

# American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century



*Social, Political,  
and Economic Challenges*

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*EDITED BY*

Philip G. Altbach, Robert O. Berdahl,  
and Patricia J. Gumpert

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# Curriculum in Higher Education

## The Historical Roots of Contemporary Issues

*Michael N. Bastedo*

The curriculum in American higher education is often characterized as a pendulum swinging from one extreme to another, from religion to secular science, from prescribed study of the classics to curricular pluralism, and from tradition and conservatism to experimentation and growth. Indeed, these are some of the major tensions in the American higher education curriculum over the past three centuries, and conflict over these issues has often been intense within academic communities. The need for curriculum reform can be understood as emanating from changes in the broader society, such as scientific advancement, evolving conceptions of knowledge, changing student demographics, and more recently, labor market demands. These have often provided compelling rationales for some forms of curricular change.

We must also recognize, however, that these explanations have often been egregiously simplified. Over thirty years ago, Douglas Sloan accused historians of treating the higher education curriculum as a “morality play” where the forces of science, growth, and *Lernfreiheit* (student freedom to learn) fought the good battle against the forces of religion, stagnation, and prescription.<sup>1</sup> In reality, those who fought for a prescribed curriculum often struggled with how to provide some form of academic freedom to students; those who were fervent and pious followers of the Christian faith were often equal believ-

ers in the need for education in the basic sciences; those who believed that knowledge must be conserved were also committed to change and innovation. There are identifiable tensions in the curriculum, but they are not simplistic dichotomies.

In short, we must come to a more nuanced understanding of the reciprocal relationship between curriculum and society. While the curriculum can be seen as a lens for social change, it can also serve society by defining the boundaries of knowledge and thus serve as a force for social change itself, as we will see in the development of technology and the study of women and minorities. And while societal forces undoubtedly influence the curriculum, a full understanding is only possible when we understand how those changes have unfolded over time. Toward that end, we must identify the agents of change, how they organized for social action, and the dynamic relationship between actors in the university and organizations and leaders in society at large.

With these aims in mind, this chapter provides a broad overview of the historical roots of curriculum reform since the early days of the American college. Using three major tensions in curriculum reform—prescription and election, stability and growth, and conservation and innovation—these historical developments are considered analytically to understand how earlier developments have influenced contemporary debates. In the final section, we briefly consider some conceptual frameworks for understanding the dynamics of curriculum reform as well as some emerging policy issues for the coming decade.

### Prescription and Election

The curriculum of the early American college was strongly influenced by the medieval English university, which trained the Calvinist ministers who immigrated to the new continent in the seventeenth century. There was one curriculum for all students, each of whom was training for a career in law or the clergy. Incoming classes were quite small; until the 1760s, all of the colonial colleges combined did not yield more than one hundred graduates per year.<sup>2</sup> Students themselves were generally only fourteen to eighteen years old and were often taught by the president himself. In later years, recent graduates, themselves only eighteen or nineteen years old, assisted him as tutors.<sup>3</sup>

Training for the Protestant ministry required learning the major

languages of biblical texts—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—so that students could understand them in the original. Study of the classical languages was also highly valued for its perceived ability to shape the human mind; the complexity of the grammatical structures of ancient languages were believed to train students to think at a more advanced level than was possible in the vernacular or other modern languages. Although basic knowledge of Latin and Greek was often required for admission, teaching in these languages comprised much of the first two years of study, with the addition of logic, grammar, and some rhetoric. As it had been in the English university, logic was highly valued for its usefulness in teaching students to think rationally and critically. In the final two years, a greater portion of the curriculum consisted of rhetoric, poetry, literature, ethics, arithmetic, and philosophy. Teaching itself consisted of lectures, verbatim recitations, and public disputations.

Emerging topics that did not fit into the ordinary curriculum were covered in weekly “extracurricular” lectures to the student body. Extracurricular topics were also occasionally taught in courses that were stated to be Latin or logic. Student literary societies served an important curricular role, promoting the reading of poetry, literature, science, and other topics that were not a priority in the standard curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Beyond simply reading the works, debates on these subjects were often organized by competing societies for the benefit of the campus. As is often true today, a great deal of learning in the early American college took place outside of the classroom.

As students and faculty became excited by new knowledge, they made extensive efforts to incorporate new materials into the curriculum, both formally and informally. After Timothy Dwight was hired by Yale, the senior class successfully petitioned the trustees to take lectures from him in rhetoric, history, poetry, and literature.<sup>5</sup> The evolution of the Scientific Revolution in European universities also could not be ignored; American faculty returned from Europe fired up to teach these new and daring subjects to eager students. Gradually, courses in physics, anatomy, chemistry and more advanced mathematics were added to the final two years of the college course.

