

What's Wrong With Too Many Required Courses

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Institutions across the country have been considering carefully scripted general-education courses in lieu of traditional distribution requirements (see “[No Math Required](#),” “[Rethinking Gen Ed](#)” and “[Gen Ed Redesigns](#)”). Some months ago, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni issued a report pointing out the efficiencies that would be realized by sequenced general-education courses with prescribed curricula, little student choice and lots of requirements.

The same organization also issued a letter deploring the fact that most college students could not identify James Madison as the father of the U.S. Constitution (most chose Thomas Jefferson) and that 40 percent did not know that Congress has the power to declare war. Their solution: a course on civic literacy required of every college student.

The push to require courses even comes from student groups. Last semester, I talked with a group of student activists concerned about their classmates’ use of phrases that had been used historically to demean others and the chilling effect of such discourse. Their solution: a course on cultural competence required of every college student.

Other groups decry college students’ lack of mathematical and quantitative literacy, of historical knowledge, of basic financial knowledge, and of writing skills. Common to all is the proposed solution: new required courses.

Administrators also enjoy required courses. They are stable and easy to section and schedule. Pointing to a required course that purports to convey particular content or skills is a highly efficient way of satisfying accreditors.

Unhappily, however, taking a course does not guarantee a student will learn what the course purports to teach. Civics courses are required in most high schools. If they worked, college students would not be lacking civic knowledge.

Worse, requirements have unintended consequences. Colleges are marketplaces: ideas are exchanged, professors vie for students and students vie for professors. The currency is not dollars, but student enrollments. Make a course required, and you remove the incentive for whoever is teaching that course to make it attractive to students. Professors are busy and they need to allocate their time carefully. Subsidizing a course by guaranteeing enrollment will cause a professor to devote more attention to other, unsubsidized courses.

Moreover, because departments also care about enrollments, they will not place their most gifted faculty members in a course in which enrollments are guaranteed. They will use their best faculty members to attract students to the major or to get students through the hardest courses. It takes a lot of vigilance and energy to ensure that required courses remain exciting and inspiring. Anyone who doubts that should think back on the worst courses they ever took.

The Power of Serendipity

I’m not suggesting that colleges and universities should have no requirements. Just as unregulated free markets concentrate capital, unregulated curricula concentrate enrollments. Think massive, entertaining, undemanding lecture courses. But the opposite -- centrally planned, highly sequenced curricula with lots of top-down requirements -- are precise analogues of Marxist economies. And we all know how those work.

The trick is to find regulations that are unobtrusive and actually improve student learning.

The first step is easy. Markets function best when there is equal and easy access to information. And students must have good information about what they can expect to learn in a class and why it is important.

But the way regulations are structured also matters. Think back to the best educational experiences that you have

ever had. Common to most such experiences will be serendipity: the intervention of a gifted professor, reading a spell-binding book at exactly the right time, taking an inspiring course or excitedly talking over an idea with a friend in a residence hall.

In a college or university, regulations should be designed to maximize serendipity. How one does that depends, of course, on the institution.

Good liberal arts institutions (and many others) go to great trouble to hire faculty members who love their disciplines and truly enjoy teaching. In such institutions, distribution requirements that simply demand that students take courses in different disciplines are effective. Although one can talk about breadth and exploration, the distribution requirements spread students over that faculty. They increase serendipity by increasing the odds that a student will encounter a gifted professor who changes their life.

In addition to maximizing opportunities for serendipity, a good college or university will make it difficult for students to avoid learning material or acquiring skills they will subsequently need. In fact, rather than simply requiring a course, it will make sure that the outcomes desired of students are reflected in *many* of the courses those students will take. To guarantee that students write well, for example, students must practice writing in most courses they take. The same goes for civics or intercultural competence. That is the job of a strong faculty working together to align many different courses. To do that, faculty members need an institutional culture where people in different disciplines talk with one another openly about what they are seeking to do in their courses, and what seems to be working and what does not.

In smaller institutions, faculty members must know one another and interact regularly. In larger institutions, one needs structures that ensure that department members in charge of large multisectioned courses crucial to other departments know and interact openly with their counterparts in those departments.

In both small and large institutions, trust is essential. Administrators and faculty leaders can't order up trust, but they can model it and facilitate interaction across different departments. For administrators and faculty leaders, it requires thinking about what groups to bring together and how to charge them. It requires being present and gathering and sharing data that departments and faculty can use. It requires the patience and wisdom to realize that time spent allowing different groups to explore not only what their students most need but also how to entice those students into acquiring what it is they need will pay larger dividends than top-down edicts mandating courses to be completed and exams to be passed.

It's not easy, and it requires time, thoughtfulness and a deft touch. Higher education, like the economy, would be simpler if a benign leader could just require things. But it wouldn't be better.