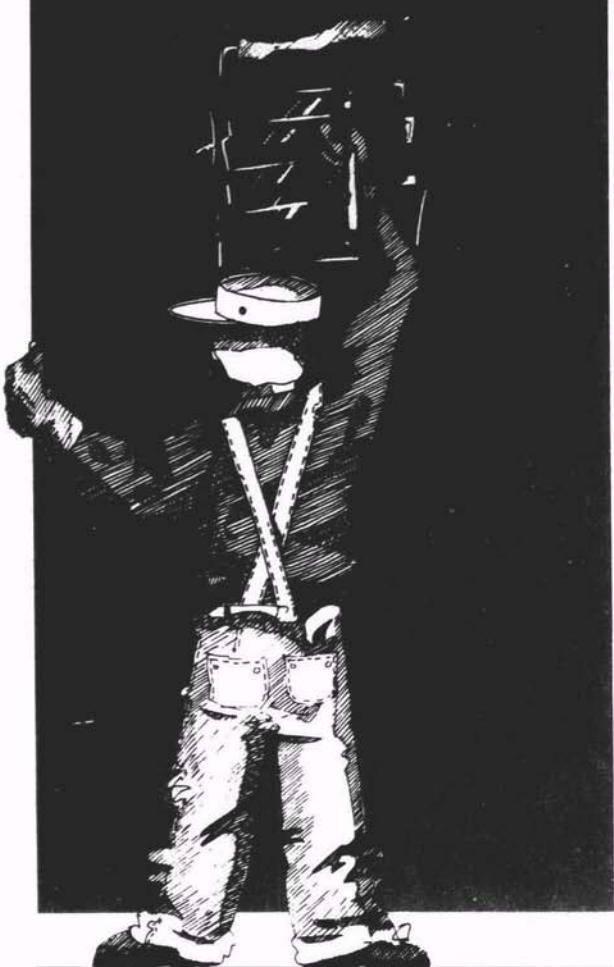


# Harvard in the 1980s: A Question of Adaptability

Stephen J. Makler and Robert J. Munnelly



The nation's oldest college is reforming its general education program to meet the challenge of the 1980s. What it does and how well it works may have profound consequences, not only for higher education, but for the high school curriculum as well.

The faculty of Harvard University has called for sweeping reform of its general education program for undergraduates. In place of its long-standing emphasis on Western thought, culture, and history, its theme for the 1980s and beyond will be adaptability to an increasingly technical and interdependent world. And if precedent holds, the shock waves will be felt not only throughout higher learning, but in the high school classroom as well.

For all its venerable traditions, Harvard, the nation's first college, has also been one of its boldest proponents of change and relevance in undergraduate curriculum. Its last major reform came in 1945 and was based on the faculty's landmark study, *General Education in a Free Society*.<sup>1</sup> Familiarly known as the "Redbook" and widely imitated, it became the bible for progressive higher education in post-war America.

According to Charles Whitlock, associate dean of faculty, "The General Education program came directly out of World War II, at a time we were all concerned about the preservation and transmittal of Western thought and institutions. We had just fought a war to preserve those very things. The Redbook gave us a philosophy for our general education program. It laid out a primarily historically-oriented approach in all areas of the humanities—even, to an extent, in the sciences."

Thus were born the broad introductory surveys in Western history, literature, and philosophy that confronted more than 30 incoming classes. Only after a solid grounding in Western values, believed the faculty, were students prepared for in-depth study in the traditional disciplines. Over the years, however, student bodies changed—at Harvard as everywhere else.

"Since that time," says Whitlock, "Harvard has become a national university. It really couldn't have been described that way in the 1930s. We now have a far more representative student body, a cross-section of the country socially, economically, and geographically."

As the students changed, so did their interests.

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Committee on General Education, *General Education in a Free Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1945).

Out of the probing intellectualism of the 1950s and the politically turbulent 1960s came a fascinating profusion of courses tailored for modern tastes. At one point Harvard's course guide listed 2,600 electives. Rather than spend the equivalent of a year on survey courses, bright young Harvard undergraduates, with the complicity of succeeding faculties, found ways to fudge on requirements. The general education program was simply ignored to death.

As Whitlock puts it: "By 1970 we had wonderful courses, but no program. It ended up that students could satisfy a natural science requirement without ever being exposed to a hard science. A humanities requirement could be fulfilled with a course on the films of John Ford. Don't get me wrong; it was a wonderful course. But the point is, you could graduate Harvard without ever having read a line of Shakespeare."

The re-assessment started in 1973 under the direction of Henry Rosovsky, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences. It began about ten years late, in Whitlock's estimation, but that wasn't all Harvard's fault.

"It should have been done in the 1960s but we couldn't pull it off because of the student troubles. When things finally calmed down around 1973, Dean Rosovsky set up task forces in seven different areas of life here at Harvard. The question of a new core curriculum was only one consideration. We also looked at counseling, the quality of life, improving the faculty, and how to better use resources."

If the test of the post-war era was preserving democracy, the test of the 1980s, believes the faculty, will be preserving a sense of balance and understanding in a time of bewildering change. Explains Whitlock: "When we finally looked at why the general education program had become unraveled we found two things. First, the old disciplinary divisions in the humanities and sciences were no longer useful. Second, we had only one faculty committee on general education. That simply wasn't enough. You end up with a program too narrow, too rigid to adapt over time."

As a result, disciplinary boundaries were erased and new emphasis was placed on analytic reasoning. "We no longer have an overall philosophy or umbrella

approach to general education—neither does anyone else. Instead, Dean Rosovsky came up with a pragmatic approach. The general education program of 1945 was much too provincial. We now feel that everyone graduating Harvard should know about another culture. Everyone should know something about computers. We also felt from a practical point of view that you couldn't have an educated individual who hadn't thought about ethical decisions. The new system will allow far more interdisciplinary courses, with language professors getting to teach history and sociology professors teaching political science, and so on. The faculty is very excited about it."

