A Three-Year Bachelor's Degree

By Michael B. Poliakoff   July 2020

Key Points

- College students need both a rigorous liberal arts core curriculum and a faster track to graduation that would saddle them with less debt.
- Universities should take an ax to the vast menu of distribution requirements and electives and shorten the undergraduate degree from 120 credit hours to 90 credit hours.
- Students could complete a rigorous core curriculum in 27 credit hours, which would provide the foundational knowledge necessary for career and citizenship, and then proceed to gaining in-depth mastery in a discipline.

A college that has failed to answer candidly the question "What does it mean to be a graduate of this institution?" is guilty of malfeasance. If the faculty, administration, and governing board can promulgate only vague platitudes about discovery, friendships formed, global awareness, and the like, *then it is stealing money, time, and opportunities from students, their families, and taxpayers*.

The university must build that core body of knowledge and aptitudes that an institution's academic experts deem central—indeed, indispensable—to being a college-educated person. And if there is a benefit for higher education that can come from COVID-19, then it might just be some soul-searching and even repentance about what we have been buying with the second-highest expenditure per student in the world.

College students, regardless of their majors or professional programs, need a rigorous liberal arts core curriculum. That curriculum must efficiently develop college-level skills and knowledge in the arts and sciences disciplines that are necessary for success in a dynamic and demanding workplace and for a lifetime of informed citizenship. Individual and national success will hinge on mathematical, scientific, economic, and historical literacy; excellent writing skills; and the ability to navigate foreign languages.

Students also need a faster track for their undergraduate education that gets them into the workforce quickly and saddles them with less debt. That is why everyone, especially conservatives, should support reestablishing a solid core curriculum, taking an ax to the vast menu of distribution requirements and electives, and shortening the undergraduate degree from 120 credit hours to 90 credit hours—allowing determined students to graduate in three, rather than four, years.

A good core curriculum should be built around requirements, not a cafeteria line of choices. It needs to include formal expository writing, literature, a college-level mathematics course, a natural science course, an economics course, a survey in US history or government, and three semesters of a foreign language. At three credit hours per course, students can complete this rigorous core curriculum in 27 credit hours, less than one-third of the 90-credit-hour degree. This would give students

the foundational knowledge necessary for career and citizenship before they pursue a major and gain in-depth mastery in a discipline, all while graduating in three years and leaving college with less debt.

Compressing the time to degree would limit the need for students to take unnecessary classes. Farewell and good riddance to fluff courses such as "Vampires: History of the Undead,"[1] "Monsters of Japan,"[2] "Social Media and Hashtag Activism,"[3] and "The World According to Pixar."[4] (Note: These course titles come straight from college catalogs of the past several years. And they count for credit, often general education or distributional credit.) Most young people already know how to use the internet for such distractions. They don't need an expensive college to help them explore pop culture.

When an institution allows such curricular bloat, typically there will be many sections that are under-enrolled. The institution that eliminates such an unwholesome intellectual diet can reckon on saving nearly 20 percent of its instructional budget.[5] It can cost-effectively replace this treacle and cotton candy with multiple sections of fully enrolled, thoughtfully designed core courses. It thereby saves scarce (now, possibly nonexistent) funds and educates far more rigorously.

For the record, there is no federal statute requiring that a bachelor's degree take 120 credit hours. Several of the federally empowered regional accreditors, which control access to federal financial aid, have stipulated 120 hours. These entities need to back off on both financial and intellectual grounds.

A three-year undergraduate degree has a strong precedent. Much of Europe offers three-year bachelor's degrees. Of course, the European model and ours are quite different, especially given the uneven world of American secondary education. But by instituting a solid core curriculum, students can develop the collegiate skills they need, focus on their liberal arts programs, and be ready to choose a major meaningfully.

In the best of all worlds, professors will move beyond the turf wars of departments to re-create a true academic community, in which their signature will be graduates who have grown through shared intellectual experiences that correspond to the challenges they will meet as fellow citizens and in the workforce. Employers will be happier, graduates will bear less debt, and institutions will run with greater cost-effectiveness and the satisfaction of knowing they are fulfilling their calling as educators and mentors.

About the Author

Michael B. Poliakoff is president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. He previously served as vice president for academic affairs and research at the University of Colorado and in senior roles at the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Notes

1. Stockton University, "Detailed Course Information: GAH 2283—Vampires: History of the Undead," June 23, 2020, https://pssb.stockton.edu/ssb/prod/bwckctlg.p_disp_course_detail?cat_term_in=201980&subj_code_in=GAH&crse_numb_in=228.
2. University of Pennsylvania, "East Asian Languages & Civilization (EALC)," https://catalog.upenn.edu/courses/ealc/.
3. The College of New Jersey, "2019 FSP Courses," https://fsp.tcnj.edu/2019-fsp-courses/.
4. Rice University, "FWIS 136—Tech and Culture in US History," https://courses.rice.edu/courses/!SWKSCAT.cat?p_action=CATALIST&p_acyr_code=2020&p_crse_numb=136&p_subj=FWIS.
5. Elizabeth D. Capaldi Phillips and Michael B. Poliakoff, *The Cost of Chaos in the Curriculum*, American Council of Trustees and Alumni, November 2015, https://www.goacta.org/wp-content/uploads/ee/download/The_Cost_of_Chaos_in_the_Curriculum.pdf.