

How curricular glut negatively impacts higher ed innovation and budgets (essay)

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Take Charge of Curricular Glut

Curricular glut stifles innovation and negatively impacts virtually every aspect of college and university budgets, argues Michael Bugeja.

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By

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Higher education is glutted with courses, many of which are marginal or associated with arcane, duplicative or outdated subjects. That is at the heart of tuition increases, student debt, budget shortfalls, legislative distrust, poor adjunct pay and too few tenured or tenure-eligible professors at typical colleges and universities.

[Last year Forbes reported](#) that more than half of American professors are part time or not tenure eligible. Contingent faculty members are hired to facilitate the ever-expanding curricula. Because they typically are not empowered to take leadership roles in departments, the service workload of continuing professors has increased, affecting research, advising and instruction.

Professors can debate the causes of budget shortfalls at their institutions. There is plenty of blame to go around.

An influential opinion piece in *The New York Times* Sunday Review, "[The Real Reason College Tuition Costs So Much](#)," notes that public investment in higher education, when adjusted for inflation, is vastly higher than 1960s levels when government funding was deemed generous.

According to the op-ed, any argument about a lack of public support for higher education "flies directly in the face of the facts." Rather, the piece cites the increase in administrative positions coupled with seven-figure salaries for presidents as the real reasons for budgetary deficits triggering higher tuition.

The Atlantic Monthly ended 2015 with a special report titled "[Hope and Despair: What Is the Future of Higher Education?](#)" It included interviews with leading scholars and advocates for higher education who spoke about the usual impediments: lack of public funding, declining student competencies and overemphasis on preparing graduates for the workforce.

In the wake of such an environment, the report noted, colleges resort to “an array of cost-saving measures, relying increasingly on adjunct faculty and student-tuition increases.”

Not once was curriculum mentioned, nor how it impacts the budget.

Many colleges and universities have adopted budget models called by many names, including responsibility-centered management or resource management models. Those practices are often tied to curricular development, allocating funds based on student credit-hour generation rather than on the number of majors.

In other words, a department with fewer than 50 majors may have a bigger budget than another with 1,000 majors, all based on the number of credits amassed via curriculum.

These budget models became prevalent in the last decade, spawning a tsunami of courses across disciplines as units promoted trendy topics or duplicated other departments’ popular classes. Budget models were not supposed to inflate catalogs. Initially, the hope was more relevant courses would be embraced and low-enrolled courses eliminated.

However, administrators overlooked a fundamental problem: the faculty owns the curriculum.

As such, presidents, provosts, deans and even chairs can do little to stop departments proposing new courses, retaining outdated ones, mandating prerequisites and creating sequences, options and tracks.

Professors and the organizations that represent them will have difficulty amending budget models, addressing top-heavy administration, reducing salaries of presidents, urging corporations to stop agenda setting and rallying legislatures for more funding.

But they and faculty senates can and should do something about glutted curricula. Otherwise, they can count on:

- Slim to no raises each year because of tight budgets.
- The more new courses, the more people will be required to teach them.
- Adjuncts will probably be working even harder for lower pay because that is the only way glutted curricula can be serviced.
- Assistant and associate professors will be teaching more with extra service and conducting scholarship less, potentially affecting promotion.
- Degree progress will slow, adding to student debt.

Below you will find recommendations for the faculty to fight curricular glut, the sheer scope of which indicates the power of the typical professoriate in matters associated with curricula:

1. Require paperwork within your unit documenting why any new course is needed, what it will cost (equipment, software, licenses, subscriptions, graduate assistants, etc.), how it will affect degree progress and whether it will add to colleagues’ workload.
2. Create or use universal course titles, such as “seminar” or “workshop,” allowing different subjects each semester without expanding curricula.
3. Eliminate outdated courses that may have been important in other eras but less so now. (Often classes remain long after professors who proposed them have retired.)
4. Delete any course with the word “intermediate” in the usual triptych of classes titled “beginning,” “intermediate” and “advanced.” (Or with suffixes 1, 2, 3, as in Economics 1, 2, 3.) Those are often artifacts of the quarter system. Make beginning and advanced classes more rigorous so the same content exists in two rather than three courses.

5. Require no more than two cornerstone classes (introductory course work) for first- and second-year students and two capstone courses for juniors and seniors. Make as many as possible of remaining courses electives that any of your own majors can take, accelerating degree progress.
6. Remove as many prerequisites as possible, especially ones associated with silos (courses promoting one viewpoint or topic). Silos undermine degree progress if students must take one course to qualify for another when no new particular skill is required.
7. End sequences and tracks. If a genre of courses doesn't appear on a diploma, it may be a silo. (Example: American Colonial History on a history diploma.) Make those classes electives, and let students decide whether to take them. Better still, reduce the number of courses in the silo so that it no longer is one.
8. Generate student credit hours strategically by offering large nonmajor principles courses, saving small classes for majors. (Example: a 200-seat Principles of Poetry class rather than 10 poetry workshops for the same number of students.) You will produce the same number of credit hours while reducing sections. And if your principles classes are good enough, you'll recruit new majors.
9. Assess each course annually in your department to see if it emphasizes competencies or advances innovation and degree progress. If not, revise or eliminate it.
10. Work with deans to change promotion and tenure requirements that encourage curricular development, which often inspires unneeded courses, and instead promote curricular enhancement. (Example: adding a digital aspect to an existing class is considered enhancement.)

Faculty senates can also help in the effort. They can:

1. Create a curriculum policy for every academic unit outlining what each department should and should not be teaching. (Example: journalism creates content for a mass audience. Communication studies does not.) Departments need to stop duplicating each other's classes in the competition for seats. A senate policy designating pedagogical areas is a shared governance way of doing so.
2. Create a Faculty Senate curriculum council that requires strictly adhered-to paperwork before any new course is approved. (Example: mandate sign-off by the faculty of another department for any related course work in addition to an impact statement documenting how the proposed course will affect student degree progress, the teaching budget and colleagues' workload.) The council can reject or sanction new courses according to the assigned pedagogical area (No. 1 above).

In the end, we can wish for an academic environment in which public support continues to underwrite existing practices. We can post invectives on social media about administrative hiring or salaries, believing our opinions will inspire change. We can blame political parties, entitled students, helicopter parents, corporate interference or any number of excuses or justifications for the state of affairs.

Or we can understand the impact of curriculum on innovation as well as on practically every aspect of the higher education budget, take responsibility and do something about it.

Bio

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