

Washington Association of Scholars



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Lowering the Bar: Washington Public Universities Fail to Maintain High Core Curriculum Standards

by Shawn Ross

Vice-President, Washington Association of Scholars

Executive Summary

What does a degree from a public, four-year university in Washington represent? Our society and economy are highly dependent upon the men and women educated at our public universities. A college degree is becoming a prerequisite for upward mobility, economic opportunity, and financial security. Do Washington universities ensure that all their students receive a comprehensive, integrated education?

Unfortunately, the answer is “no” at our publicly-funded universities. Certainly individual students still get a good education, but at no public university is there an institutional guarantee that students will receive an education that exposes them to the diversity of human knowledge and prepares them to participate fully in our democracy and in the global economy.

- The UW has no meaningful core requirements in computer literacy, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, literature, art, music, history, philosophy, or comparative religion.
- The essential disciplines of the arts, humanities and social sciences are consistently neglected by the core requirements of all the universities examined.
- No public university requires the study of American history or government, while two institutions, WSU and EWU, require only cultural or gender diversity courses.
- The weak general education requirements directly contradict statements extolling the value of general education found in university catalogues and web sites.

In today's universities students can avoid most core disciplines. An appreciation for the interrelatedness of human knowledge, as well as the solid foundations needed for advanced study, are both sacrificed.

Washington's public universities are consigning students to an impoverished intellectual life and denying them the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential. Student, parents and taxpayers deserve a well-structured, integrated core curriculum which will encourage academic excellence and prepare students to join fully in life beyond the university.

**WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOUNDATION**

LOWERING THE BAR:

Washington Public Universities Fail to Maintain High Core Curriculum Standards

by

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With a Preface by

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Summary of Findings

- This report reviews the general education requirements in the College of Arts and Sciences (or equivalent) at the publicly-funded institutions of higher learning in the state of Washington, including:¹
 - The University of Washington
 - Washington State University
 - Western Washington University
 - Central Washington University
 - Eastern Washington University
- Washington's universities all—to varying degrees—employ what is known as a “cafeteria-style” approach toward general education requirements, in which students fulfill a short list of requirements by choosing from a long list of courses.
- Although the cafeteria-style approach to general education requirements is employed at all of Washington's universities, specific requirements vary widely from campus to campus. The lack of statewide minimum requirements undermines any goal of ensuring that all graduates of Washington's publicly-funded universities have acquired necessary skills or mastered a common body of knowledge.
- General Education Requirements at some of these universities are so permissive that students can avoid taking any courses in many of the traditional core subjects. Requirements tend to be stricter in “skills” courses (basic mathematics, English compositions, computer literacy, etc.) than in “breadth” courses (literature, history, natural sciences, philosophy, social sciences), but only English composition is required at all schools.
- The University of Washington, supposedly the premier institution of higher learning in the state, has the most permissive, least structured core curriculum. Almost every course in the entire College of Arts and Sciences—even the most specialized and esoteric—satisfies one or more of the general education requirements.
- Indeed, the UW has no meaningful requirements in computer literacy, mathematics, natural and physical sciences, social sciences, literature, art, music, history, philosophy, or comparative religion.
- General Education Requirements at WSU and WWU are more structured than at the UW, but still allow any of dozens of courses to be counted toward most general education requirement. This situation undercuts the goal of ensuring that students within an individual institution share a common intellectual base.
- Two schools (CWU and EWU) have more requirements and allow students to choose from fewer courses, ensuring more breadth and structure to a student's education. These

schools also limit the use of upper-division courses to meet general education requirements.

- The essential disciplines of the arts, humanities and social sciences are consistently neglected by General Education Requirements across all of the universities examined.
- Only one institution, the University of Washington, requires students to take a foreign language or pass a proficiency exam. Even at the UW, only first-year proficiency in a foreign language is required to graduate.
- While three universities (WSU, WWU, EWU) require courses in multiculturalism, only one (CWU) explicitly requires courses in Western civilization.
- No institution requires the study of US history or government, while two institutions, WSU and EWU, require US cultural or gender diversity courses.
- The problem of weak general education requirements is exacerbated by the fact that in many cases general education requirements may be met by specialized, upper-division courses which do not provide an overview of the discipline in question. Broad survey courses which would provide a sound foundation can be entirely avoided in many, if not most, disciplines.
- Low grade requirements and grade inflation further compromise the integrity of those general education requirements that do exist.
- The lack of rigorous general education requirements at Washington's publicly-funded universities contradicts statements extolling the value of general education found in their catalogues and on their web sites.

