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What Every Student Should Know

By CHARLES McGRATH

MOST college students want to learn something that will help them get a job. The most popular undergraduate major by far these days is business, and more B.A.'s are awarded every year in the "health professions" than in, say, English lit. No wonder. In terms of mean annual earnings, business grads do much better than the hapless English majors, who are just a notch ahead of graduates in forestry and environmental science.

There are still colleges that insist on the merits of the liberal arts - education intended to cultivate you as a person, that is - and some of them, the elite institutions especially, hint that such an education will help you get an even better job. But even among the liberal arts colleges, there has been considerable debate recently over what is known as general education: the idea that in addition to competency in some specialized subject - a major - there is a body of wide-ranging knowledge that all students ought to acquire.

When [Lawrence H. Summers](#) took over as president of Harvard University, in 2001, one of his most urgent projects was to reform the undergraduate curriculum, which he thought inadequate for the 21st century. In speeches and interviews, he talked about how students majoring in the humanities needed to know more science, biological science especially, and to be more comfortable with mathematical and statistical reasoning. He mused occasionally about broad-based survey courses of the kind that are seldom taught anymore, and insisted that in an age of globalization, Harvard students also needed to get part of their education from travel and study abroad.

In the spring of 2003, Mr. Summers put together four faculty committees to examine different aspects of education at Harvard. This is an exercise most universities undergo every 20 or 30 years, and it usually takes them forever. Mr. Summers thought the task so pressing that he asked for a draft report in a year, which in academe is practically overnight. The final report was released this past November to a certain amount of fanfare in the non-academic press. But inside the ivory towers it landed on many desks not so much with a thud as a rustle.

Compared with its most famous predecessor - a 1945 report familiarly known as the "Red Book" (it's maroon, actually), a book-length account that in stately prose outlined a vision of general education not just for Harvard but for American high schools - the 2005 version seems flimsy and occasionally ill-written. It essentially dismantles Harvard's well-known Core Curriculum, which requires students to choose many courses from a fairly narrow menu demonstrating "ways of knowing" - say, moral reasoning and the study of foreign cultures. Instead, it favors a system of distribution requirements whereby students must take a certain number of courses in each of three general areas: arts and humanities, the social sciences and science and technology.

This is a system, of course, that many other universities have been using for decades.

"It's old wine in new bottles," Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, the president of George Washington University, says of the Harvard report. "It's sort of like having the head rabbi say the restaurant is kosher."

That's the polite version. It's not hard to imagine dozens of deans privately pulling out their hair over Harvard turning up in the news for something that their universities did sooner and better. In 2003, for example, Yale issued a report, four years in the making, that winds up in more or less the same place as Harvard's but is far more eloquent and detailed. Nor is Harvard likely to win many friends among the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a conservative group founded by Lynne Cheney that champions what it calls "a solid Core Curriculum" - general courses taken by everyone - over mere distribution requirements, and had already given the older, less permissive Harvard system a failing grade.

From the students' point of view, the advantage of the new system is that it gives them more freedom, or "agency," to use a term beloved by college administrators. Agency gets a lot of positive spin nowadays, because the conventional wisdom is that students hate requirements and learn better when not coerced.

The new system also lightens up on the rules for fulfilling a major, which had forced students to choose a specialty at the end of freshman year and rack up so many credits in that specialty that there was hardly room for anything else.

All the tweaking and politicking at Harvard serves to dramatize what is in fact a century-long debate about what students should be learning: a struggle to reconcile breadth with depth, specialized knowledge with a more general kind of understanding - the kind that prepares you for something like global citizenship. And the Harvard experience suggests that though the goal of general education is as attractive as ever, the idea of prescribing or enforcing it, instead of just holding it out as an ideal, is probably a losing battle.

UNTIL the end of the 19th century, students took the courses that the faculty told them to take, and not only did these pretend to encompass most of what was then known, they were also intended to be good for you - to enhance your moral and spiritual development. They were not crowd-pleasers. In "The Education of Henry Adams," Adams said of the Harvard curriculum of the 1850's, "It taught little, and that little ill, but it left the mind open, free from bias, ignorant of facts, but docile."

