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The Frankenstein Monster of College Catalogs

By Terry O'Banion

It was a horror story. It was not designed to be a horror story, but it turned out to be one. The package arrived on a dark and stormy night, sent by a friend who knew of my obsession with community college catalogs. It was disguised in brown wrapping paper and seemed as innocent as a kitten. When I opened it, I realized that I held in my hand a horror story to rival those written by Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley. I soon decided that this 2022-2023 catalog was probably the Frankenstein monster of all the catalogs I have seen, not an unexpected result when a volume such as this is designed by a committee that includes over 30 faculty members and administrators.

Weighing in at 3.2 pounds and containing more than 600 pages, this catalog is the alpha male of catalogs. Readers are advised at the outset that “every reasonable effort” was made to ensure accuracy throughout the volume, and are given the caveat that courses, programs, and other information are subject to change without notice. The final page reinforces the warning and urges students to download the entire catalog as a PDF, stating that the download, which may take several minutes, is *today’s snapshot of the catalog*. An ironic and fair warning that “something wicked this way comes” (Shakespeare, 1623/2013).

A Catalog’s Purpose

Many community college leaders claim that their institution’s catalog is designed to help students navigate the college’s culture, programs, courses, and regulations. A

CollegiateParent article (Calhoun, n.d.) reminds readers that, “The catalog is the single most important navigation tool available to your student” (para. 21). In the catalog, the president echoes these beliefs in a familiar opening message to students: *Welcome to XYZ Community College! We are here to support you on your journey to a degree, certificate, or transfer. We are honored that you are here!* Since the president’s introduction implies that the catalog I held in my hands was designed for students, I decided to assess its effectiveness from a student’s perspective.

My first reaction was that there was no rationale for how the material was organized. The catalog developers had obviously followed a recipe that produced a monster: a mash-up of every policy, rule, regulation, requirement, timeline, and anything else the committee could think to include. If there was an underlying organizing principle, it was to avoid liability—or responsibility—at any cost by drowning students in information.

Programs and Courses

Typically, the sections that describe programs and courses are the heart of any catalog, since they assist students in selecting what they want and need to learn to become responsible citizens and productive workers. But if this catalog is for students, the extensive Programs and Courses section defeats that purpose. No person of sound mind, even those with master’s and doctoral degrees, could easily negotiate these 465+ pages—the longest section in the catalog. First-generation and at-risk students with high school diplomas or their equivalents would find it almost impossible to navigate through this part of the catalog.

The lengthy section describing programs and courses form a monster that would make Mary Shelley proud. The section contains more than 20 definitions of the term *grade*, there is no table of contents to guide students, and there is no index for easy reference. However, it is the segment dealing with the common core that exposes the true Frankenstein nature of this section—and the entire catalog.

General education, a common core of courses required for graduation by almost every community college in the U.S., is frequently the best indicator of the learning outcomes an institution values. Every American regional accrediting association requires that accredited institutions of higher education post their general education requirements in their catalogs.

The Frankenstein catalog deals with the general education requirement by providing a laundry list of courses and asking students to choose the courses in prescribed areas they wish to take. Although the catalog offers a number of general education configurations from which students can choose, all of the options are quite similar to the following example, from which students must select a number of courses from a variety of subject matter areas:

Area A: English Language Communication and Critical Thinking

- A course in Composition is required
- Students must choose one of 4 courses from Oral Communication
- Students must choose one of 4 courses from Critical Thinking

Area B: Scientific Inquiry and Quantitative Reasoning

- Students must choose one of 38 courses from Physical Science
- Students must choose one of 17 courses from Life Science

- Students must choose one of 14 courses from Mathematics

Area C: Arts and Humanities

- Students must choose one course from 39 in Arts
- Students must choose one course from 69 in Humanities

Area D: Social Sciences

- Students must choose two courses from at least two different disciplines from 74 courses in the Social Sciences

Area E: Lifelong Learning and Self-Development

- Students must choose 1 course from 14 in Area E

In this configuration, students must choose 11 courses from 274 possible choices to meet the college's general education requirement in five knowledge areas. The catalog does not include any information about how these knowledge areas were selected, why they are relevant to a student's education, or how the courses were assigned to each area. Occasionally, there is a note to students about the need to see an advisor or counselor for assistance in making the right choices. But most institutions have an average ratio of one advisor for every 1,000 students, which basically negates the value of such assistance.