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Preface

When I was an undergraduate, I made an appointment with my advisor to seek his help in choosing courses for the coming semester. He was an eminent scholar in modern French literature who had known Sartre, Camus and other celebrated French existentialist writers. We chatted briefly about my academic interests and then I asked his opinion of the courses I had in mind.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But as an existentialist, I cannot advise you on which courses to take."

I mumbled a "Thank you" and promptly left his office to look for someone who could give me some advice. I tell this story at the start of the Washington Association of Scholars curriculum study because it is in many ways emblematic of the way our system of higher education in this state and country has failed in its responsibility to give students a solid grounding in the liberal arts.

"I mumbled a 'Thank you' and promptly left his office to look for someone who could give me some advice."

Most colleges and universities pay lip service to the goal of a strong general education, but as our study, *Lowering the Bar*, makes clear, none of our state's publicly-funded colleges and universities ensure that students actually obtain it. In place of a structured core curriculum, these institutions rely on a "cafeteria style" approach, allowing students to choose from a wide range of courses to fulfill a small number of requirements. Some of the courses that satisfy these requirements, like "Weather," "Race in the American University," "Greek and Roman Athletics," may be worthwhile in themselves, but contribute little in the way of a systematic overview of human intellectual and artistic achievement, which is the goal of a liberal arts education.

As Shawn Ross points out in the following study, the adoption of meaningful general education requirements would go a long way toward rectifying the problem. His suggestions for reform would help guarantee that our state's students get the broad, integrated and comprehensive education they deserve. The stakes are high in this endeavor. Students need to gain competence in basic subjects -- writing, reading, mathematics, science, history, art, foreign language -- to compete effectively in today's job market, to fulfill their responsibilities in a democratic society, and finally to enhance their ability to lead rich and satisfying lives. We hope that our study provokes a serious review of the curricula at Washington's public colleges and universities, leading these institutions to adopt rigorous core requirements, thus ensuring that all of our state's students gain the full benefits of a liberal arts education.

Nicholas O'Connell, PhD
President, Washington Association of Scholars

Introduction

What does a degree from a publicly-funded, four-year university in the state of Washington represent? This question concerns students, parents, employers, graduate and professional school admissions officers, and citizens at large. Taxpayers in the state of Washington spent over \$1.8 billion on higher education in the 1995-97 biennium, about 10% of all state General Fund expenditures. In addition, students pay between \$2,600 and \$3,600 a year in tuition at the state's public universities. Over 34,000 students will enroll this fall at the University of Washington alone, spending about \$200 million in tuition and fees.² Our economy, with its large aerospace and information technology sectors, is highly dependent upon the men and women educated at our public universities. A college degree is becoming a prerequisite for upward mobility, economic opportunity, and financial security.

But can any public university in Washington make reasonable assurances that its graduates are mastering a basic body of knowledge? Is there any shared curriculum deemed important enough to be required of all students? Do Washington universities play an active role in ensuring that all their students receive a comprehensive, integrated education?

Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is "no" at our publicly-funded universities. Certainly, individual students may still get a good education, one that exposes them to the breadth and diversity of human knowledge, prepares them for membership in a democracy, and readies them for participation in the global economy. However, at no public university in Washington is there an institutional guarantee that such an education will be delivered.

"At no public university in Washington is there an institutional guarantee that students are receiving a comprehensive, integrated education."

The problem of declining general education requirements—and growing student ignorance—is not limited to Washington universities. A decade ago, a National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) survey found that it was possible to graduate from:³

- 78 percent of the nation's colleges and universities without ever taking a course in Western civilization;
- 38 percent without taking any course in history;
- 45 percent without taking a course in American or English literature;
- 77 percent without studying a foreign language;
- 41 percent without studying mathematics;
- 33 percent without studying natural and physical sciences.