The new core curriculum calls for a year's study in at least four of five major subject areas: arts and literature, history, social analysis and moral reasoning, the natural and social sciences, and foreign cultures. Instead of such staples as "Central Themes in American History" and "Natural Science I," students will be able to opt from among such courses as "The Function and Criticism of Literature," "The Christianization of the Roman World," "The Theory of a Just War," "The Astronomical Perspective," and "Art, Myth, and Ritual in Africa."

In addition to the core curriculum requirements, there is a requirement for expository writing, aimed at teaching students to communicate with precision, cogency, and force. The present foreign language requirement remains. A further requirement will be the demonstration of proficiency in the application of mathematics and quantitative reasoning in three dimensions: using the concept of function to understand reality, dealing with uncertainty through techniques of probability and statistics, and being able to carry out simple time-shared computer problems.

Fulfilling the core curriculum course will consume the equivalent of about one academic year. The other requirements and electives will take about one year. Concentration requirements will continue to absorb about two years of academic work.

"We haven't changed the balance of a Harvard education at all," maintains Whitlock. "We think the new core curriculum is a strong, positive restatement of our belief in the value of liberal arts training."

Parents who hope to send a child to Harvard

some day are advised to pay close attention now to high school curriculums. "What's happening in secondary schools is going to affect who gets in here, particularly in how they teach math," says Whitlock. "With the technological revolution that's going to come about in the next ten years, students are going to have to know what they can do with a computer. The schools are going to have to teach math differently. Students who haven't developed analytic skills in the social systems area are also going to be at a disadvantage. Our admissions people place great emphasis on analytic ability."

Knowing well the influential role the earlier Harvard report played, the present faculty took pains to point out that the new plan was not prepared as a model for all of higher education. Instead it reflected an effort to provide the best possible education for Harvard students as the faculty saw the makeup and experiences of the students. A reading of the faculty report on the mathematics proficiency requirement will make clear that it was designed with the Harvard admissions profile in mind (700 in College Board math scores and advanced standing in coursework).

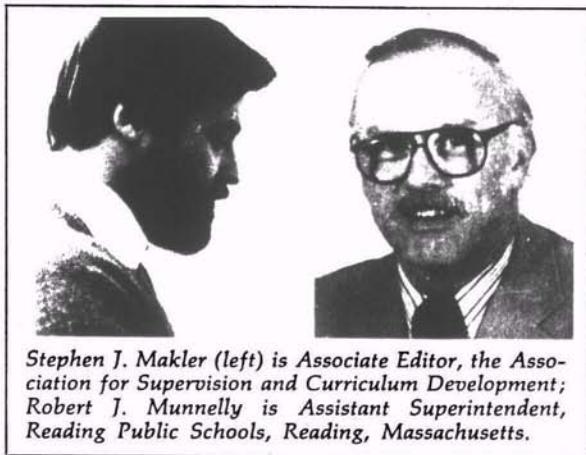
Despite the faculty's disavowal of any intent to speak for all of higher education, the report has generated widespread interest outside Harvard. *The New Yorker* profiled "An Educated Person"<sup>2</sup> while the *Saturday Review* and *Harper's* heralded "Confusion

at Harvard"<sup>3</sup> and "Harvard Flunks a Test."<sup>4</sup> Such interest clearly signals that a new priority for citizens and educators alike is the task of developing a consensus about what constitutes quality general education for the 1980s. *EJ*

<sup>2</sup> "The Educated Person," *The New Yorker*, December 4, 1978, pp. 40-43.

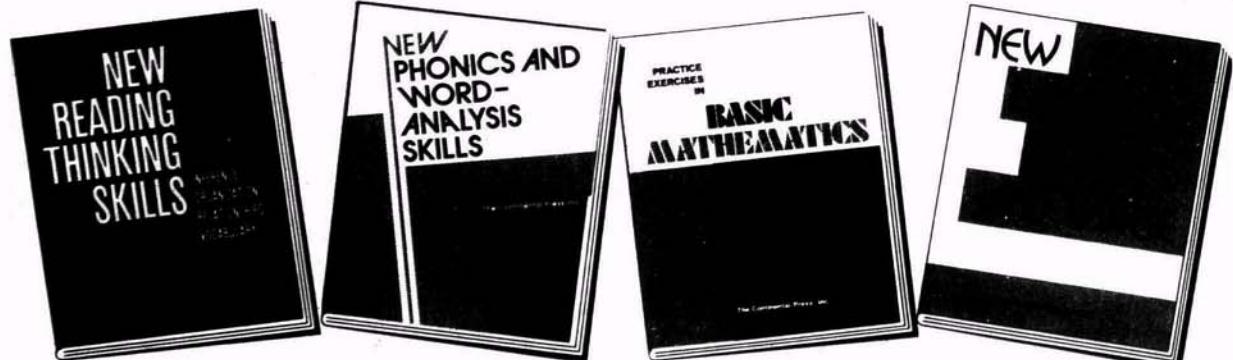
<sup>3</sup> Susan Schiefelbein, "Confusion at Harvard: What Makes an 'Educated Man'?" *Saturday Review*, April 1, 1978, pp. 12-20.

<sup>4</sup> Adele Simmons, "Harvard Flunks A Test," *Harper's*, March 1979, pp. 20-27.



Stephen J. Makler (left) is Associate Editor, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; Robert J. Munnely is Assistant Superintendent, Reading Public Schools, Reading, Massachusetts.

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