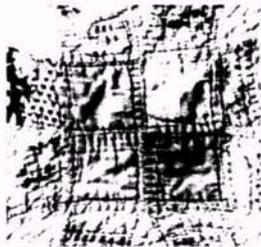


Patchwork Curriculum in Higher Education



Lewis B. Mayhew

Undergraduate education in the United States has been characterized by upheavals followed by long periods of stability. We are living in a time of experimentation and change.

One tires of the apocalyptic, nostalgic, and utopian connotations of titles such as the one assigned this essay. It is, in its tone and its implications, typical of much if not most writing about education by professional critics and theorists. First, it implies that things are dreadfully wrong with education and the curriculum, that things will get worse if whatever the article urges is not adopted, and that at some time in the past there was an educational Camelot to which there can be a return. It also implies that there is a science—or at least a highly developed art—of curriculum building and that there are experts who can exhibit the art or science. It may well be the purpose of educational journals, conferences, and yearbooks to give educational critics and theorists something to do and to enable them to tell each other that they are engaged in serious work.

Actually the fundamentals of constructing a curriculum are relatively straightforward and should be expected to produce a patchwork or a mosaic that changes over time. The curriculum is the formal, organized body of knowledge, activities, artifacts, and thoughts; created as a principal means for achieving the educational purposes of the institution. Since the purposes of education are vague, the curriculum should be expected to be vague. However, one of the principal purposes of collegiate education is to help the young mature and move into adult society.

Since the nature of that society changes over time, the materials relevant to prepare people for that society also change. Hence, there should be expected, and indeed there is, a variegated curriculum varying over time and varying with

changing conditions. There are some materials that are likely to be needed in all ages—one's native language and the ethical principles of one's religion are examples—but the changes will likely outnumber the constants. The trick of building an effective curriculum is the selection of materials at a given time that most closely mirrors the life into which the young will likely move.

This does not mean that studying and thinking about the curriculum is unimportant. The cur-

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riculum is part of the intellectual tradition of a society, and knowledge about the curriculum can inform as to the nature of that society. The curriculum is also formed by the society as it evolves, so understanding that evolution can inform as to the nature of the curriculum and how it should be modified.

Three Periods of Curriculum Change

The undergraduate curriculum in colleges and universities in the United States can be viewed in three large and distinct periods, within each of which there were fluctuations and change. Knowing these periods can reveal the interaction between education and society can suggest what will come next, and can help make one comfortable with a patchwork curriculum. For indeed, the curriculum has always been and always will be a patchwork. At times the patches may be of compatible hues and at times of contrasting and even discordant shades—but they are patches nevertheless.

The first period extends from 1636 to approximately 1862. During that time the curriculum consisted of a relatively few prescribed courses in classical languages, which were the means of transmitting the intellectual content of the Reformation and Renaissance—a content

judged essential to prepare the young to move into a society dominated by those two major historical movements. College students were young, and there were no high schools, therefore instruction was conducted in a more disciplinary way than might have been used for older and already disciplined students.

For a time that curriculum was remarkably successful. It produced highly literate ministers who could evolve a theology for a new and rough land, and political theorists who could adapt Greek political thought to the solving of unique political issues.

But society changed, and new elements of intellectual traditions appeared and required assimilation. A thin line of colonies became a continental-sized nation that had to use the fruits of an industrial, and then later a scientific, revolution to conquer and use the enormous resources of that continent. The older curriculum that prepared men to write the erudite Federalist Papers proved incapable of developing the skills needed to dig canals, build bridges, and construct railways. At least one other nation had shown how education could change and help the move into a new age. After the disaster of the Battle of Jena in 1806, the German states discovered a new role for universities that, through science and scholarship, could generate and teach the nation to strive for military, agricultural, and industrial leadership in Europe. Ten thousand Americans experienced the new German university, and in time introduced its major elements into the curricula in American collegiate institutions. In just over 40 years, those elements completely changed the face of higher education. A new kind of institution was created to educate the agricultural and industrial classes of the nation. Science and technology were embraced as essential curricular matters. Academic departments were formed. Students were allowed to elect what they would study. Lectures and seminars came into vogue, as did use of laboratories and libraries. The period ended with the linking of basic science to preparation for the professions—first with medicine and gradually in other fields. To the apocalyptic, the nostalgic, and the utopian, this resulted in a patchwork curriculum to be feared, criticized, and resisted. But to the society it produced the agriculture, the industry, the commerce,

and the military that within a scant few decades put the nation into a position of world leadership.

That particular pattern of curricular activities proved to be so productive that its basic elements remained in place throughout the bulk of the twentieth century. Between 1910 and the end of World War II, there were few significant curricular changes except for refining technique and increasing the number of courses as new knowledge and needs for new skills emerged.

Since the end of World War II, a number of social changes, largely unexpected, have taken place that have produced the first structural changes in education. First there was a population explosion. Then there was a large period of relative affluence that allowed rising educational expectations. Next, the segregated and disadvantaged minority groups tried to gain entry into the mainstream of society. And there came a sudden awareness that university research, adequately financed, could do much more than had ever been believed to solve major social problems.

These changes produced enormous increases in size, cost, and complexity of higher education, and an elevation of research to a position equal to or above the traditional mission of the preparation of leaders for society. They also produced a much more heterogeneous student population. As institutions struggled to cope with those changes, they began to modify the curriculum. What appears to some in a pejorative sense as a patchwork curriculum is simply experimentation, the results from which are not yet in.

Since about 1958, when the major structural changes began to take effect, there have been a variety of curricular and institutional innovations, each in essence attempts to cope with size, cost, complexity, heterogeneity, and the outpouring of subsidized research. There have been experiments with new groupings of students to keep the large institution from becoming too impersonal. New temporal arrangements have been devised to accommodate the needs of many new sorts of students. Various ways to individualize instruction have been under study. Educational technology has been used to keep expense under control. Off-campus experiences have been contrived to motivate students who have not been socialized to be driven by academic work. New interdisciplinary courses have been created to help students under-

stand issues and phenomena too complex to be learned in disciplinary courses alone. Courses for special groups have also been developed when the traditional classes stressing the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant experience proved to be irrelevant for those students previously excluded from collegiate education.

Additional curricular and instructional experiments were added to cope with the sudden upsurge in egalitarianism that swept the nation in the late 1960s. Throughout the history of American higher education, there has always been a gradual form of egalitarianism that slowly provided for new groups of students—children of farmers, factory workers, and minority-group members. But suddenly many new groups had to be rapidly accommodated—the young, the old, the very poor, the inept, and the incarcerated. To serve them, nontraditional forms of education appeared, such as taking education to people rather than asking them to come to a campus; evaluating life experience for academic credits; or contriving courses for people unable to use words, numbers, or abstract conceptualization effectively.

Now, in the late 1970s, the collegiate curriculum seems in constant flux as experiments are tried, fail, and are replaced by new experiments. It is this seeming anarchy that bothers many. In time, things will settle down just as they did settle down after 1910. Which elements will last can no more be predicted than the success of the marriage of basic science to clinical instruction in medical education could have been predicted in 1870. In 1870, the odds would have favored the adoption of the case method just introduced to legal education, rather than the chemistry and physiology laboratory. ²⁷



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