At about the same time, the NEH sponsored a survey conducted by the Gallup Organization of college seniors' general knowledge:⁴

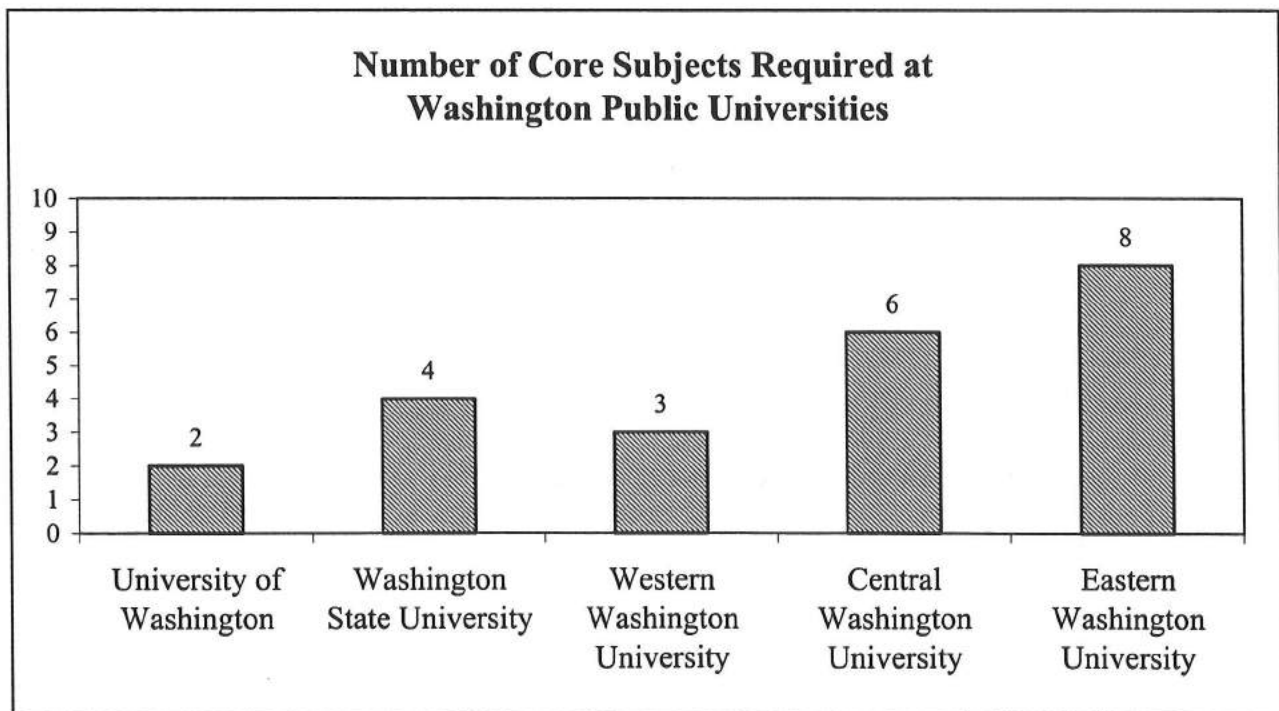
- One-quarter were unable to locate Columbus's voyage within the correct half-century;

- One-quarter confused the thoughts of Karl Marx and the ideas of the U.S. Constitution;
- 40 percent could not state when the Civil War occurred;
- The majority could not link major works by Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Dostoyevsky, and Jane Austen with their respective authors.

Of course, a university education should require more of students than simply learning lists of names and dates. As former NEH chairman Lynne V. Cheney observed, however, “[S]tudents who approach the end of their college years without knowing basic landmarks of history and thought are unlikely to have reflected on their meaning.”⁵

In addition to providing basic knowledge, strong general education requirements provide needed structure to a student’s university education. Broad courses in the arts and sciences help students integrate specific knowledge into the wider context of human understanding. Such requirements introduce students to the various methods and approaches of the sciences and humanities. In this way students acquire the basis for understanding the more specialized information presented in specialized, upper-division courses.

Students at publicly-funded Washington universities are, of course, required to complete certain classes in order to graduate. Our universities, however, all employ what is known as a “cafeteria-style” approach toward these requirements. This allows students to fulfill a (usually short) list of requirements by choosing from a (usually long) list of courses. Not much has changed since the NEH reported that it is “luck or accident or uninformed intuition that determines what students do and do not learn.”



The state’s premier university, the UW, has the weakest general education requirements.

The result of this approach is that at no publicly-funded university in Washington can you be reasonably assured that a student has studied many of the liberal arts and sciences.⁶ For example:

- No public university requires the study of both history and literature; at only two schools can one be reasonably assured that a student has taken *either* a single history course *or* a single literature course;
- No university requires even intermediate-level study of a foreign language; foreign languages can be completely avoided at four of the five public universities;
- Philosophy and religious studies can be completely avoided at four of five;
- Art and music can be completely avoided at four of five;
- Social Sciences (including economics, political science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, *and* geography) can be completely avoided at four of five.