Rules and Regulations

Within the first 50 pages of this catalog are sections on college history, facilities, admission and registration requirements, fees and financial aid, and special programs, along with a description of general education patterns. Only one and one-fifth pages describe the college's philosophy of general education and faculty values before introducing a long section on associate degrees and general education requirements. Through almost 90 percent of the catalog (over 540 pages), the information is all about details of programs and courses; it then turns to a section on Student Services.

In the Student Services section, the catalog lists numerous rules and regulations related to cheating, behavior, disciplinary and grievance procedures, student compliance, smoking, privacy rights, traffic and parking, free speech, etc. By juxtaposing the section on Student Services with lists of rules and regulations, the committee that built this monster catalog made three significant errors. First, it reinforced an outdated belief that the primary role of student affairs professionals is to act *in loco parentis*. Second, it ignored decades of writing and research demonstrating the significant role that student affairs programs, processes, and services play in student, faculty, and institutional success. Finally, committee members proceeded to compound the first two errors by burying this section—a section of vital importance to students—in the bowels of the catalog.

Faculty and Administrators

Thinking my assumption that the catalog was written for students may have been wrong, I decided to change my perspective and look at the catalog as a resource for faculty and administrators. The catalog lists the names, titles, and degrees of almost 40 administrators and managers and over 230 full-time faculty members. It also includes a statement on the value of adjuncts to the college—but no value statement about any other employee group. Six adjunct faculty members are identified by name, thus creating a mystery. Since most

community colleges employ more adjunct faculty than full-time faculty, I found myself wondering, where are the names of the other adjunct faculty? Another mystery is the list of more than 360 faculty members in the faculty emeritus category. What is the purpose of listing in the current college catalog the names of faculty who no longer teach?

It is probably safe to assume that the lists are an attempt to honor the members of various employee groups at the college. But that raises three more questions: Who would take the time to search through these three dozen or so pages of lists? Why is there no reference to classified staff? Is there not a better way to honor employee groups?

Toward a Workable Solution

Every community college has a catalog. Not all catalogs are Frankenstein catalogs, but far too many seem to be edging closer and closer to monster status. Originally, community college catalogs were crafted to mimic university catalogs. Current versions have been handed down annually, some for 50 or more years. In the process, they have been expanded and revised, but seldom has anything been eliminated. Today, the catalog produced by most community colleges is a relic of the past, more a jungle of information that students must hack through than a clearly marked pathway that helps students identify and reach their career, educational, and life goals.

Here are steps with clear markers that can lead to a workable solution:

1. **Examine the true purpose of your catalog.** Why does it exist? Should it be a road map for students or is that function better filled elsewhere? Is it a marketing tool? Or is the catalog an official compilation of the rules, regulations, and guidelines that must be followed by students and faculty? Form should follow function.
2. **Determine the audience and write for the reader.** Establish whether your catalog is for students, faculty members, the public, accrediting agencies, state and federal agencies, or all of the above. Tailor the style and language to the audience and avoid educational jargon. Include an essential glossary with easy-to-understand definitions. Always include a table of contents and an index.
3. **Consider breaking your catalog into more targeted documents** such as programs of study and courses, a guide to financial aid, transfer requirements to state universities, general education requirements, and key rules and regulations. Many campus offices already do this to better accommodate the needs of students. At least create a Student Handbook and a Faculty Handbook. Build the sidewalks where the paths have been trod.
4. **If you have not already done so, convert your catalog to a web-native format and dispense with print versions.** This is environmentally responsible and key to connecting with digital natives. Revise web-based catalogs to simplify navigation and integrate with content management and student information systems to keep them automatically accurate. Ensure that your online catalog is mobile friendly. Make the digital experience interactive and accessible for all users. (O'Banion & Miles, 2021)

This article is based on an actual community college catalog from one of the flagship community colleges in the U.S., and while it is an extreme example, the characteristics described here are common across the community college field. The college that publishes this catalog has one of the best leadership teams in its state, guided by an exceptional president and board of trustees. Its faculty is equally outstanding and has created numerous programs leading to substantive records of student and institutional success. But like almost every other community college catalog, this one exemplifies a neglect of

catalogs as practical resources for students. It is the author's hope that this article will be a wake-up call to the hundreds of community colleges that have not considered their catalogs in their reform efforts. It is far past the time to include the college catalog as a priority in future reforms.

References

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Author's note: This manuscript references an actual community college catalog that is much like all the other community college catalogs in the U.S., except this catalog is longer and more complex. The author has permission from a key source at the college to publish this article.

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