After becoming president of Harvard in 1869, Charles William Eliot abolished all requirements for undergraduates. His elective system was so popular that by 1900 half the graduates had specialized in nothing and taken only introductory courses. Alarmed by the legion of dilettantes streaming out of Harvard Yard, the university's next president, A. Laurence Lowell, stepped in and put the brakes on. In 1910 he introduced a system that required students to major in a subject and also to take courses outside their areas of concentration. How much broad, general education students should be exposed to, what that should consist of and, not least, how to ensure that students actually learn what they're supposed to have remained issues ever since.

Today there are three approaches to the problem. At one extreme are universities like Brown, which famously, like Eliot's Harvard, has no requirements at all; it's considered part of a student's education to figure out what that education ought to consist of. Apocryphal stories abound of students who are expert in the erotic subtext of pre-World War I Croatian folk dance but don't know what the Stamp Act is. But Brown is noted for its excellent advisory system - something Harvard acknowledges that it has to work on.

At the other extreme are the tiny handful of colleges that, like Columbia and the University of Chicago, have a mandatory great-books-style curriculum intended to instill in students a basic awareness of Western civilization and some of its major texts. Harvard, with the Core or with the system that preceded it - the 1945 Red Book curriculum, in which everyone had to fulfill a strict general-

education requirement - fell somewhere in the middle.

The new distribution system is still in the middle, but tilting ever so slightly Brownward.

Even some professors not on the faculty at Columbia or Chicago will admit a secret fondness for the great-books idea. There is a lot to be said, they think, for a system that exposes everyone to a body of common knowledge and common texts. It's good for the students, and it makes subsequent teaching much easier. But the Columbia and Chicago systems are each the product of a specific historical moment - Columbia's came about in response to World War I, for example, as an attempt to restore Western civilization to its rightful place after the onslaught of German barbarity - and it's doubtful that they could be recreated from scratch. On the 75th anniversary of Columbia's Core Curriculum, Arnold Rampersad, a Stanford professor who used to teach at Columbia, compared it to the interstate highway system: you can maintain it, but you could never build it the same way anymore.

One reason is that knowledge has expanded so much in recent years, especially in the sciences and social sciences, that no one can agree any longer on what constitutes a basic foundation. In the humanities, a sizable faction believes that the great books are in fact the bad books - symptoms of sexism, imperialism and generalized Western myopia and self-regard.

In the beginning, at least, the 17-member general education committee at Harvard seriously considered the notion of a series of prescribed general courses. And as the discussions went on, a self-described "Gang of Four" - Louis Menand, from the English department; Michael Sandel, a historian; the philosopher Alison Simmons, and Steven Pinker, who teaches psychology - continued to hold out.

"We would have been happy with a bit more structure," Professor Pinker says. "It would help any educated person in appreciating music or art throughout life to know the difference between Romanticism, modernism and post-modernism. And it's necessary in understanding a scientific discussion to know the difference between a gene and a chromosome."

Professor Pinker was particularly eager to see a required course in statistical and analytic reasoning, to instill the habit of critical thinking. Others in the gang were interested in a moral-reasoning requirement.

But in the end the committee couldn't come to an agreement. "If you've got a background in literature, say, it's very easy to solve the problem of general education - until you talk to the people in the sciences, and vice versa," says Benedict H. Gross, a mathematician who is also the dean of Harvard College and was a co-chairman of the general education committee. "Some people on the faculty had very specific lists of things they thought were essential to the curriculum, but these lists just didn't intersect. Try it at home. It's a good dinner party game - to see if you can agree on a brief list of things students need to know."

ANOTHER obstacle to old-fashioned general education courses is that a lot of faculty members don't particularly want to teach them anymore. They're time-consuming, labor-intensive and usually have little to do with a teacher's specialty; and it's by excelling in your specialty, not by starring in the classroom, that you advance your career in academe. At the University of Chicago, people who teach in the Core are awarded a kind of combat pay. "It's an extra stipend of \$1,500," says John W. Boyer, the dean, "and it's really pretty small."

James Shapiro, a professor of English at Columbia, was once a popular teacher in the Core Curriculum there; he's one of the heroes of David Denby's "Great Books," about the author's return to Columbia, and its great books course, as a middle-age student in 1991. But Mr. Shapiro hasn't taught in that program for years now. "When you acknowledge this course and reward faculty accordingly, then I'll be glad to teach it again," he says. "But in universities today salaries and resources are all built on

the star system, and everyone knows that."