Surprisingly, the state's premier school, the University of Washington, has the weakest general education requirements. The UW has no meaningful requirements in mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, English or world literature, intermediate foreign language, art, music, history or philosophy.

Certainly, it would be difficult, though not impossible, for a given student at the University of Washington to avoid *all* of these categories. Skipping several—perhaps four or five—requires little ingenuity. What few requirements that the UW sees fit to impose are further compromised by the fact that most can be satisfied by completion of a class with only a 0.7 (D-) grade—this at a school where the *average* grade is a 3.11 on a 4.0 scale.⁷

That a student can fulfill general education requirements with specialized, upper-division courses further exacerbates the problem. "Weather," "Introduction to Organized and White Collar Crime," "Race in the American University" and "Greek and Roman Athletics," may all be worthwhile courses for students specializing in the field in question. Taken as electives these classes could contribute to an undergraduate's education. However, they neither provide an overview of human intellectual achievement, nor substitute for the broad courses that serve as the foundation of an undergraduate education.

The most motivated, responsible and prepared students can still receive an excellent, comprehensive education at Washington's public universities. The resources are available and the classes are offered. But what of the student who may have been ill-prepared by a mediocre high school? The student who, for whatever reason, does not seek out academic advising or is poorly advised? The student who may be somewhat lazy or averse to taking difficult classes? What will prevent such a student from sliding by, avoiding challenging subjects and classes, or concentrating within a narrow sub-discipline without ever being exposed to the breadth and diversity of human thought and achievement? Currently, no institutional policies or requirements at Washington's public universities prevent these

"How can students be expected to think deeply and critically when they have been exposed to neither the rigors of an academic discipline nor the fruits of human inquiry?"

eventualities.

Now is a time of intense debate about the future of higher education in the state of Washington. Defending the current practices of the university against changes envisioned by Governor Gary Locke and his "2020 Commission," 834 faculty members of the University of Washington signed an "Open Letter" which whole-heartedly proclaimed:

"As University of Washington faculty we are profoundly committed to . . . fulfilling the goals of a liberal education. We seek to cultivate the active, independent, critical faculties, ethical capacities, flexible intelligences, and analytical skills without which neither democracy, nor freedom, nor creativity can thrive."⁸

Such rhetoric rings hollow. How can students be expected to think deeply and critically when they have been exposed to neither the rigors of an established academic discipline nor the fruits of human inquiry and thought? The adoption of meaningful general education requirements would do much to ensure that students receive a comprehensive, integrated education, making it far more likely that they will exercise their "critical faculties" and "analytical skills."

If Washington's public universities expect to produce graduates who can participate effectively in the democratic process and in the global economy—and who have begun to realize their full potential as human beings—those institutions must do more to ensure that all of today's students receive the comprehensive, integrated, and rigorous education they need and deserve.

Washington Universities Extol the Value of General Education Programs

Public university catalogues and websites carry ardent statements about the virtues of a high-quality liberal arts education. Public universities seem to set high standards for themselves in providing a solid general education for all students who enroll. A thorough examination of the classes actually required of students, however, reveals a singular lack of application of these very principles. These statements in praise of liberal scholarship sound good and noble, but they seldom represent the actual experience most public university students encounter in the classroom. Below are some examples.

"A liberal arts education entails mastery of certain basic skills, [and] exposure to a broad range of academic disciplines . . . the Areas of Knowledge requirement is the means by which the student develops a breadth of knowledge."

—University of Washington General Catalogue

"Baccalaureate education is not only about acquiring technical knowledge and skill. It also is about exploring broad human issues, expanding mental horizons, having ideas,

developing critical perspective. Opportunity to do these sorts of things is a distinguishing mark of a baccalaureate curriculum. Having done them is an important part of what makes a college education as such, regardless of specialized subject, valuable to society and in the marketplace.”

—Western Washington University Web Site

“The general education program offers our students a liberal education, an education intended to help them become liberated, or free, persons, able to make informed and enlightened choices. We assume that a free and liberally educated person has the following:

- basic competence in reasoning and communication;
- an awareness of a wide range and variety of human knowledge--scientific, humanistic, and artistic, including an awareness of at least some of the best that the human spirit has yet achieved;
- a sense of the interconnectedness of knowledge;
- a critical awareness of the ways in which knowledge is discovered and created;
- a sense of the ways in which knowledge must and does evolve.

