

## An Essential Education for All Students

Even before the pandemic, reformers failed to make major curriculum reform in community colleges a priority, writes Terry U. O'Banion, who offers a new paradigm.

By

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This decade has been one of the most reform-rich periods in the history of higher education, especially in the community college sector. With major funding from foundations and substantive research from centers and institutes, a national consensus has emerged about the importance and urgency of reform. Dozens of state and national initiatives have been launched to study and recommend changes in policies, programs, practices and personnel.

The community college has been at the center of these reform efforts clustered around what has become the overarching mission of the contemporary community college endorsed by former president Obama, a

number of leading foundations, national organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees, and hundreds of community colleges. That overarching mission purports to double the number of students who by 2020 earn one-year certificates or associate degrees or who transfer to a university. Unfortunately, the deadline is upon us, and there is no possible way that particular goal can be met. Reformers were aware of that failure before the current pandemic hit, and now the reactions of colleges to the pandemic in terms of many closed classrooms and increased online education further complicate and serve as barriers to reaching the goal.

### **Reformers Ignored the Curriculum**

Even before the pandemic, the primary reason we will not meet that goal is that reformers failed to include major curriculum reform as a priority. We've seen some dabbling in curricular reform: new pathways in math and accelerated courses in developmental education have proven somewhat effective. Contextual education illustrated by the [I-BEST](#) program in Washington State is expensive but has had some success, and guided pathways urge an examination of the curriculum to ensure students are taking the right courses to completion. But there has not been in this explosion of reform efforts any major and substantive national initiatives to reform the curriculum.

And there are reasons why this is so. First, curriculum reform is one of the most difficult tasks in all of higher education. "It is easier to move a cemetery than to change a curriculum," President Woodrow Wilson is believed to have said. To which someone added, "In either case, there is no help from the residents."

Second, faculty members are generally not motivated to change the curriculum. They have vested interests because they added all these courses to reflect their own personal ideas they wanted to teach. Thus, it is by and large the faculty who have created the “cafeteria curriculum.”

Third, in bureaucracies it is often easier to add than to delete. To delete a course is to offend some faculty members and even pave the way to delete a faculty member. Retribution can become the game.

Fourth, most faculty members have no formal training in creating and revising the curriculum. Very few educators have any understanding of the history of general education and how it has become a hodgepodge of courses cluttering up the catalog and confusing students and their advisers.

And finally, today’s general education curriculum is caught between those who advocate for more liberal education and those who advocate for more career and technical education. This split has been the norm for hundreds of years, more embedded in the education culture today because of the strong advocacy of the Association of American Colleges and Universities for liberal education and the Association of Career and Technical Education for workforce education.

The division between liberal and workforce education is quite visible in the structures and policies of community colleges, where they are split into separate divisions with separate faculty groups, separate facilities, separate degrees, separate curricula and separate funding. The community college has embedded this historical divide into its structures and policies, further making it difficult to reform this complex issue.

## The Cafeteria Curriculum

Thomas R. Bailey and his colleagues at the Community College Research Center in their seminal work, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, identified the “cafeteria curriculum” as a major barrier to student success, noting that “The general studies curriculum is perhaps the most confusing and complex program for students to navigate.” Almost every community college in the nation lists a general education or core curriculum in the catalog following this statement: “The Core Curriculum is a set of courses that provides the knowledge, skills and educational experiences needed to succeed in higher education.” Here are several examples of core curricula:

- **In a California community college**, the catalog includes four different sets of requirements for general education degrees -- already confusing for students. In the college’s general education requirements of six courses, students must choose from among 217 different courses (one course from 46 in natural sciences; one from 47 in social and behavioral sciences; one from 79 in art, humanities and culture; and so on).
- **In an Ohio community college**, students must choose from 46 different courses in the arts and humanities to meet a three-course general education requirement, from 36 courses in the social sciences and from 48 in math and science.
- **In a Texas community college**, students are required to select five courses from among 78 courses in three different categories to meet general education requirements.

The curriculum is supposed to be the collective wisdom and expertise of the faculty about what is important for students to learn. And if these examples of a core curriculum are repeated in other community colleges (and they are), faculty members and academic administrators like vice presidents of

instruction, deans and department chairs should be ashamed of the monster they have created. Students cannot navigate through these jungles, and advisers cannot possibly guide students through these pathways of fractured, incoherent programs that lack integrity.

## **An Essential Education**

For those college leaders considering curricular revision or reform, I've described in detail a new curricular paradigm in a monograph, *[Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life](#)*, published by the League for Innovation. The new paradigm is an attempt to create a framework for an integrated curriculum while helping to resolve the historical divide between liberal education and workforce education. In it, I define an essential education as an integrated core of learning that includes and connects the key components from liberal education and workforce education to ensure that a student is equipped to earn a good living and live a good life. It is a quality education essential to all students. An essential education is what some advocates have identified as a liberal career education or a practical liberal education.

And there are plenty of clues to the nature of that curriculum. Advocates of liberal education and of workforce education have been moving closer and closer to a curriculum that unifies their key missions. Most advocates from both sides will agree that all students need skills and knowledge in problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork and collaboration, and communication -- cross-cutting skills necessary for students who want to succeed in higher education and in life. They are the soft skills that should become the hard core of a new essential education. When the Association of American Colleges and Universities surveys business executives about the curriculum

they deem necessary for the 21st century, these four basic skills, necessary for all educated persons, always top the list.

The next step is a brave leap to creating a core curriculum that includes these four key skills. Four three-credit courses as stand-alone courses or combined in a 12-credit learning community is one model of an integrated curriculum. Some colleges will add core courses in diversity and equity, global awareness, and information technology. While no community college has embraced this particular model to date, there is growing recognition that the current programs of general education are woefully inadequate for today's student and for today's society. In *Bread and Roses*, I have outlined seven different approaches colleges could use to create an essential education for all students. The designation of "essential education" also avoids the pejorative aspects long associated with "general education" and "workforce education."

Core courses are more manageable for everyone (faculty, advisers and students), and they are easier to explain to students. If faculty from liberal education and from workforce education can agree on the common elements of core courses and construct content and teaching strategies that apply to the courses, we stand a good chance of creating an integrated curriculum that will help our students make a good living and live a good life. If we fail to create this kind of essential education, the community college we know today may cease to exist, and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be.

## **Bio**

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