



Speakout: College curriculum needs solid core

By Anne D. Neal, Special to the News

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General education doesn't often make headlines. But thanks to the groundbreaking efforts in Colorado to ensure a rigorous statewide core curriculum, Colorado is making national news.

At a time of breathtaking changes and ever-growing bodies of information, Colorado's focus on a strong general education will give its college graduates a competitive edge. Students in other states can graduate with a patchwork of narrow and often trendy courses outside of their majors. Colorado's graduates will have the advantage of a coherent and cohesive general education requirement - precisely the broad exposure needed for productive workers, informed citizens and lifelong learners.

It used to be that all colleges and universities in America insisted on a rigorous, sequential curriculum that ensured students a broad, general education in addition to the specialization provided by their major. Courses covered the most important events, ideas or works known to mankind - material considered essential for an educated person. Students were given a common educational foundation on which to build. This was, truly, learning for a lifetime.

Nowadays, however, virtually unlimited choice has supplanted the concept of a rigorous general education. The Hollow Core, a recent study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, found that 48 percent of the colleges surveyed, including the Big 10, the Big 12, the Ivy League and the Seven Sisters, require no more than two true core courses, and 24 percent require one or no course at all. The University of Colorado got a "D" for its general education curriculum because its graduates need not complete any solid courses in writing, literature, government, history, economics or mathematics.

Today's colleges give the appearance of providing a core curriculum because they require students to take courses in several subject areas - the so-called distribution requirements. Within each subject area, however, it is not uncommon for students to have dozens, even hundreds, of courses from which to choose - many of them narrow and even frivolous.

Left to their own devices, students tend to pick courses that sound sexy, or are easy A's, or meet after 10 in the morning. The result has been a dumbing down of general education with potentially disastrous consequences for an entire generation of college graduates.

By revamping its general education curriculum, Colorado can lead the nation in reversing the

trend. Success here will encourage governing boards around the country to insist that faculty design and require general education courses that are limited in number and broad in scope, courses that together form a coherent whole. Only such a curriculum can address lifelong educational needs, not mere youthful interests.

Consider what we lose by failing to require solid gen ed courses. On any single day, news headlines talk about tax cuts, deficits, globalization, trade barriers, oil prices, interest rates, inflation, monetary policy, free markets, etc. If you want to succeed in today's economy - or vote intelligently in elections - you have to understand not only what these terms mean, but also the basic ideas of economics: how the law of supply and demand affects oil prices, how government spending affects inflation, how interest rates affect the stock market, how tax cuts affect investment, and so on.

But the evidence suggests that America has become a nation of economic illiterates.

According to a Public Agenda survey in 2004, 63 percent of the public believes that in order to protect jobs, a company should not be allowed to outsource work abroad, even "if that is the only way that company can stay competitive and profitable." They don't seem to understand that if the company goes out of business all jobs will be lost.

This isn't rocket science. It is Economics 101. But our Hollow Core study found that no college requires Economics 101 any more. Nor any other economics course. Evidently, today's colleges do not include economic literacy in their definition of what every educated man and woman should know.

To prepare our next generation of citizens, a curriculum should be pitched higher than the momentary tastes of 19-year-olds. "[D]emocracy rests on the assumption that the citizens will be intelligent," said visionary educator Robert Maynard Hutchins.

"Their intellects must be disciplined . . . they must know the difference between honest thinking and sophistry and between reasoning and rationalization. Only by disciplines that teach them these differences can they hope to resist the demagogue and propagandist."

The current efforts of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education must be seen in light of the dissolution of the general education curriculum. By establishing faculty panels to review existing courses and reject those that fail to provide both strong content and critical thinking skills, the commission has put into play a process that is justifiably attracting national attention. Success in replacing the "hollow core" with a curriculum that is solid "to the core" will benefit Colorado's graduates for years to come.

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