To these ends our general education program holds our students responsible for a high level of competency in the basic skills of reading, writing, speaking and reasoning; it exposes them to a broad sampling of the range and variety of human knowledge and of the ways of knowing; and it attempts to instill a critical awareness of human knowledge and of its relationship to the human condition.”

—Central Washington University Web Site

Criticisms of Core Curriculum Analysis

The very undertaking of evaluating general education requirements based upon the mastery of particular competencies, such as English Composition, and disciplines, such as history or mathematics, has been challenged as lacking sophistication, de-emphasizing critical thinking in favor of passive reception of a canon of “great works,” and generally defining what constitutes an “education” too narrowly. Responses to the National Association of Scholars report, *The Dissolution of General Education: 1914-1993*, embody such criticisms:

We can't ignore the decline of requirements, but the real agenda of higher education today is the concern with problem solving, critical thinking, communicating and learning how to value.

—Russ Edgerton, president of the American Association for Higher Education⁹

I don't want bingo education where you pick one course from column A and another from column B and then shout: 'Bingo! I'm educated!' We've gotten way beyond that. We're focused on standards. We're focused on the question of whether the student

develops a real capacity to learn and to apply his knowledge to the world.

—Robert Zemsky, director of the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania¹⁰

Although “a real capacity to learn and to apply . . . knowledge” and “problem solving, critical thinking, communicating, and learning how to value,” should all be goals for institutions of higher learning, we must also consider the admonition offered by Lynn Cheney, former Chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities: “[S]tudents who approach the end of their college years without knowing basic landmarks of history and thought are unlikely to have reflected on their meaning.”¹¹

It appears unlikely that any of the worthy goals set forward by Messrs. Zemsky and Edgerton can be achieved in a vacuum, divorced from the principles and accomplishments of the various disciplines which constitute liberal arts. For instance, to what extent can a student who has not been exposed to the methods of the natural sciences, the discipline of philosophy, or the critical reading of literature be said to have “develop[ed] a real capacity to learn?” Can that student “apply his knowledge to the world” if he or she is ignorant of not only the historical context of the knowledge in question, but the means of reconstructing and interpreting that context? Can a student who has never systematically studied ethics, moral philosophy, or religion “learn how to value?” When a student practices “critical thinking,” what is that student supposed to think about? In short, does the rhetoric about “real learning” and “problem solving” really reflect a more nuanced, sophisticated approach to the construction of a core curriculum in higher education, or is it merely cover for a refusal, for whatever reason, to enforce standards and guarantee the quality of a college or university education?

The Value of a Core Curriculum

The main purpose of American education should be to bring us together with a set of common skills, common experiences and common values. Schools should do this for as many people as possible, not just for a fortunate and gifted few.

—Newsweek Magazine, September 6, 1999

The authors of this study advocate a rigorous core curriculum, one which introduces students to the various disciplines of the liberal arts and sciences, structures their education, provides for shared learning, and helps build community among students and faculty at a given institution.

Such a curriculum not only acquaints students with a specified body of knowledge but also helps them to acquire the tools necessary to evaluate and analyze that knowledge and the skills required to communicate this newfound understanding to others:

Students should not only know when Columbus sailed but also perceive the world-altering shock of his voyage. They should not only know what Plato wrote but also understand the allegory of the cave. When education is rightly conceived, events and ideas become . . . invitations to look, to listen and to reflect.

-- Lynn V. Cheney, National Endowment of the Humanities¹²

The various disciplines of the arts, sciences, and humanities take differing approaches toward understanding the world around us, employing various techniques for the acquisition, analysis, and communication of information. Without the structure and coherence provided by a rigorous core curriculum grounded in these disciplines, students' education frequently succumbs to "the intrusion of programs of ephemeral knowledge developed without concern for the criteria of self-discovery, critical thinking, and exploration of values that were for so long central to the baccalaureate years."¹³

Furthermore, general education requirements serve to organize students' learning. They provide an analytical framework within which students can integrate discrete bits of information: "[A] required course of studies can bring needed order and coherence . . . a core of learning shows the patterns of the mosaic. It provides a context for forming the parts of education into a whole."¹⁴

Finally, a shared core curriculum would help colleges and universities to address the often-lamented problem of a lack of community among students. The need to develop a sense of community has become increasingly important recently as colleges and universities attempt to balance the growing emphasis on diversity with the need to prevent division, alienation and tension within the student body. A shared learning experience provides common ground for dialogue among students.