In his opinion, general education is not the real issue. Class size is. "If you want kids to learn to read and write and think, then what matters is that they meet on a regular basis with someone who's interested in working on their writing," he explains. "But what we have now is professors lecturing to 400, 500, 600 kids and then a team of graduate students doing all the work. I really worry that this model is not sustainable."

"But," he adds, "this is not on the table at most campuses. There's no conversation about it at all, and it's a dangerous conversation not to have."

Not everyone at Harvard is averse to teaching general courses, and by the hundreds, students flock to them - or at least the better ones, which tend to be idiosyncratic and, like popular courses anywhere, depend on the charisma of individual teachers. Professor Sandel's "Justice," a Core course in philosophy, history and moral reasoning, has for more than a decade been the single most popular draw on campus. Other big hits are William Julius Wilson's course on race, poverty and urban life and Thomas Kelly's "First Nights," about the premieres of five important musical works.

The new curriculum makes room for such offerings, but it throws most of the responsibility for general education back on the individual departments. Instead of catering to majors they will have to design courses for browsers from among the entire student population. This is in part a strategy to get more faculty involved and thinking outside the confines of their specialties.

"This new proposal is a compromise," Professor Sandel admits. "Not among competing factions but with the facts of life in a modern research university. Although I would ideally prefer a more prescriptive approach, you have to allow the faculty enough latitude to design their own courses in general education. You can't legislate the precise shape they take." He adds: "The real test of a program of general education is not what it requires of the students but what it demands of the faculty. Scholarly knowledge advances by a narrowing of focus that does not serve undergraduates well. Liberal education requires courses that give students the big picture, courses that enable them to see the world whole. In research universities, general education needs to lean against the specializing tendencies of departments and disciplines."

The final vote by the Harvard faculty will take place whenever William C. Kirby, the dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, decides the time is right. And it's possible that some of the recommendations could be dropped or modified. Professor Simmons, of the Gang of Four, says there is still a faction of the faculty that would like the curriculum to be more prescriptive and enforceable. "They're worried about students taking the easy way out," she says. "It's a dispute between the optimists and the pessimists - the culture of hope versus the culture of fear."

The heads of several influential departments and committees have made public their objections to the absence of moral and quantitative reasoning requirements, and one member of the general education committee has compared the new curriculum to a dining hall menu that offers the students healthy food but doesn't insist they eat it. For now, at least, the report appears to be a somewhat watered-down version of what President Summers originally had in mind. Two of the provisions he used to talk about - quantitative reasoning and study abroad - are there on a kind of wish-list, as recommendations, not requirements, and others, like emphasizing the biological sciences, are there only implicitly, if at all.

FOR all his enthusiasm about a new curriculum, Mr. Summers, known for being outspoken, may have turned out to be his own worst enemy. While the curriculum discussions were still going on, Mr. Summers, in a now notorious speech delivered in January 2005, theorized that the reason

fewer women than men pursued careers in science and engineering might be that they had less intrinsic aptitude for such fields. Oops. Two months later, the Harvard faculty cast a vote of no confidence in his presidency, which while not binding nevertheless seems to have chastened him considerably. He absented himself from the general education meetings, on which he had been sitting in and where he was, by all accounts, a prime mover and cast a lower, more conciliatory profile on campus.

In a recent interview in his office in Massachusetts Hall, however, Mr. Summers, relaxed and with his feet up on a glass coffee table, professed to be more than satisfied with the new direction. "I think we're making progress in the right kind of way," he said, "by encouraging students instead of using coercion."

He used science as an example. "Experience from our new biology course suggests that there is a great appetite for science courses when they're well taught," he said. "We think that will happen. There's very little appetite here for great books, but we think we can give students attractive choices in courses that will impart broad foundational knowledge." He added that many incoming students had already acquired a fair amount of general education, and said, "For all the bashing of American high schools, the students coming in now are better prepared than ever."

Both Dean Gross and Dean Kirby echo the "Build It and They Will Come" theme and see the lack of teeth in the report as a positive virtue. It's convenient they think so, because in a couple of respects Harvard students appear remarkably like Harvard faculty: they're spiky, choosy and don't like taking direction. A lot of them are also precocious specialists even before they get to Cambridge. That's why they are admitted in the first place.

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