With new topics emerging at a rapid pace, many openly considered allowing students to select the courses of their choosing. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the American college curriculum was in a state of conflict over the knowledge and skills necessary for a lib-

eral education in contemporary society. As the interests and career goals of incoming students became more catholic, as society expected higher education to cover an increasing number of subjects, and as faculty grew restive, the curriculum came under attack from progressives for its intensive focus on ancient languages and theology. The result was unplanned growth of subjects in the curriculum without an overarching philosophy, which to some meant chaos and confusion. According to historian Frederick Rudolph, "Higher education behaved in harmony with a culture that built canals and railroads in seemingly endless number and for reasons that were often more consistent with the national psychology than with sound economic and engineering practice."<sup>6</sup> Students were also getting older; the age of the average college student rose throughout the nineteenth century, making the idea of an elective curriculum increasingly acceptable as students grew from boys to men.

Yet there were many opposed to such changes, for reasons both traditional and contemporary. The defense of the classical curriculum by the president and faculty of Yale College in 1828 was often seen as the last bulwark against the radical changes being proposed by students and society. The Yale Report famously defined the purpose of liberal education as providing "the *discipline* and *furniture* of the mind."<sup>7</sup> Intensive study of Latin and Greek, they argued, was necessary for students to expand their memory; logic and scientific experiments were required to teach students to think through complex problems. Ordinary Americans could be trained on-the-job for careers in "subordinate" positions. Yale's purpose, they argued, was to train young men from the upper classes who would serve as society's enlightened leaders and decision makers.<sup>8</sup>

Despite widespread acceptance of the report, Yale and the other elite colleges could not single-handedly resist the demands of a changing society, and the propulsion of increasingly rapid knowledge change. As state, community, and denominational competition drove the creation of hundreds of colleges throughout the nineteenth century, those states, communities, and denominations expected college curricula consonant with their needs and interests. Advanced education was increasingly needed for professions outside of the law and clergy, and students expected a more rational connection between their course work and future career opportunities. Faculty and students, seeing emerging knowledge being created in new academic

fields such as science, economics, and sociology, expected to see that knowledge reflected in the curriculum. The complexity of these demands by college constituents made reform virtually irresistible.

Once the classical curriculum was dismantled, it happened with remarkable speed. Although Frances Wayland at Brown University had instituted an elective curriculum by 1850—and, as a result, increased enrollment by 40 percent—Harvard president Charles Eliot is usually credited with popularizing the new curriculum throughout higher education, despite being appointed nearly twenty years later.<sup>9</sup> By 1879, only the freshman year was prescribed for Harvard undergraduates, but there was still intense conflict over the elective reforms. Numerous public debates among high-ranking college presidents were conducted throughout the late nineteenth century. Indeed, presidents and faculty were often conflicted within themselves about the choice between prescription and election.

The changes at Brown and Harvard led to similar moves throughout higher education, part of what David Riesman has described as a “meandering snake-like procession” of ideas through colleges and universities.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there was widespread unhappiness with the rapid decline in standards that accompanied the adoption of the elective system; students increasingly enrolled in entry-level courses and abandoned logic and languages in droves, leading to charges that the university was educating a generation of sophists and dilettantes. The appointment of A. Lawrence Lowell to the Harvard presidency in 1909 was a response to Eliot’s radical overhaul of undergraduate education. Lowell’s mandate was to institute a set of distribution requirements to ensure that all students received a liberal education, a plan he outlined at his inauguration with Eliot sitting next to him on the dais.

An idea that worked in theory never seemed to work well in practice. Distribution requirements forced students to select courses from particular categories, but there was still no common curriculum for all undergraduates. Proponents of a rigorous liberal education were still around to make plenty of trouble for the new system. Dissent crystallized around Robert M. Hutchins, who took over the University of Chicago in 1919 at age twenty-nine. Hutchins was driven by a desire to elevate the common man through standards of culture, thought, and morality, and thus to elevate society as well. The only way to accomplish these goals, Hutchins believed, was a prescribed program of general education.

The development of general education programs would be facilitated by institutional changes in the disciplines. Historians, who needed to introduce students to their rapidly developing discipline, developed broad courses that covered Western history from Greece to the present.<sup>11</sup> These courses were the basis for War Issues courses developed during World War I, whose purpose was to create solidarity between future American soldiers and their European counterparts by educating them on their common heritage.<sup>12</sup> These courses, in turn, led to the "Great Books" movement launched in the 1940s and 1950s and discussed later in this chapter.

The response to the concerns of Hutchins and his sympathizers within higher education was exemplified by Harvard's famous "Red Book."<sup>13</sup> The "Red Book" was a report written by a committee of Harvard faculty charged with evaluating the state of general education for undergraduates. The committee did not go as far as Hutchins or Adler might have hoped, but they did acknowledge that distribution requirements were inadequate and recommended that all students be exposed to the major areas of knowledge. Tension between prescription and election is evident throughout the monograph, an artifact not only of the prevailing views of the country but of the conflicting views of the faculty on the committee.<sup>14</sup> Once again, the Harvard plan proved to be popular, and it became a model for general education programs throughout the country.

