
Getting to the Core

Redesigning the General-Education Curriculum

BY GARY LAND

American educational practice has come in for a lot of criticism recently. At the college level, there has been a growing awareness of the need to re-examine general curriculum requirements. Surveys of high school and college students reveal ignorance of basic knowledge, especially in comparison with the students in other industrialized countries. There is a widespread impression that American students lack essential knowledge and understanding.

The general-education programs of American colleges and universities have contributed to this problem. In its report, *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students*, the National Endowment for the Humanities says that "entering students often find few requirements in place and a plethora of offerings. There are hundreds of courses to choose from, a multitude of ways to combine them to earn a bachelor's degree, and a minimum of direction."¹

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This report is only the most recent to indict the dominant "distribution" approach to general education, a system in which students can choose almost limitless combinations of courses to complete the required number of credits in areas

such as science, humanities, and social science.

There are a number of reasons, both practical and philosophical, why American colleges and universities developed what critics see as an incoherent approach to general education. Because of the explosion of knowledge, professors have focused on increasingly specialized areas of study. This makes it difficult for them to identify the broad areas of knowledge essential to balanced education. Furthermore, departments—for budgetary reasons—have wanted to be included in the potentially rich coffer of general education. As a result, the variety of such courses almost inevitably has grown over time.

Philosophical support for the "distribution" system originally arose out of the "modes of inquiry" model. Unlike the traditional approach, which stressed the learning of facts, this view emphasized the various ways that the disciplines formulated and addressed problems. It was not so significant for the



student to know the causes of the American Civil War, for example, as to learn how to think historically, something that presumably could be accomplished through any course with a historical orientation.

Recently, some academics have taken the more radical view that there is no such thing as essential knowledge. Catharine R. Stimpson, for instance, argues that both our pluralistic society and the relativity of truth make it not only impossible but also undesirable to impose a predetermined curriculum upon students. Relativism, she says, will nurture a more democratic university.²

Nonetheless, many people both inside and outside academia are calling for a required core curriculum. Robert Roemer states that "the faculty at a college or university have a responsibility to direct the studies of undergraduates and to declare which courses of study serve to make a person educated."³ Describing distribution requirements as a "con-job," Jason DeParle and Liza Mundy argue that "the cure is the core—the core curriculum, that is—a few carefully designed courses that all students must take and that ground them in the world's great books, events, and ideas."⁴

In 1990 Carl A. Raschke of the University of Denver helped organize the American Association for the Advancement of a Core Curriculum. He states that "commitment to a core curriculum means a commitment to interdisciplinary thinking, to making sense out of a rapidly changing and fragmented culture. It also represents a commitment to undergraduate education."⁵

A Strong Case

These critics make a strong case, especially when their concerns are integrated into a Christian outlook. Distribution requirements that result largely from academic turf wars are educationally indefensible. The argument that there is no essential knowledge flies in the face of the Christian view that the Bible offers the starting point for true education. "Modes of inquiry" advocates justifiably point to the need for varied thinking skills. However, they undervalue the need for specific knowledge in order to adequately use these skills. The student who knows how to think historically, for example, would nevertheless have considerable trouble understanding the recent debate

over a Harvard student's displaying of a Confederate flag without knowing the background and results of the American Civil War. Recognition of the pluralism of American society, rather than calling for further fragmentation, points to the importance of common binding elements in the educational process. This unity is also essential to a church that crosses the

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What Is a Core Curriculum?

William J. Bennett succinctly explains what is meant by a core curriculum: "a set of fundamental courses, ordered, purpo-

sive, coherent."⁶ Fundamentally, in designing a core curriculum, we are addressing the question of our educational mission or purpose and attempting to translate it into a specific set of courses. Such a task is not easy, but the following four-step procedure shows how it might be accomplished.

First, as Christian educators we need to ask ourselves this question: What is required to be an educated Christian in the 21st century? To answer this question, we need to educate ourselves regarding the nature of a college education. General-education committees, in my view, need to study some essential works before they embark on redesigning a general education program. They also need to design a plan to ensure that this study continues on an ongoing basis. Such study should include reading and discussion of, for example, John Cardinal Newman—*Idea of a University*, Jacques Barzun—*The American University*, Arthur Holmes—*The Idea of a Christian College*, Ernest Boyer—*College*, Ellen G. White—*Education*, and a sampling of the recent reports and articles that debate general education.

Second, after this initial study, the committee can develop an outline of the school's general-education program, including its overall philosophy, the total credits, general areas to be studied, and distribution of credits among those areas. At this point the committee should discuss its philosophy with the faculty within each area. Committee and faculty should together identify the essential knowledge and skills to be taught, together with the most effective course structures through which to teach them.

Finally, drawing upon these discussions, the committee should design the specific curriculum of the general-education program. If it has effectively communicated with the larger faculty in developing its program, the general-education committee should have little trouble gaining acceptance for its proposed curriculum.

Individualizing General Education

The procedure described above suggests that general-education programs must be developed individually within each Seventh-day Adventist college or university, for the faculty will not support a program that they do not "own." Because each institution has differing eco-

nomic resources, student populations, and faculty characteristics, the specifics of the general-education program will differ from place to place.