General Education Requirements at Publicly-Funded Universities in the State of Washington

Overview

Our message to administrators and professors alike is that the curriculum requires structure, a framework sturdier than simply a major and general distribution requirements and more reliable than student interest.

—*Integrity in the College Curriculum*, Association of American Colleges, 1985.

Numerous studies over the past century have analyzed—and frequently lamented—the state of higher education in America. Over the past twenty years much debate has focused on the structure and makeup of the core curriculum, the courses or subjects required by colleges and universities of all undergraduates pursuing degrees in the arts or sciences. Criticism of declining

expectations has been widespread, whether individual studies emphasized the content of core curricula or the “methods and processes” taught to undergraduates.

The quality of the core curriculum may not be the only measure of academic excellence at American colleges and universities, but analysis of this curriculum can offer valuable insights into the state of higher education. The courses that a college or university requires of its students—regardless of their particular majors or emphases—reveal the educational priorities of the institution, reflect the interest of the institution in ensuring that all students conform to certain minimum standards, and demonstrates institutional beliefs about the purpose of a liberal education. In short, although faculty, academic advisors and students themselves all contribute to the educational opportunities and expectations at a college or university, the core curriculum required by an institution constitutes the official statement of what shared knowledge students must master in order to become educated, informed individuals, citizens of a democratic society and participants in the global economy.

“The core curriculum is the official statement of what shared knowledge students must master to become informed individuals, citizens of a democracy and participants in the global economy.”

Evaluation of the core curriculum at institutions of higher learning is but one way of judging the quality and thoroughness of an undergraduate’s education. It can tell us what the official, institutional requirements are for graduation, an important statement of a university’s goals and expectations. It does not, however, demonstrate what classes students have actually taken; universities could easily claim that although their general education requirements are minimal, their students nevertheless routinely design well-structured curricula for themselves which achieve the high standards advocated by this study. Evaluating such a claim would involve analyzing student transcripts in order to see what classes students at a given institution actually take. Such an inquiry would involve a lengthy process of obtaining informed consent and is beyond the scope of the present study.¹⁵ Furthermore, the authors of this study believe that if students regularly exceed an institution’s minimum standards, the burden of demonstrating this lies with the college or university in question, since the institution itself controls the data necessary for such an evaluation and is ultimately accountable for demonstrating the quality of the education it routinely provides.

In addition, this study in no way addresses the quality and rigor of individual classes. We investigate whether or not an institution requires classes within specific disciplines or proficiencies such as mathematics, or social sciences, or a foreign language. This study, however, does not address the content or quality of those classes. Instead, this report relies on each campus’s representations of its general education requirements. We have been generous in accepting the word of the institutions we have studied; if a course meets a mathematics requirement, we have generally acknowledged that course as a genuine mathematics course, unless the

“The University of Washington accepts courses in which the student earned only 0.7 (D-) as acceptable for general education credit.”

catalogue description of the course clearly indicated otherwise. Requirements may be more lax in practice than official course descriptions indicate. It is conceivable that a course which fulfills the mathematics requirements is not a rigorous, college-level math course, or that a given social sciences course is notorious for passing all students, or that a foreign language course is poorly taught.

We have, however, noted when a requirement can be fulfilled by passing a class with an unduly low grade, as is the case for most requirements at the University of Washington, which accepts courses in which the student earned only a 0.7 (D-) for general education credit. In short, we have examined those aspects of the core curriculum, such as disciplines and courses required, grades accepted for credit, which can be objectively determined from official university publications; we have not evaluated aspects of general education courses, such as intellectual rigor or specific content, which are more elusive, subjective, or ambiguous.

Scope and Criteria of this Study

The present study sets out to evaluate general education requirements at the publicly funded four-year universities in the state of Washington. The Evergreen College has not been included because it does not offer its students a traditional curriculum consisting of individualized requirements. As such, its general education requirements cannot be meaningfully interpreted alongside those of other colleges and universities (see Appendix III). The institutions examined in this study include:

- The University of Washington, Seattle
- Washington State University, Pullman
- Western Washington University, Bellingham
- Central Washington University, Ellensburg
- Eastern Washington University, Cheney

General education requirements are defined as those requirements for graduation imposed upon all students in the arts and sciences, regardless of major or emphasis.¹⁶ Students in the arts and sciences represent the majority of undergraduates at the publicly funded four-year institutions in the state of Washington, while the requirements imposed by other colleges and divisions within each university (such as business schools, nursing schools and other professional programs) are based on the arts and sciences requirements. General education requirements at these institutions were evaluated using information from each institution's General Catalogue or its online equivalent.