Twenty years later, Columbia University faced concerns about its general education program, but from the opposite direction. Columbia's Contemporary Civilization program required a single course sequence in the classics for the entire first-year class, leading to attacks that it restricted the academic freedom of students and consisted of works largely irrelevant to contemporary social concerns. Daniel Bell, a prominent sociologist at the university, was asked to write a report on the subject for the consideration of the faculty. *The Reforming of General Education* (1966) was a thoughtful, pragmatic approach to the problem of general education. Bell argued that since college takes its place between the secondary school, which emphasizes facts, and the graduate school, which emphasizes specialization, "the distinctive function of the college must be to teach modes of conceptualization, explanation, and verification of knowledge."<sup>15</sup> The selection of canonical texts included in Columbia's program broadened the mind because the works were presented as contingent, allowing the reader to draw conclusions that differed from the professor. Material pre-

sented merely as fact or dogma, Bell argued, would lead only to specialization and vocationalism, thereby undermining the goals of general education.

Despite his defense of Columbia's core curriculum, Bell's pragmatic argument provoked those who believed that the classics were worthwhile in and of themselves. This view was most clearly expressed by Leo Strauss, a political philosopher at the University of Chicago. "Liberal education is education in culture or toward culture . . . the finished product of a liberal education is a cultured human being," Strauss wrote. "We are compelled to live with books. But life is too short to live with any but the greatest books."<sup>16</sup> Robert Belknap and Richard Kuhns later took an even more reactionary stance, arguing that contemporary students were ignorant, and that universities had failed to integrate the disciplines by placing a premium on specialization. "Universities and schools," they said, "have lost their common sense of what kind of ignorance is unacceptable."<sup>17</sup>

Allan Bloom extended this argument in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom derided the culture of American college students and the curriculum of American colleges, both of which, he believed, encouraged an unhealthy cultural pluralism. Teaching students merely to be open to new cultures was wrongheaded, he said, because it is natural to prefer your own culture just as it is natural to prefer your own child over another's. Without this proprietorship of culture, students were left in a "no man's land between the goodness of knowing and the goodness of culture, where they have been placed by their teachers who no longer have the resources to guide them."<sup>18</sup> Students, Bloom argued, no longer had a cultural orientation with which to organize the world around them, leaving them unable to construct meaning from a stream of facts and opinions. In a society characterized by torrents of information, Bloom said, colleges have abandoned students by their ideology of openness.

Bloom's tract led to a flood of books on the state of the American college generally and liberal education specifically. Dinesh D'Souza, in *Illiberal Education*, argued that the problem was not that colleges taught non-Western culture, but that it was taught ignorantly. Instead of teaching classic non-Western texts like the *Analects* of Confucius or the *Ramayana*, he said, faculty taught politicized works like *I, Rigoberta Menchu* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, books that were written by Westerners and served merely to reflect liberal Western conceptions of non-Western peoples.<sup>19</sup> Thus D'Souza advocated a



prescriptive but not ethnocentric curriculum that identified essential texts from both traditions. D'Souza strongly supported *50 Hours*, a similar curriculum published in 1989 under the auspices of the National Endowment of the Humanities during the Reagan administration.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1990s, a few scholars emerged to defend the university against these often vituperative critiques.<sup>21</sup> They were united in their opinion that most discussion of liberal education was oblivious to its history, and argued that curriculum has always been a contested area full of controversy and disagreement. The curriculum, even in its classical period, was never entirely static—new books gained entrance (for example, Austen, Twain, James, Freud) and old books were discarded. In this way, the curriculum has always responded to changing fashions in scholarship, taste, and the demands of an evolving society. Similarly, they argue, the new demographics of higher education mandated the inclusion of new authors in general education programs that reflected an increasingly multicultural society.

In a complementary argument, University of Chicago philosopher Martha Nussbaum argued that shaping citizens remains a vital function of higher education. Students must be prepared for a culturally diverse and international world, she said, and doing so requires understanding the perspectives of a wide variety of cultures. Nevertheless, she saw the Western tradition as remarkably consonant with emerging demands for pluralism. Books in the Western tradition can help students with the critical examination of people and cultures, including one's own, and develop the ability to think about the emotions and values of people in other cultures. This ability "to step out of your own shoes," she concluded, was key to living in a world marked by a diversity of people in race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.<sup>22</sup>

Thus debate over the nature and necessity of the prescribed college curriculum continues to this day. There are remarkable parallels between debates over the elective system in the 1880s and 1890s and debates over general education in the 1980s and 1990s. In both cases, the degree to which knowledge evolution and changing student demographics demand curricular reform are key points of debate. Both sides have engaged in significant debates on the utility of more traditional curricula compared to emerging subjects. The key question is always: What do college students need to learn to be educated members of society? Ultimately, general education does not exist in a vacuum, and it cannot fail to be as dynamic as the rest of the curriculum.

