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# COHERENT CURRICULAR CHOICES

## A Strategy to Enrich a College Education

*The authors propose an advising approach to identify singular courses that will result in a more effective use of curricular requirements and provide a wider array of learning outcomes.*

In the last several years problems and shortcomings of American higher education have been widely publicized. The National Institute of Education's Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (1984) warned of deficiencies in our curriculum, facilities, morale, and academic standards. The Study Group cited student involvement (time, energy, and effort that students devote to the learning process), high expectations (clearly publicized), and systematic assessment and feedback as the three critical conditions of excellence in higher education.

One year later the Association of American Colleges' Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose cf Baccalaureate Degrees (1985) assaulted the undergraduate degree for its neglect of writing experiences; incoherent curricular structures; lower academic standards; and inadequate responses to scientific, technological, and foreign language incompetence.

Boyer (1987) identified various "points of tension" on the campuses, including the conflict between narrow vocationalism and liberal arts, concern and confusion about outcomes assessment, and the intellectual and social isolation between college and the larger world. Certain of his recommendations included a comprehensive advising program with connections to the academic priorities of the campus, an integrated core of general education coupled with an enriched (broader) academic major, and an assessment program that insures the likelihood for a positive impact of college beyond graduation.

More recently the same Association of American Colleges' Task Group on General Education (1988) posited "that the chief task of the college years is for students not only to gain the ability to identify perspectives, weigh evidence, and make wise decisions, but also to learn how to think about thinking and to enjoy thinking" (p. 4). The Task Group also proposed that program and course planning identify specific skills and competencies students should achieve as outcomes. "Perhaps the most urgent reform on most campuses in improving general education involves academic advising" (p. **43).**

Higher education clearly is in a state of re-examination and change, and the student's academic advisor is in a pivotal position to foster such re-examination in individuals and to facilitate change in them. These intellectual activities can occur even through the characteristically most mundane advising activity — course selection.

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This article presents an advising strategy for course selection that attempts to remedy some of the aforementioned problems in undergraduate higher education. The strategy emphasizes the advantages available to students through their liberal arts, general studies, core, or elective parts of their curriculum, but it is not limited to these. A similar approach can be taken in the major (study in-depth) component as well.

The heart of this advising strategy makes students aware of the limited number of choices they really have, introducing them to areas they might not have otherwise considered, helping them understand the relevance of these areas, and assisting them in making course selections that serve multiple functions. The message is simple: a course (to borrow a phrase) "is a terrible thing to waste."

## THE LIMITATIONS*

Most of us fail to recognize how severely limiting the undergraduate degree really is. ***The first limitation,*** for example, is that the baccalaureate degree programs at most institutions require 120 credits, i.e., 40 courses. These same institutions typically offer approximately 800 different courses over a given four-year period. Therefore, students experience ***only*** about ***5*** percent of what the institution has to offer. Subtract from the total figure the number of specifically required courses — usually in the major — and the student might be left with only a 1-2 percent choice. This is an alarmingly small portion of the curriculum and, therefore, must be used with extreme care, concern, caution, and coherence.

***The second limitation*** is that many students are actually forced to expend their choices much too early in their careers. Students are often advised to concentrate on their core curriculum or general education in the freshman year so as to "get that out of the way." Arden (1988) argued that students should pursue a vertical (four-year) general education/core curriculum rather than a horizontal one squeezed into the freshman year — a time when most students are not ready to reap the benefits intended by this part of the curriculum anyway.

***The third limitation*** lies in our quest to structure the curriculum so that all general education principles are reflected, or that various disciplines are represented. The search appears to be for some ideal level of learning. However, a diverse curriculum, outstanding faculty, improved academic standards, distribution requirements, and student choices still provide no guarantee that these students will be educated.

Reinhart and Lee (1988) suggested an alternative to seeking the ideal level of learning that results in an educated person. Instead we might consider seeking an "optimum level of ignorance," that is, "the level of learning beyond which it just is not worth continuing to add new knowledge" (p. 138). They argued from a marginal analysis or cost-benefit approach. Does an additional course requirement or additional year of study significantly add to the base (the 120-credit curriculum) we already have? If the additional cost does not produce an equal benefit, then it is not worth the effort.

Students, however, too often reflect this approach to learning: "Why must I take literature when I want to be an engineer?" or, "How will chemistry help me as an accountant?" Their career motivations are often short-sighted as they seek only to achieve this optimum level of ignorance that will enable them to get a job; they see no cost-benefit in courses beyond their major.

* The examples throughout the article are based on medium-sized, four-year institutions using the semester unit of credit. Institutions with varying credit units and those with a much larger array of undergraduate course offerings should adjust the numbers accordingly; community colleges/associate degree programs should probably use half the credit and course values.

The course selection process is relevant to this alternative concept. Students obviously seek to fulfill degree requirements, but should they not also expect to learn some skill, competency, understanding, interpretation, or value from these courses as well? They pay tuition to accumulate the 120 credits, and also to increase their learning.

The advising strategy proposed here attempts to compensate for these limitations. It can be applied in a variety of curricular structures, by all types of advisors, with all types of students, and in all types of institutions.

## THE STRATEGY

Although the checklist shown below (Figure 1) resembles many you have no doubt used, it differs in its reflection of areas of knowledge, skills, or competencies transcending the specific degree requirements. It might even suggest a "secondary curriculum." The advising strategy emphasizes that the selection of one course is not simply to meet one single degree requirement; rather each course should provide multiple functions.