However, there should be agreement among Adventist schools regarding the philosophy and basic elements of general education. Such universal understanding could be fostered through seminars sponsored by the Board of Higher Education. The seminars might focus upon study and discussion of the readings suggested above.

Once their core curricula are in place, Seventh-day Adventist schools should formalize and publish agreements regarding the equivalencies of their general-education courses. This will enable students to more easily transfer from one institution to another.

Aims of a Restructured Core Curriculum

In a Seventh-day Adventist college, a redesigned general-education program should aim at certain characteristics. First, general education should provide students with a structured basic knowledge of the social, cultural, physical, natural, and spiritual reality within which we live. Students should gain communication skills in their mother tongue and a foreign language, as well as the computational skills necessary for contemporary life.

Second, general-education courses should be as academically demanding as major courses at a similar level.

Third, all students should go through the same core curricula, with the only exceptions being (a) that honors students take more advanced versions of the same courses, and (b) students who have demonstrated a high competence level might substitute a more advanced "major" course for certain general-education courses.

Fourth, courses in the social sciences, humanities, and religion should include significant readings in those works that have both shaped our social and cultural

world and our understanding of that world. Similarly, courses in the natural and physical sciences should include laboratory experiences.

Finally, the entire program should be grounded in a self-conscious Christian world view.

These general purposes may be achieved in a variety of ways, but the individual courses must comprise a structured, integrated whole. If we use courses defined by disciplines, such as

world history or introduction to psychology, the syllabi must attempt to relate each course to the other courses in the program.

Another alternative is to emphasize interdisciplinary courses that examine broad themes, such as the impact of technology or the development of Western culture. If we choose this approach, in addition to relating the courses to the overall program we must also ensure that they are truly interdisciplinary and not just composed of unrelated sections taken from different disciplines. While interdisciplinary courses seem more intellectually exciting, they require extensive planning time and an ongoing commitment, including the training of new teachers, in order for them to be successful.

In short, the general-education committee must actively and continuously

oversee and discuss with the teachers the courses included in the core curriculum. This will reinforce the fact that these courses exist primarily for college or university goals rather than departmental purposes.

An Example

At the risk of being presumptuous, let me illustrate what a structured basic knowledge in the area of religion might mean in a core curriculum where courses are defined by discipline. In this case, the religion curriculum's mission would be to produce students who (1) know elementary principles of biblical interpretation, (2) are acquainted with the general outline of the Old and New Testaments, (3) understand the major elements of Christian theology, (4) have both an intellectual and experiential understanding of Christianity, and (5) are acquainted with the major philosophers who have shaped the Christian tradition. These goals could be achieved through a series of four courses:

- Introduction to the Old Testament,
- Introduction to the New Testament,
- Introduction to Systematic Theology (which

would include significant reading from such religious thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, as well as Adventist writers), and

- A course in Christian spirituality that introduces the student to such classics of devotional literature as the works of Thomas A. Kempis, Bunyan, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Ellen White.

A systematic approach such as this—identifying specific knowledge and skills as well as particular courses that collectively achieve those goals—should be taken to each part of the general-education curriculum. This will help the school to achieve the overall purpose of structured basic learning. Furthermore, the content and readings of courses can be coordinated through the oversight of the general-education committee. This will reinforce learning and ensure interdisciplinary connections. Darwinism, for ex-

ample, could be examined historically, scientifically, and religiously in separate courses, each of which would build upon and complement the others. Interdisciplinary courses would accomplish the same goals, each using a different means.

Not every student would respond identically to this curriculum, for students are not automotons. However, administrators could be sure that (1) every student had been exposed to the information, ideas, and skills that our institutions regard as basic, and (2) that each student had achieved a certain level of competence. We would then graduate individuals with cosmopolitan rather than parochial interests. They would be broadly educated yet competent specialists, thoroughly grounded in the Christian tradition yet enabled to understand and deal with a rapidly changing contemporary world.

Compromise and Commitment

Achieving this goal will not be easy, but it can be done.⁷ It will require vision—and probably a visionary. At the same time it will necessitate some degree of compromise, for campus politics—for good or ill—play a significant role in the development of general-education programs. Furthermore, it will require a continuing commitment, for neither the vision nor the specific program can remain static. It must continually moderate the interrelationship of the past, present, and future.

The general-education program also must be related to the larger college or university culture, according to Jerry G. Gaff. We must create a college culture marked by a coherent set of values that support the purposes of general education: For Seventh-day Adventist institutions, this means that the goals of general education will be reflected in chapels and assemblies, worship services, school-sponsored entertainment, and the daily

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conduct of administrators, faculty, and students. This, too, will require continuing self-examination and creative thinking.

Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities have the starting point for implementing these values. But we must also develop both the vision and the will to work out their implications for campus life in general and general education in particular. A core curriculum that clearly embodies these values and their educational application will thereby reflect a coherent vision for each institu-

tion. This will enable us to speak clearly to our constituencies and to better educate our students. The reordering of our curriculum is a task of vital importance, for—to paraphrase Michael Novak—if we do not do this, the light of the Adventist college may well go out.⁸

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