## Stability and Growth

Persistent debates on the state of general education have occurred amid the massive expansion of knowledge and the development of organizational structures to support them. During the 1880s and 1890s, as the implementation of the elective system was negotiated in colleges across the country, the modern disciplines were also beginning to emerge. In a process that Walter Metzger has called *subject parturition*, the disciplines that we have come to understand as the foundation of the modern university were organized into distinctive and recognizable units.<sup>23</sup> As knowledge created in the university became increasingly complex and differentiated, new subjects emerged to help define the boundaries of that knowledge. In their early days, professors in these fields often struggled for legitimacy with professors in more established areas of knowledge. Over the years, through a process Metzger termed *subject dignification*, these fields gradually gained legitimacy through the creation of scholarly societies, academic journals, and distinctive and rigorous methodologies.

Subject parturition was led in the nineteenth century by the sciences, which began to break out from the more general and humanistic approach taught in the colonial and antebellum colleges under natural philosophy. As scientific modes of investigation were incorporated and Ph.D.s returned from advanced study in Germany, the study of science seemed increasingly differentiated from other subjects. Before the widespread adoption of the elective system, chemistry, geology, astronomy, physics, and biology were already recognized as distinct subjects at most colleges.<sup>24</sup> The social sciences quickly followed, with economics emerging from political economy, and sociology emerging from economics. These new fields were supported by scholarly societies like the American Anthropological Association, founded in 1802, and journals such as the *American Journal of Sociology*, founded in 1895.<sup>25</sup>

New forms of knowledge and methodologies for their investigation led to new forms of classroom pedagogy. The lectures and recitations of the early American colleges were simply ineffective methods for science education or for advanced students at the graduate level. Laboratory sections were added to courses to facilitate empirical investigation of scientific phenomena. While the lecture would remain the primary mode of instruction for most of the twentieth century, the

seminar was implemented for graduate students and then gradually diffused to advanced undergraduates. Having learned the basic foundations of their field, graduate students and advanced undergraduates were deemed capable of engaging in direct dialogue with professors and colleagues.

The disciplines became increasingly specialized over the course of the twentieth century. Through the disciplines, universities helped to define what forms of knowledge were worth knowing by their placement in their curriculum, and researchers themselves established new modes of inquiry. These changes were then diffused throughout the academic field through scholarly societies and journals, and transmitted to society by graduating students and faculty who interacted with people outside the university. The curriculum was transformed further as faculty sought to teach more specialized courses, resulting in greater differentiation of courses and degrees. The professional self-identification of faculty changed concurrently. Where once a faculty member might call herself a psychologist or a biologist, later she would declare herself to be a Jungian or a neuroendocrinologist.<sup>26</sup>

Subjects outside of the traditional disciplines have also been accommodated, particularly in fields that are closer to the economy. Schools in medicine, law, education, social work, and public health emerged to meet the needs of an increasingly professionalized society. Academic work in these schools was often a laboratory for increasing specialization and the interdisciplinarity of knowledge. Technical and vocational subjects have become a core mission for the community colleges, ranging from automobile repair to medical technology and radiation therapy. This is not to say that vocational subjects were solely the realm of community colleges; on the contrary, students across the spectrum of colleges both public and private became increasingly vocational in their orientation and demanded curricula relevant to their needs.<sup>27</sup>

In recent years, the humanities have been an increasingly fertile field for the development of new programs and departments in the university. Unlike those founded in earlier periods, these programs were often explicitly connected to organized social movements led by students.<sup>28</sup> The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s inspired student groups to demand black studies programs at more than eight hundred colleges and universities. Black faculty worked in concert with the students, making strenuous efforts to increase scholarship in

the emerging field. Funding was often provided by the Ford Foundation, whose grants helped to establish many black studies programs across the country.

Over the course of the 1960s, however, black students increasingly associated themselves with the Black Power movement, a more militant attempt to force society to recognize the rights of black Americans. Students inspired by the Black Power movement often thought black faculty, tainted by their socialization in the academy, were "too white" to reflect an authentic black culture, and demanded programs that explicitly rejected the involvement of the traditional disciplines and incorporated community members into the curriculum.<sup>29</sup> Their goal was not simply to establish a separate curriculum, but also to transform the curriculum of the university as a whole, and to address racism in society more broadly.

