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It was the kind of setting you see in a movie, the sort of college campus that made you feel smarter just being there: long tree-lined walks, noble brick buildings, an ornate fountain in the distance. Everything but “Pomp and Circumstance” playing over the loudspeaker. Visiting for a day, I felt like I was part of something important: conversations about the meaning of life, experiments unlocking the mysteries of cancer, explorations that would make learning purposeful and impactful. It felt good, standing there on the quad. Like I was part of something that mattered.

I later mentioned this feeling to the university’s provost, complimenting him on the beauty of the campus, the thought they’d put into creating a setting that causes students to stand, backs a little straighter, seriousness in their eyes. He smiled and thanked me, but then frowned. “But then students walk into our gen ed, all those basic courses and 101s. How do they feel then?”

A great question. One answer comes in the form of a tweet a student shared with me a while back. It’s posted by “\$yd,” (yes, with a dollar sign) and says:

Unpopular opinion: general education courses in college are a complete scam for your money to keep you paying for 4+ yrs. If gen ed courses weren't a requirement, major really only require 2 yrs of classes. All of highschool (sic) was gen ed- it's simply unnecessary.

This tweet, from 2018, has 209,000 likes and more than 72,000 retweets. That's a lot of attention for social media discussing education. "Unpopular"? Hardly.

Here's the thing: architects and designers will tell you that when creating a space, they're thinking very deliberately about how that space constructs its occupants. Step into the Google offices in Dublin, and you enter a colorful, energetic atmosphere full of raw energy. You feel invigorated and irreverent. There are no rules, this space says. Play. Create.

Step into St. Paul's in London, and you feel simultaneously humbled and transcendent. Cathedrals are grand for a reason: you're meant to feel small, insignificant, even. But beneath that there's also this sense of being drawn upward, of a greater purpose, something larger than the daily grind, something transcendent that's inviting you to join. Not unlike the college campus I mentioned.

Too often, though, our general education curricula don't match our architectural rhetoric, particularly when those curricula are structured around a distributional model where students take two of this, two of that and two of the next thing. Rather than inviting students to feel capable, energized and part of something meaningful, we hand them a checklist that all but says, "You're stupid. You need the basics. Again."

To be clear here, I'm not arguing that our students always enter the university with adequate academic preparation. Many of them don't. The reasons for this are many and varied and not really the point of this essay, but they include an overdependence on standardized testing that places an emphasis on content memorization over meaningful application of that content in complex contexts.

My point, though, is that even if our students come in needing “some additional help,” we don’t do them -- or ourselves -- any favors by packaging their learning and development in a way that constructs them as uninterested, unintellectual and incapable. And at many institutions -- even many very good institutions -- it’s hard to argue against \$yd’s logic: this curriculum, these courses -- they feel like high school.

Consequently, why are we surprised when students who enter our classrooms seem put-off, slightly offended? They spent all that time in high school writing papers, taking tests, trying to get good grades. They studied for the SAT, visited colleges, wrote application essays, asked their teachers for letters of recommendation. They spent months checking their email, nervous every time they got online. Sure, they’re young and they probably spend too much time on weekends doing things their parents would prefer they didn’t. But deep down, there’s a part of every student that wants to be challenged, that wants to go home and brag about this one professor or this one class or this one project that kicked their butt, that was *so hard* -- but that somehow they got through it.

Put another way, most students want, in the language of the cathedral, to transcend. But what they get, too often, are classes that construct them as receptacles for content distributed in mass-produced textbooks, as incapable of taking on the messy intellectual and practical problems that dominate our world. They’re told these are classes to “get out of the way,” to “get through,” to “just survive.” As Eric Amsel, a professor of psychology at Weber State University and former Utah Professor of the Year ^[1], once told me, when students take a “checked-box” approach to general education, we’re the ones who put them there. That’s the room we built for them. Why then, are we so surprised when they respond accordingly?

Here's an experiment: google “gen ed requirements state university” and click “image.” What you’ll see is table after table and list after list of course after course that can be taken to “fulfill” a “requirement.” Often,

a particular curricular expectation can be met via a dozen different options. One requirement for philosophical thinking I encountered offered 12 different topics appropriate for meeting the requirement goals, including human nature, scientific reasoning, theories of cognition, social obligations and constraints, and applied ethics. Just to be clear: that list of 12 doesn't cover the *courses* that count for this requirement, only the *topics*. Assuming there are at least a dozen courses that address each of those broad topics, we're talking about an explosive list of options -- most science classes, for instance, include scientific reasoning, and I've yet to teach a literature course that doesn't address social obligation, human nature and ethics.

I like philosophical thinking. I think we need more of it in our educational systems. But what does it mean when even the philosophy requirement says more about *what* fulfills the requirement than about *why*? What does that tell students about how we view them? About how these requirements relate (or don't) to their lives? And what does it tell them about us? Because as much as this curricular rhetoric is constructing them, it's also constructing faculty members and administrators. What does it say about who we are, about what we believe, about what we value, about what drives us?

