

Calls for Curricular Coherence

Historically, debates about curricular prescription and choice occupied higher education faculty, administrators, and leaders like President Eliot of Harvard, who supported elective choice, and President John Maynard Hutchins at the University of Chicago, who argued that all students should have a common foundation of knowledge and skills. In the latter quarter of the 1900s, the array of voices grew as additional stakeholders vociferously entered the conversation about curricular content. Originally an internal concern, questions about postsecondary curricula have become more visible as more and more students in the United States attend college and as stakeholders external to higher education institutions, such as employers, legislators, and government officials, have sought to influence college and university curricula.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a wave of reports from blue ribbon committees appointed by state and federal agencies, as well as recommendations from higher education advocacy organizations. These reports (see Table 6.1) assessed the condition of higher education and called for various reforms. The reports that focused primarily on curriculum (for example, Association of American Colleges, 1985; Bennett, 1984; Boyer, 1987; Cheney, 1989; National Institute of Education, 1984; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993) typically decried curricular fragmentation and overspecialization resulting from the lack of coherent general education programs. Although focused on many of the same problems, the authors of these reports arrived at a variety of solutions. William Bennett, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and his successor Lynne Cheney, both published reports that called for greater attention to Western civilization and culture, while the Association of American Colleges called for greater focus on transferable learning skills such as critical thinking and communication.

These reports, particularly Bennett's (1984) "To Reclaim a Legacy," which placed the blame for students' flight from the humanities at the feet of research-oriented and/or ideological faculty, inspired a backlash from critics of the traditional, Eurocentric liberal arts core. Proponents as diverse as educational theorist Henry Giroux (1992) and philosopher and classicist Martha Nussbaum (1997) argued for an education that would prepare students for life in an increasingly diverse nation and world. Although united in their call for greater attention to national and global diversity, these commentators espoused a variety of goals. Some, like Giroux, advocated curricula that would enable students to critique and address social inequities and encourage social transformation. Others, such as feminists like Elizabeth Minnich (1990), sought to redress the distorted view of U.S. history and society resulting from a curriculum that excluded discussion

of the experiences of historically underrepresented students and women. Others who focused on economic competitiveness rather than social justice made the case that students must be well prepared for the contemporary, global workplace (Bollinger, 2007).

Another call for curricular reform focuses on the value of interdisciplinary study at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Such calls, although more persistent of late, are not new. During the general education movement after World War I, a number of reformers emphasized interdisciplinary study as a means of connecting the knowledge of the diverse disciplines that comprise general education programs. During the 1960s, the women's studies movement took up the cause, arguing that the traditional academic disciplines provided only partial and limited perspectives from which to view social problems. Viewing interdisciplinarity as the antidote to incomplete understandings of the lives and issues faced by marginalized populations, faculty in these programs encouraged students (and instructors) to critique and expand traditional disciplines. In the late 1980s, a new group of advocates, this time from the sciences and professional fields, grew in force. These proponents of interdisciplinarity asserted that the disciplines in their traditional form were no longer adequate to solving social and scientific problems. They argued that students needed to develop the ability to work in interdisciplinary teams and attack problems from multiple disciplinary viewpoints to spur scientific breakthroughs and innovation. Unlike their