Women's studies programs followed a similar path in the early 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Feminism was a powerful influence on young women entering the university, who demanded that the study of women and women's issues be incorporated into the curriculum. Female faculty who pursued graduate work during the 1960s often risked their careers by writing dissertations in women's studies, and once they were hired faced sharp critiques from their disciplinary colleagues that their work was methodologically weak or "too political." Women's studies faculty and students, like those in black studies, explicitly sought to change the curriculum of the university and to rectify institutionalized sexism and misogyny in society. Similar identity-based movements can be seen today in efforts to promote Chicano studies, Asian American studies, and Queer studies in the curriculum.<sup>31</sup>

Further growth in the higher education curriculum has resulted from interdisciplinarity, the integration of two or more disciplines to form a new content area or mode of inquiry.<sup>32</sup> Interdisciplinary inquiry has occurred almost since the foundation of the disciplines; recently, however, there have been movements to organize new subjects in separate departments and programs. Interdisciplinary programs are in evidence across the fields of knowledge, from biostatistics and biopsychology to area studies of Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa. The disciplines themselves have also become increasingly interdisciplinary, as subfields of the disciplines have grown increasingly close to their neighbors. Thus we see areas of study such as economic sociology, where sociologists have directed their energies into areas previously claimed by economists, and behavioral eco-

nomics, where economists have taken on insights from psychology to paint a more realistic picture of economic behavior.

Finally, growth in the curriculum can be seen in areas that serve to segregate students and academic programs within colleges and universities.<sup>33</sup> In the past, differentiation of students generally occurred among colleges; increasingly, this separation also occurs *within* individual colleges. Separate admissions standards are often established for popular academic programs, especially at community colleges, forcing some students into less lucrative or less popular fields. Honors colleges, which provide special sections and other benefits to enrolled students, are a rapid growth industry in higher education; fully one-quarter of all honors programs were established at public colleges in the decade from 1989 to 1999.<sup>34</sup> On the other side of the academic spectrum, state officials are concerned that remedial education is increasingly provided to underprepared students, resulting in lower academic standards and persistence rates. Each of these trends has significant implications for equitable access to higher education, particularly within the public sector.

Despite all of these pressures toward growth and differentiation, with tremendous growth has also come impressive stability. Disciplines established over a century ago—some longer than that—remain the core of the academic enterprise today. If anything, there is greater consensus within the disciplines on appropriate modes of inquiry and the established domains of content. Societal demands on the university and knowledge construction have certainly become more complex over time, but the university has often adapted by accommodating those changes within its existing organizational structures. Despite seemingly unending specialization, conflict, and change, the university curriculum is a recognizably stable entity that has adapted to social, economic, and political demands.

### Conservation and Innovation

One of the main forces of stability in the curriculum has been academic culture. Scholars have been trained to believe that one of the core missions of the university is to preserve the knowledge of past generations. The classical curriculum, while dynamic in some ways—through extracurricular lectures, literary societies, and the gradual adoption of new subjects—remained remarkably consistent for most

of the colonial period and well into the nineteenth century. In an era when it was plausible to believe that Latin and Greek were essential to any man who considered himself liberally educated, the forces of stability were a powerful influence in the American college.

The affect of Christianity on the college curriculum cannot be underestimated. Although the central role of colleges in the preparation of ministers gradually declined, Christianity nevertheless remained infused throughout student life and the curriculum. Protestant revivalism, as expressed through the Great Awakenings of the 1740s and the early 1800s, found fertile ground in the American college. Indeed, one of the major sources of the Second Great Awakening was Yale University, and one historian has argued that colleges during this period could accurately be described as "revival camps."<sup>35</sup> The curriculum and Christianity were thus mutually reinforcing; faculty concern for the salvation of their students was paramount, and transmitted to students in courses such as ethics, literature, and theology.

Although science was certainly on the rise throughout the nineteenth century, there was not as sharp a divide between science and religion as is often perceived today. After the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, the major intellectual project of the Middle Ages was the resolution of biblical revelation with classical science and philosophy. Thus, the people who were founding new colleges as an expression of religious faith were the same people establishing science departments in those colleges, and they saw no contradiction in those two actions. The scientific method, far from undermining religion, was rather an instrument for the revelation of sacred truth.

Nonetheless, a gradual secularization of the Protestant university took hold over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As new subjects were added to the curriculum at a rapid pace, their connection to the religious mission of the college was often increasingly tenuous. Protestant leaders, for their part, valued religious tolerance and a unified American culture, making it difficult to retain denominational separatism and distinctive religious missions.<sup>36</sup> As the nature of the multiversity became the secular pursuit of knowledge, religion was increasingly unimportant to the college mission, and leaders of the academy themselves were drawn from prominent academics rather than ministers. The declining influence of Christianity was quite gradual; Wellesley College, for example, did not eliminate required chapel until 1968.<sup>37</sup>

The secularization of the university was not entirely welcomed,

and neither was the liberalization of academic requirements. Robert M. Hutchins, the University of Chicago president who led the attack on distribution requirements during the 1930s and 1940s, began to think about resurrecting more traditional curricula that would meet the standards of an earlier era. He was encouraged by John Erskine's General Honors course at Columbia University, which was an extension of the War Issues course developed by Erskine for outgoing American soldiers during World War I. Erskine designed the course in response to what he saw as the increasing specialization and vocationalism in college education, and his students read fifty-two classics from Homer to William James in a single year.<sup>38</sup> Hutchins soon taught a course of his own, first to high school students, and then as a Great Books course at the University of Chicago limited to twenty students by invitation.

