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[Home](#) > Community college catalogs must be improved if they are to serve their purpose as guides for students (opinion)

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## **Community college catalogs must be improved if they are to serve their purpose as guides for students (opinion)**

Authored by

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All community colleges have a catalog, from their first proud copy heralding the institution's launch to annual editions calibrated with the academic calendar. Most open with a welcome message extolling the wonders of the college and the catalog itself, like this one from an urban community college president: "I invite you to read this catalog carefully. In it, you will find everything you need to plan your educational experience."

Others offer bold promises to students and communities, such as this from the president of a rural Midwestern community college: "This catalog is a road map to over 60 degree and certificate programs that serve as pathways to family-sustaining wages. Additionally, you will find a comprehensive description of the college and our mission to strengthen local communities."

Some get right to the point: "This catalog is meant to serve as a guide." One urban community college catalog in the Northeast points to its multifold audience with "This catalog is published as a convenience and source of information for prospective students and for the general public."

Unfortunately, claims that these catalogs are *all* that students need to navigate their college journey is not true. We examined the latest available catalogs from a random, stratified sampling of 30 rural, suburban and urban colleges across the United States and share the following findings that will not make those who create community college catalogs happy.

### **What's Inside**

In general, we found community college catalogs are crammed with information for a variety of purposes and are largely indecipherable unless you know in advance what you are seeking. They offer a hodgepodge of basic and exotic information to ensure nothing is left out and are rarely written for the benefit of students. In fact, catalogs seem to confuse more than enlighten even college staff, who report making their own versions of catalog sections to better guide students.

In short, as often structured, the college catalog is a costly anachronism that serves few of its functions well. We find three key barriers to overcome if community college catalogs are to meet their explicitly stated purpose of serving as student guides: excess span and scope, unbounded choice, and ambiguity of purpose.

**Excess span and scope.** The 30 catalogs we reviewed averaged 319 pages in length. Rural college catalogs were somewhat shorter (averaging 210 pages), but urban and suburban college versions averaged 366 and 380 pages, respectively. Those data alone suggest catalogs were not designed as “easy guides to college.”

They all included standard information: application and admission procedures, academic program listings, degree and course descriptions, graduation requirements, explanations of student support services, and academic rules and regulations. All offered academic calendars, costs, departmental contact information and students’ rights and responsibilities. Many included a Student Handbook or Student Code of Conduct, with detailed rules and procedures regarding expected behavior and potential disciplinary action -- warning, probation, suspension and expulsion.

Unfortunately, much of the nuts and bolts of how to go to college was cloaked in legalistic and insider language or buried under mountains of details on a dizzying array of topics. One California community college devoted 13 catalog pages to general education requirements, California State University general education requirements, intersegmental general education transfer curriculum and intersegmental general education transfer education for STEM. Its table of contents included 377 entries spanning seven pages.

All the catalogs were peppered with educational jargon that few new students could be expected to decipher. Approximately one-third of community college students are first generation, and they probably find terms such as "assessment," "accreditation," "academic load," "academic freedom," "articulation," "credit hour," "lower division," "prerequisites," "corequisites" and "registrar" rather confounding at first glance. Several catalogs addressed those terminology challenges with translation guides.

For example, a Georgia college catalog offered a glossary of 21 academic policy terms, and one in Tennessee defined 57 “common terms.” One California college had

a dictionary of 372 acronyms, while a Massachusetts catalog included a lexicon of 69 institutional review board terms more appropriate for graduate students.

These guides surely help. One might argue students must learn the lexicon of the land to be successful college graduates, but why make translating a technical manual the gateway to entry? How many community college students will plow through 200-plus pages to find “everything you need to plan your educational experience”?

**Unbounded choice.** One problem for students is the unbridled abundance of certificate and degree options and variant descriptors for those options across institutions. We seasoned researchers even struggled to make fair comparisons among the catalog offerings. Pity students striving to make informed choices with only a catalog as their handbook. Colleges offer multiform programs, majors and degrees, as well as certificates, diplomas and letters of recognition, many with multiple choices in the same area of study.

The offerings increase with institutional size and are clear points of institutional pride:

- An urban college catalog featured five full-page charts listing 160 degrees and certificates, including eight choices for early childhood education.
- A suburban college catalog assured students, “You’ve come to the right place,” with its offering of 46 degrees and 62 certificates.
- A rural technical institution proudly touted 93 degrees and certificates.

Students able to zero in on a preferred program of study next confront an even more convoluted decision point: selecting general education courses. All the catalogs directed students to complete a specific number of courses beyond their major or electives in particular areas of study to graduate, but those requirements varied broadly in nomenclature and number. Many referred to “general education requirements,” while others called them “general studies requirements,” “transfer program requirements,” “liberal arts requirements” and “degree requirements.” Despite little commonality among the titles or requirements, we found a fair measure of agreement on institutional philosophies, as reflected in these exemplary statements:

- The essential objective of general education is to educate the individual student to be a rational and humane person.
- The purpose of general education is to help all students develop the skills and knowledge that are essential to becoming satisfied, knowledgeable and productive individuals and citizens.
- The promise of general education is that it provides an integrative and comprehensive program that is broad and deep, introducing students to skills,

knowledge and patterns of learning that foster better understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Whether such assertions inspire students to embrace these mandatory courses is left to wonder.