Sure, sometimes it simply says, "These topics matter": you need to understand how science works. There's a logic to mathematics that, if you can capture it, won't ever abandon you. The abstract thinking skills you learn exploring art and philosophy is going to be valuable no matter what you do after you graduate.

But other times? Well, Cathy N. Davidson ^[2] points out that our siloed structuring of the university into divisions and departments ^[3] is essentially a remnant of industrial-era models for efficient factories. The distributional approach, where every division, every department, has requirements, is essentially a consequence of that history. After college, graduates will take jobs that blur sociology, literary studies,

physics and business psychology on a daily basis. But in the academy? We're still structured around SOCI, LITS, PHYS and BUAD.

Implicit within all of this is a dynamic we'd generally prefer to avoid acknowledging: in many ways, the distributional model continues because it provides job security. As long as students are required to take courses in all three divisions (social sciences, STEM, arts and humanities), all three divisions will remain viable.

Protecting our Turf

This is *not*, for what it's worth, an argument about the value or lack of value of one division or another. As I've already pointed out, every field has value, particularly for students who are only beginning their journey into the world and never know where they're going to find themselves. No, my point is that too often all of us in the academy let our concern for protecting our turf get in the way of smart thinking about how we construct general education -- and, consequently, how we construct our students. I've worked with dozens of campuses engaged in curricular revision. I can't tell you the number of times the drive in from the airport has included conversations along the lines of "The X department is worried that if we change the curriculum, they'll lose students."

What's startling about this kind of thinking is how simplistic the math is: the only way to get people into my classroom is to require my courses? The only place in the curriculum for the kinds of thinking that occur in my field are courses in the major? First, this logic undermines the relevance of our work. If the ways of thinking taught in my field are only relevant in my field (and I don't think it is, but bear with me here) then, logically, requiring that those ways of thinking be taught to everyone doesn't make sense. Second, this

kind of turf math makes us blind to curricular models that *both* broadcast the relevance of our fields *and* construct our students in ways that allow them to understand their greatest capabilities.

Consider, for instance, the gen ed requirements at Worcester Polytechnic: the first-year experience involves a team-taught course focusing on complex problems like sustainability, epidemics, food and energy. Students also participate in an “interactive qualifying project,” a real-world problem (some from overseas) that those from different fields work in small cohorts to solve, supervised by a professor. Senior year, students participate in “major qualifying projects,” also focusing on real-world problems, also overseen by a faculty member, also working in small groups -- though generally drawing from just a single field. Besides some initial requirements in the humanities (arguably necessary at an engineering school), there is no distributional component to the curricula; the various divisions, their methods, contents and values, are woven into the larger projects, many of which are based on [high-impact practices](#) [4].

Distribution exists, yes, but it doesn't drive the model.

Instead, from the moment students walk into their first-year dorms, they step into a curriculum that constructs them as capable of solving grand problems, real problems, complex problems, problems where the answers aren't at the back of the book. By their sophomore year, students are actually *solving* some of those problems, drawing from a variety of fields, sometimes in foreign settings. By their senior year, the kind of complex, collaborative, interdisciplinary thinking necessary to make the world a better place is almost old hat.

And the faculty of the university put the students there, constructing them as trustworthy, responsible, serious and capable of great leadership.

Or consider Wagner College, where students are required to participate in three learning communities -- one during the first year, one during the last year and one somewhere in between. Each learning community has an experiential component, essentially using New York City as a real-time lab. Students still take courses from a variety of fields, but importantly, those courses are embedded in larger, more meaningful conversations. And so are the students.

In contrast to distribution models, which often allow a department a single contact point in the curriculum (take math to fulfill the math requirement; take politics to fulfill the social science requirement), these models allow *multiple* contacts: a student might encounter, say, psychology, as part of a first-year learning community, a sophomore community-based course or a senior capstone project. Further, they encounter psychology at a moment when its value becomes self-evident: you're not learning this content because it's a box you need to check; you're learning it because it's necessary to this broader, meaningful discussion.

All of which is difficult for faculty members to see when we're blinded by turf concerns. Fair enough. No one wants to feel dismissed in curricular debates. But perhaps it's time to move beyond first-glance reactions and explore curricular reform as a serious intellectual question that deserves the same attention we afford our scholarly research.

The world's a pretty messed-up place. Fixing that -- or even just slowing the damage -- is going to take more than students who've been drilled on the basics over and over again, in both high school and college. The basics matter. Content matters. But how this content is presented, and what students are enabled to do with this information and skills, also matters. Students need to step into the world having experienced more than siloed data regurgitation. Remediation by any other name still smells like limitation.

We need to create spaces for students to enter, spaces where they can encounter their best selves. Spaces that respect them by challenging them. Spaces that provide them with the tools that they need, and with the opportunity to invent new tools that we -- the assumedly wise professionals charged with their education -- can't even anticipate. Spaces that acknowledge the messiness of the world and acknowledge, as well, that we see our students' capacity to take on that mess with complex and transcendent wisdom.

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[1] <https://www.weber.edu/WSUToday/111606profofyear.html>

[2] <https://www.cathydavidson.com>

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