The Great Books idea was highly influential both inside and outside of the university, leading to a small industry of book publishing and discussion groups during the 1940s and 1950s. This was initiated by the publication of Hutchins's caustic *The Higher Learning in America* in 1936, which derided the vocationalism and intellectual content of higher education and prescribed a new course centered on the classics.<sup>39</sup> The book was an instant bestseller despite—or perhaps because of—its rather elitist attitude toward college education. Ten years later, Hutchins left the Chicago presidency to assist the Great Books movement, which had inspired a charitable foundation, discussion groups throughout the country, and a rather lucrative company that published approved selections as *The Great Books of the Western World*.<sup>40</sup>

Adherents of the "Great Books" method were so pleased with the results of the courses at Columbia, Chicago, and elsewhere that they were eager to revamp an entire college based on the premise. The opportunity presented itself when 200-year-old St. John's College announced that it would close due to budget problems.<sup>41</sup> Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan, "Great Books" adherents at the University of Virginia, decided to try and save the college by instituting a four-year prescribed course in the classics. The "New Program" curriculum that they developed based on the Chicago and Columbia models, with the addition of a substantial amount of science and mathematics, has remained largely as it was developed in 1939.<sup>42</sup>

St. John's College was only one of many experimental colleges founded during the post-war period, with the 1950s and 1960s being

a particularly fertile period. In its willingness to upend the foundations of the college curriculum, this period is virtually unmatched in American history. Prominent examples include the University of California at Santa Cruz, whose cluster colleges tried to break down the multiversity into manageable organizational units, each with its own distinctive character. As one example, UCSC's Kresge College experimented with using t-groups in courses inspired by the 1960s encounter movement founded by Carl Rogers.<sup>43</sup> Another example is Black Mountain College, which attracted famous writers and artists from across the country to its utopian community in North Carolina until its collapse in 1956.<sup>44</sup>

The 1960s served as a period of experimentation even within traditional colleges. The emergence of national student movements and the breakdown of social conformity that characterized the post-World War II era pressured colleges to alter traditional curricular and pedagogical practices. For student activists, the curriculum had become far too abstracted from relevant political and social concerns. The best-known group was Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which formed in 1960 to organize students around the social concerns of the period, primarily social justice issues and the Vietnam War.<sup>45</sup> Because the university graduated the future leaders of the country, SDS viewed reforming the university as essential to promoting social change.

Resistance to the idea of "politicizing" the university curriculum was strong, so SDS members moved to create "free universities" where any student could study or teach, and where individuals in the university community, regardless of academic qualifications, were welcome to participate. In free universities, the political neutrality of courses and instructors was explicitly rejected, because the mission was to encourage political activism to improve society. Any form of grading was often eliminated as irrelevant to the learning process. Over time, free universities were widely accepted at colleges across the country. Indeed, they were so successful that militant students, seeing that free universities were peacefully coexisting with the traditional curriculum, became disenchanted with their ability to transform the university and eventually abandoned them.<sup>46</sup>

As the 1960s came to a close, many students and faculty became cynical about the ability of universities to inspire social change. The persistence of the Vietnam War and the student killings at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970 coincided with an overall contraction in



university growth. Student activism declined dramatically, reaching record lows in the 1980s and 1990s. The major curricular experiments in higher education had, one by one, failed to achieve their goals, leading to further cynicism and apathy. In future decades, curricular reforms would be significantly less ambitious, but would nevertheless influence the core of the educational enterprise. In an incremental manner, these changes would ultimately have more impact on the curriculum than the most ambitious experimental colleges.

The influence of technology on the modern curriculum is undeniable.<sup>47</sup> The information technology revolution of the 1970s and 1980s has transformed how students conduct their work and expect to obtain and transmit information. Improving student ability to use technology is often explicitly stated as part of the core educational mission of undergraduate education, and the "digital divide" is a key issue among those concerned with equity and access. The widespread adoption of the Internet by colleges and universities during the 1980s and 1990s has revolutionized our ability to obtain vast quantities of information and synthesize it in a short time. Classroom teaching itself has been changed through the use of computer laboratories, educational software, and sophisticated presentation techniques.

New forms of learning have emerged to take advantage of new technologies. Distance education, which allows instructors and students to connect visually across multiple classroom locations, has expanded access to higher education for those who live vast distances from a university or who are determined to seek out programs outside their local communities. The Internet has created innumerable opportunities for online education, where students communicate solely by discussion groups, e-mail, or in virtual chat rooms. More recently, programs have begun to experiment with combining both traditional and virtual modes of instruction as the needs of students, faculty, and the subject dictate. Although proclamations of the death of the traditional university have proved to be premature, there has been an undeniable change in the nature of academic work for many students and faculty.

