowledge is time-tested and provides a solid grounding for future pursuits. Another is that the curricular coherence on campus will furnish ready-made fodder for intellectual conversations outside the seminar room. "It's inevitable that if you and your roommate are both reading Aeschylus at three in the morning, you'll discuss it," says Columbia professor David Helfand. Furthermore, professors can assume a basic level of knowledge among their students in advanced classes.

American universities started out requiring a prescribed course load, generally including Latin, Greek, and theology. Over the centuries, the amount of knowledge has mushroomed, individual freedom has gained currency, and faculty have increasingly specialized; all of these factors led to the smorgasbord phenomenon. The reaction against restrictions peaked in the 1960s, when, for example, Brown introduced its open curriculum, abolishing all requirements. The philosophy behind an open curriculum is that, in the words of a Brown dean, "Designing the education is part of the education," and that education is not one-size-fits-all. The middle ground of distribution requirements attempts to ensure breadth while allowing a great degree of choice. The liberal arts schools of New York span the curricular gamut, from laissez-faire Eugene Lang and Sarah Lawrence (in Westchester County) to the extensive requirements at Columbia, NYU, and certain branches of CUNY.

NYU's 10-year-old core offers students limited choices to fulfill requirements in four basic areas. The approach lies between a distributional system and what Dean Matthew Santirocco calls a "hard core" of fixed course requirements. "In the old days you could say people should read these 10 books," Santirocco says. But now, "What 10 books? If you try to get a consensus on content, you'll fail." Instead, schools ask, "What skills, what habits of mind, should students acquire?"

It's a popular concept. In the rapidly advancing sciences, few would single out specific information to be taught. But there is growing concern that students lack mathematical skills and an understanding of scientific tenets. Countless graduates of elite schools have coasted by on variations of "Physics for Poets." Now Harvard and Yale as well as Columbia are introducing more rigorous science requirements, which will incorporate research and compel demonstration of quantitative-reasoning skills.

Tougher science requirements are essentially a matter of making the kids eat their broccoli. But other hallmarks of contemporary academia, such as internationalization, are more likely to strike students as appetizing opportunities. Harvard is making study abroad all but mandatory, and other universities are strongly encouraging it as well. NYU's international offerings are typical: It has a Center on International Cooperation, classes in languages from Hindi to Swahili, and interdisciplinary majors such as Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. Interdisciplinary studies of all lineages (ethnic, women's and gender, urban) also get props from students and teachers alike.

Many students appreciate the paternalism of core requirements. CUNY-Brooklyn senior Sonya Donaldson says of her physics requirement, "I railed against it, but I ended up making connections between structuralism in English Lit. and deconstruction in physics." But others mentioned that core courses tend to be lower quality than electives, because neither the instructors nor the students want to be there. They also noted that survey

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classes could only allot single weeks to thinkers like Plato and Kant.

Permissive schools also garnered mixed reviews. Some alums, while grateful for the freedom, regretted not having learned a foreign language or read the classics. Then again, as Colin Dodds, Eugene Lang '99, put it, "I also wish I'd learned piano when I was a kid, but when I was a kid I never would have sat still long enough."

NYU, according to Dean Santirocco, built rethinking into the structure of its core program a decade ago, and continually implements changes in response to student and faculty feedback. "Now, a lot of universities are addressing these questions," he says. "It doesn't mean it's broken. But this is a moment of revisiting."

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