Figure **1.** Coherent curricular choices checklist

| | Function | Descriptors | Number of Courses Recommended (Desirable) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Writing | Competence; confidence across disciplines | – – – – – – |
| 2. | Quantitative Analysis | Using symbolic language; computer applications | – – – – |
| **3.** | Investigation | Various modes of inquiry | _ _ _(_ _ _) |
| 4. | Global Awareness | International dimensions affecting daily lives | – – – – – – |
| **5.** | Oral Presentation | Mastery; confidence | _ _ _ _ |
| '6. | Independent Study | Create a design for study; new mode of learning | _ _(_ _) |
| 7. | Work in Groups | Interrelationships; interdependence of others | – – – – |
| 8. | Internship(~) | Test theoretical knowledge in practical setting | _(_ _) |
| 8A. | (Overseas Study) | (As substitute) | (_) |
| 9. | Other Concentration | Substantive knowledge in diverse field | – – – – – |
| 10. | Organizations | Understanding of current and future environments | _(_ _) |

A quick summation indicates that, in the traditional course mode of one course per requirement, almost all 40 courses in the degree have been specified. This is where the coherent choice advising strategy prospers, because students are challenged to identify courses with more than one dimension of learning.

As students consider courses to fulfill general education and/or major requirements, the advisor encourages discussion beyond the student's traditional criteria of time of day, number of class assignments, whether one's roommate is also in the class, or the grading scheme. Together, advisor and student search for courses fulfilling multiple functions. For example, a certain course in "literature" might include a writing component, use various word-processing packages, and require oral presentation and/or group projects; it might even be specific to another culture (Latin-American, Russian, etc.). Such a course earns five checks on the worksheet. Or, an independently designed business major elective, in which the student researches computer security in financial institutions and summarizes findings in an extensive report, could earn as many as six. This strategy also includes consideration of individual faculty, that is, for some unique expertise, methodology, or research interest, which might fit a student's particular interests and goals. Briefly, the strategy indeed suggests that a course "is a terrible thing to waste," given the above limitations.

To implement such an advising strategy requires substantial information about courses not routinely provided, or even available. A variety of methods to determine such information is possible. Handel and Muratore (1988) provided an excellent example of a process used at UCLA to assess General Education courses for their contribution to seven basic intellectual competencies. These competencies were evaluated through interviews with faculty and teaching assistants, and through examination of course readings and lectures. A similar process could be used for the strategy suggested herein.

Some institutions produce annual "course evalutions" or "course previews" that describe expectations, assignments, readings, and grading schemes. Information regarding the course functions described above could be gathered and included in the same type of document. Prior to course approvals, curriculum review committees could request (or require) that such functions be addressed as new courses are proposed. These characteristics could then be forwarded as part of the course description and materials as would normally occur.

On smaller campuses it is possible to learn about courses simply through normal teaching and advising, through curriculum and other committee work, and through planned faculty development programs. It would not be inappropriate to send students to various instructors to determine such information directly — perhaps intrusive advising in reverse. On larger campuses a more systematic effort, naturally, would be necessary.

Once the desired information about courses is determined, an even more difficult task is to make such information available to students and advisors. To facilitate such communication some coding system will likely be developed. This codification might be done somewhat the way many institutions identify courses for specific categories or "areas" in general education requirements; it might be done by a separate publication for the specific purpose of providing such identification (as an advising tool); or most likely it might be done via a computerized course data base that becomes readily accessible to students and advisors.

Although the information gathering and reporting tasks appear somewhat overwhelming, the most important feature of this advising strategy lies in the consideration of multiple course functions. Becoming aware of and thinking about such issues during routine registration activities is as important, if not more so, than specific course selection.

## THE RESULTS

Using this strategy throughout their degree programs, students learn to radically improve their choices. In doing so they counter many of the problems in higher education identified at the outset of this article. They become more actively involved in the learning process; they develop higher expectations of themselves; they begin to bridge the gap between careerism and being an educated person; they become broader and deeper thinkers; they better use their 5 percent of the course offerings; they extend the real benefits of education throughout their four years; they develop a higher optimum level of ignorance at no additional cost; and they do seem to enjoy the challenges and opportunities presented through this effort.

This strategy might also result in better instruction at the undergraduate level. While attempting to achieve the multiple functions described herein, course and curriculum components, teaching pedagogies, and reward structures could require closer analysis. In turn, faculty development efforts, campus-wide communications about courses, and advisor training programs will probably need some revision.

The ultimate outcomes of the coherent choice strategy are, of course, that students learn to create conditions for lifelong learning rather than simply for three credits and a GPA; that they become experts in curiosity rather than in a discipline; that they have a global perspective of the world in which they live; and that they have acquired an integrated and sophisticated sense of knowledge, careers, community, and their own goals, values, abilities, interests, and responsibilities. Academic advisors have excellent opportunities, using the advising strategy suggested here, to help students enrich their college education.

Authors' ***note:*** We are fortunate to be able to work with a faculty that thrives on improved undergraduate education. Over the years this faculty has developed a unique, interdisciplinary, and participatory General Studies curriculum, including a requirement fulfilled only at the junior/senior level; a long-standing Basic Skills Program using faculty from all disciplines, which also provided an impetus for improved basic skills instruction throughout the state; a comprehensive writing program, including writing-intensive and writing-across-the-curriculum courses and a Junior Writing Test; a contractual obligation/recognition to teach courses by independent study; a faculty development program that has resulted in the infusion of writing, computer usage, humanities, and values into all parts of the curriculum; a Freshman Seminar, which is developed and delivered through currently existing courses; and, soon, a similar Senior Seminar.

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