We found a stunning array of course options for meeting general education requirements. Most catalogs called for 10 or 11 such courses but offered on average 95 to 215 from which to choose. One urban college listed 469 general education courses. In the area of humanities and fine arts alone, most urban colleges required one course but had an average of 67 eligible courses. The course offerings in smaller, rural colleges were fewer over all but averaged 95. This pattern was borne out across our review: the larger the college, the more general education offerings. The more career oriented the college, the fewer options it offered.

To make educated choices among the assortment of courses, students must read through course descriptions and draw conclusions about which will best prepare them to be “satisfied, knowledgeable and productive individuals and citizens.” In addition, students attempting to follow this road map to educational success may be flummoxed by trying to figure out which among all those courses in the catalog will be offered in any given term. That ciphering requires cross-referencing with another guidebook altogether: the course schedule.

No one would advocate for limits on choosing one’s destination or destiny. To think of choice as a bad thing is deeply counterintuitive. Don’t we all prefer 31 flavors of ice cream over three? But if you are anything like us, you typically order the same favorite scoops each time you visit the ice cream parlor, no matter how many options are available. We are creatures of habit, after all.

Choice seems premier when it comes to big decisions, but research in behavioral economics and psychology has taught us that too much freedom of choice can lead to choice paralysis and unhappiness. According to *Paradox of Choice* author Barry Schwartz, having to choose among many good options activates our powerful human drive of loss aversion and anxiety about making a wrong decision. Confronting students with dozens or hundreds of desirable options of programs and courses may trigger a fear of loss rather than the thrill of opportunity.

**Ambiguity of purpose.** What is the true aim of a college catalog? Is it a pathway to student success, a compliance manual or an institutional repository? The catalogs we examined seemed to serve a variety of masters and understandable purposes. Having an accessible compendium of up-to-date college processes, procedures, people and programs is handy. Counselors and advisers use them. Outreach, marketing, public

relations and recruiting staff use them. Catalogs help institutions keep up with employee terms of service and milestones. Regional accreditors require colleges to publicize their purpose, processes and outcomes, and catalogs served that messaging function before websites were ubiquitous. Accreditors, lawyers, auditors, compliance officers and college employees all benefit from the smorgasbord of information crammed into college catalogs.

But one audience appears to have been omitted from the catalog user design plan: students. To be fair, with enough time and coffee (and perhaps a Rosetta stone), one can winnow wheat from chaff, decipher general education requirements and flesh out a degree plan. But for community college students slogging through the catalog quagmire, lack of coffee is not their problem.

During this investigation, the authors discovered a few exceptions where catalogs were clearly created with students as end users in mind. These were arranged with student-centered headers and cues such as “Where do I begin? How do I register? What major is right for me? How do I receive financial assistance?” Those examples give hope that change is possible.

### **Digital Progress?**

All 30 community colleges we examined offered some form of online catalog. Most also provided downloadable portable document format (PDF) versions of standard print catalogs and access to archival versions of prior years' catalogs as PDFs. Just one, a small rural school in the Midwest, provided only a static PDF version. Two colleges -- one urban, one rural -- had only slightly more active versions. One offered a choice between a downloadable PDF, a link to “search courses” by department (but not to other catalog information), or a flip book version of the print catalog pages complete with a whoosh noise as you click to turn the inert pages.

Sadly, web-based versions often replicated the shortcomings of their printed precursors. Some added additional links to student-oriented information, but about half of the online catalogs we examined were verbatim digital reproductions of their print catalogs. Even more troubling, the information offered in many online catalogs was not the same nor as student friendly as other parts of the college website.

One third of the colleges attempted to improve access for students and faculty by creating digital catalog gateways to programs of study and courses. But many confusingly required students to fill in a box with their career priorities to get to program information without being able to see the options available. Or they required students to know esoteric program abbreviations, names of specific courses or the

difference between an associate of arts and an associate of science degree before gaining access to more information.

The current trend to digitize is a no-brainer, and quite frankly, most community colleges came late to this party. A few colleges from our sample had thoughtfully transformed their catalogs into smart, student-centric, web-based formats that were searchable and linked to the same rich content available throughout the college website. One even linked to an online program planner and inquired, “Still can’t find what you are looking for in the catalog? Please use our online chat feature or contact us at xxx (email and phone included).” For most, however, there remains great opportunity to both simplify and focus their digital catalog content to provide an easy-to-follow road map for students.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

One community college in our study no longer issues a traditional catalog, a prescient vision. For colleges that continue producing catalogs, we offer four ways to make them more meaningful.

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.
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. Build the sidewalks where the paths have been trod.
4. **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 your online catalog is mobile friendly. Make the digital experience interactive and accessible for all users.

Traditional community college catalogs -- once intended to convey helpful information to assist students and staff in navigating a complex set of rules, regulations, programs and services -- have become obsolete because they are indecipherable, especially for first-time college students. In his poem "Andrea del Sarto," Robert Browning coined the phrase "less is more," but the German American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is known for popularizing the saying to explain the elegant simplicity of his modernist designs. Our study suggests that in the case of college catalogs, less is indeed more, and the clutter and unnecessary obstacles need be removed from the path of the student navigator.

The nation's community colleges have undergone a 20-year student-centered reform movement buttressed by significant research and resources. Yet they have overlooked the college catalog, enduring as a medieval manuscript better kept vaulted than distributed to students. It is time for reform leaders to examine their catalogs and to revise them for 21st-century learners.

Section:

[Community Colleges](#) [1]

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