Other forms of curricular experimentation are making their claims on the university as well, often with remarkable success. One prominent example is the development of experiential education and service learning programs. Service learning emerged in the experimental fervor of the 1960s from the same social movements that led to SDS and the free universities.<sup>48</sup> Consonant with the ideals of the time, service

learning was a means for students to engage and transform society through efforts that were rewarded with academic credit by the university. At first, service learning was simply a loosely defined group of internships and volunteer activities, many with a political or non-profit bent. As notions of community service grew in society throughout the 1980s and 1990s, service learning programs grew in importance and were co-opted, becoming increasingly apolitical. Over time, service learning has emerged as an identifiable and legitimate mode of inquiry with applications across the fields of study, and serves as a demonstration of the university's commitment to public service.

Curriculum reform has also been aimed at improving student persistence and graduation rates, particularly at community colleges and public comprehensive universities. In "learning communities," groups of students enroll simultaneously in a sequence of courses, or even an entire academic program, instead of choosing those courses separately. Often these courses have a unifying theme that draws students and faculty together to study one topic intensively. Although research in this area remains embryonic, learning communities seem to promote student persistence by providing classroom experiences that are more meaningful for students, and by building support structures among students themselves.<sup>49</sup> Another effort to address dropout rates has been to use "supplemental instruction" in the classroom, which provides coursework in basic skills to underprepared students enrolled in traditional credit-bearing courses, rather than segregating them into separate remedial courses. Data on these programs suggests that students in supplemental instruction earn higher grades and are more likely to persist than their peers.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion: Understanding Curriculum Change

For many observers, the curriculum is an "academic graveyard" where ideas for educational reform go to die. It is widely believed that the curriculum simply does not change, and that reforms never move forward, merely swinging from one extreme to the other over the course of time. On the contrary, significant changes in the curriculum have occurred in American higher education throughout its history. Although revolutionary change in the curriculum has been rare, incremental changes have often accumulated over time to create significant and lasting impacts.<sup>51</sup> By using the curriculum as a lens for so-

cial change, we can see the effect of society's demands on higher education, and how universities have sought to define the boundaries of knowledge and thereby influence how the public views social issues.

Knowledge differentiation is certainly a key factor in curricular change. For some, knowledge is the key unit of analysis, putting constant pressure on the university organization to adapt to its increasing complexity.<sup>52</sup> To cope with these unrelenting pressures, the curriculum must accommodate them by altering the content and form of courses, as well as the requirements and organization of programs and departments. Unending differentiation thus yields an organization that is remarkably adaptable to the range of demands placed upon it, but faces increasing problems of integration as students and faculty have less in common when they move further and further apart. In this perspective, general education for all students can never be resurrected, because it is impossible to build a consensus across the university on which types of knowledge are most valuable to undergraduates.<sup>53</sup>

Curricular change can also be understood as inhabiting within an organizational culture that supports it.<sup>54</sup> In this view, the curriculum is socially constructed among the constituents of the university, who interact with one another to create meaning. The curriculum itself signifies changes in the faculty's underlying assumptions about what counts as knowledge, what knowledge is most worthy of transmitting, and what organizational forms are most appropriate. The curriculum also serves as a form of organizational culture for students, by socializing them into the content and skills needed to navigate the world of the university. From this perspective, to understand curricular change we must understand the organizational culture of the university, and identify the mechanisms by which faculty and students interact within the curriculum to construct the meaning of knowledge.

Social movements can also be a key mechanism for curricular change.<sup>55</sup> Traditional accounts of curricular change have often identified changing student demographics—increasing numbers of minorities, women, and sexual minorities in the university—as the main causal factor behind change in the curriculum. With this explanation, there has been little understanding of how these demographics have led to actual change in the curriculum. One answer is social movements, which have organized students and faculty around political and identity-based causes to make demands for new programs and de-

partments in the curriculum. Earlier, we saw how the Black Power movement, SDS, and feminists have organized to create new content and produce new organizational structures in the curriculum.

The construction of the curriculum can also be connected to powerful political and economic actors in society.<sup>56</sup> As the government and profit-seeking corporations have become increasingly involved in the funding of university research activities, their influence on the curriculum in departments and programs closely connected to those agencies has become apparent. For-profit corporations make grants to science departments and business schools; the government pours substantial funds into medical schools, science departments, and schools of education; nonprofit foundations are often significant providers of funds in the humanities and the social sciences. Although it is not yet clear how these connections yield specific changes in coursework or organizational structures, these actors are undoubtedly powerful resource providers with significant influence on research-oriented faculty.

Finally, we must consider efforts to influence undergraduate education through state policy. Nonpartisan organizations, including the Education Commission of the States and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, have been sharply critical of the inability of states and colleges to improve teaching or monitor progress on student learning.<sup>57</sup> State policy makers in Ohio and Massachusetts have been equally critical of faculty productivity and time spent on research and service over teaching.<sup>58</sup> Increasingly, states are considering the use of measures such as Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores, critical thinking inventories, and even high-stakes graduation exams to improve and assess undergraduate instruction. Although these ideas are still in their early stages, policy makers expect this to be a major policy issue for the next decade.