Recent studies, including *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students* (the National Endowment for the Humanities), *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community* (the Association of American Colleges), and *The Dissolution of General Education: 1914-1993* (the National Association of Scholars) informed the selection of categories into which general education requirements are divided. The categories employed in this study include:

Skills and Competencies

- English Composition
- Foreign Language
- Mathematics
- Computer Literacy

Breadth of Study

- Natural Sciences¹⁷
- Social Sciences¹⁸
- Literature¹⁹
- History
- Art and Music
- Philosophy and Religion

Although each institution divides its curriculum differently, and employs different nomenclature to describe that curriculum, each of the categories chosen for this study is required by at least one Washington college or university. Furthermore, each category represents a logical, specific and clearly recognizable division of the curriculum, as opposed to the often vague or obscure jargon used to describe requirements at some institutions, such as “Individuals and Society” or “Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning.”

Content of General Education Requirements

A complete list of the core academic subjects required at each university is presented by the four tables shown in Appendix I. Table I indicates what disciplines a student must take in order to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree from each institution studied.

Table II presents the core disciplines that may be avoided by a student at each of Washington’s five public universities. A student can receive four years of higher education and be allowed to graduate with a college degree without taking a single course in any of the academic fields indicated in this table.

Tables III and IV compare the number of requirements at each institution with the number of courses available from which a student may choose to fulfill each requirement. Each requirement may consist of a single course, a sequence of courses, or simply a group of courses.

These tables indicate that across institutions an inverse relationship exists between the number of requirements and the number of courses available to meet any given requirement. In other words, institutions which have only a few, broad requirements (such as the UW) also tend to allow students to choose from dozens—if not hundreds—of courses to fulfill those requirements.

On the other hand, schools which impose more requirements (such as CWU and EWU) also tend to allow fewer classes to fulfill any given requirement. The latter approach provides at least minimal guidance for students, whereas the former imparts little or no structure to students’ education. Tables III and IV also illustrate the degree to which each institution follows a “cafeteria style” approach to general education requirements: the fewer the number of requirements and the longer the list of courses from which a student may choose to meet those requirements, the less structured are the general education requirements.²⁰

Conclusions and Recommendations

General education requirements at Washington's publicly-funded institutions vary greatly. The required core curricula at all of these institutions, however, have serious shortcomings. The UW, WSU, and WWU in particular fail to provide adequate structure, coherence and breadth to students' education. Breadth requirements are particularly weak, allowing students to avoid most core disciplines. CWU and EWU have more structured core curricula, but students at these universities can still entirely avoid important academic fields such as literature and history.

In response to these shortcomings, Washington's public universities must:

- Define the core learning each university believes is necessary to an educated person in the 21st century.
- Work towards minimum statewide standards, while respecting the individual mission and constituency of each institution.
- Develop a comprehensive set of both skill and distribution requirements.
- Structure these requirements so that students' educations logically progress from broad courses which introduce them to various disciplines to more specific courses which extend and refine earlier learning.
- Require students to meet *all* of these requirements, replacing the loose "cafeteria style" approach to general education with specific and meaningful requirements.

Furthermore, the authors of this report believe that the objectives of general education requirements at a modern university must include:

- Mastery of written and oral language (English and at least one foreign language), mathematics and computer skills.
- Habits of mind, including careful observation, analysis, and critical thinking.
- General knowledge of the origins and intellectual foundations of the modern world, including acquaintance with Western Civilization and American history and government.
- An introduction to the great works of literature, art and music that enhance human life and understanding.
- Familiarity with the history, literature and art of at least one foreign culture, including advanced language study.

Washington's publicly-funded institutions of higher learning fall far short of this standard. Core disciplines are easy to avoid. No institution requires courses in American history or government. None require foreign language study beyond the first year. A determined student could avoid history and literature entirely at any of these institutions.

Although harder to quantify, the lack of structure and coherence in the core curricula at Washington's public universities also impairs the development of students' critical facilities. Especially at the UW, WSU, and WWU, students can avoid most broad, introductory courses—even in required disciplines. Students lose perspective as they plunge into highly specialized