## NOTES

1. Douglas Sloan, "Harmony, Chaos, and Consensus: The American College Curriculum," *Teachers College Record* 73 (1971): 221-51.
2. Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the Undergraduate Course of Study since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977). Rudolph's work is still the standard for historical examination of the college curriculum, and his influence can be seen throughout this essay.

3. John D. Burton, "The Harvard Tutors: The Beginning of the Academic Profession, 1690-1825," *History of Higher Education Annual* 16 (1996): 1-17.
4. James McLachlan, "The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early 19th Century," in *The University in Society*, vol. 2, ed. Lawrence Stone (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 449-94; Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 95-98.
5. Although the effort was successful, the lectures were not incorporated into the standard curriculum and attending students were required to get permission from their parents. Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 39.
6. Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 55.
7. "The Yale Report of 1828," in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 275-91. Emphasis in the original.
8. For extensive discussion of the Yale Report, see Jack C. Lane, "The Yale Report of 1828 and Liberal Education: A Neorepublican Manifesto," *History of Education Quarterly* 27 (1987): 325-38; Melvin I. Usofsky, "Reforms and Response: The Yale Report of 1828," *History of Education Quarterly* 5 (1965): 53-67; Rudolph, *Curriculum*. Rudolph has been strongly criticized for overestimating the effect of the Yale Report. See David B. Potts, "Curriculum and Enrollments: Some Thoughts on Assessing the Popularity of Antebellum Colleges," in *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Roger Geiger (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).
9. Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Phyllis Keller, *Getting at the Core: Curricular Reform at Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
10. David Riesman, *Constraint and Variety in American Education* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958).
11. Gilbert Allardyce, "The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 695-725.
12. Carol S. Gruber, *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975).
13. Paul H. Buck et al., *General Education in a Free Society: A Report of the Harvard Committee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945).
14. Ironically, the Harvard faculty never formally adopted the report, and it had far more influence outside of Harvard than within it. See Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995).
15. Daniel Bell, *The Reforming of General Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 8.
16. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 3, 7.

17. Robert L. Belknap and Richard Kuhns, *Tradition and Innovation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 23.
18. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 37.
19. Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education* (New York: Free Press, 1991).
20. Lynne V. Cheney, *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989).
21. W. B. Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and the American Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
22. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
23. Walter P. Metzger, "The Academic Profession in the United States," in *The Academic Profession*, ed. Burton R. Clark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 123-208. See also Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 121-70.
24. Metzger, "The Academic Profession in the United States," 128.
25. On the beginnings of the social sciences, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Thomas Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).
26. For more on the differentiation of knowledge, see Burton R. Clark, *The Higher Education System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Patricia J. Gumpert and Stuart K. Snyderman, "The Formal Organization of Knowledge: An Analysis of Academic Structure," *Journal of Higher Education* 73 (2002): 375-408.
27. Steven Brint, "The Rise of the Practical Arts," in *The Future of the City of Intellect*, ed. Steven Brint (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 231-59. On the increasing vocational orientation of traditional liberal arts colleges, see Matthew S. Kraatz and Edward J. Zajac, "Exploring the Limits of the New Institutionalism: The Causes and Consequences of Illegitimate Organizational Change," *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996): 812-836.
28. Philip G. Altbach, *Student Politics in America: A Historical Analysis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Sheila Slaughter, "Class, Race, and Gender and the Construction of Post-Secondary Curricula in the United States," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 29 (1997): 1-30; Julie A. Reuben, "Reforming the University: Student Protests and the Demand for a Relevant Curriculum," in *Student Protest: The Sixties and After*, ed. Gerard De Groot (New York: Longman, 1998), 153-68.

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34. At private colleges, the figure is 39 percent. See Bridget Terry Long, "Attracting the Best: The Use of Honors Programs and Colleges to Compete for Students" (unpublished working paper, Harvard University, March 2002).
35. Sloan, "Harmony, Chaos, and Consensus," 227–32.
36. George M. Marsden, "The Soul of the American University: A Historical Overview," in *The Secularization of the Academy*, ed. George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
37. Ibid.
38. James Sloan Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
39. Robert M. Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936).
40. Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture*; Robert M. Hutchins, ed., *The Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952).
41. Gerald Grant and David Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
42. Grant and Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream*, 40–76. Outside of St. John's, very few Great Books programs exist today. Prominent holdouts are the general education programs at Columbia University and the University of Chicago, and Stanford's Structured Liberal Education option.
43. Grant and Riesman, *The Perpetual Dream*, 77–134.

44. Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972).

45. Altbach, *Student Politics in America*, 221–6; and Reuben, “Reforming the University.”

46. Reuben, “Reforming the University,” 156. Few of the free universities exist today. At Oberlin, the Experimental College (ExCo) sponsors dozens of student-taught courses every year, and students may earn up to five ExCo credits toward graduation by either teaching or enrolling in courses.

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