

Designing a General Education Curriculum for Today's High School Student

The first step in curriculum reform is to carefully define specific elements all students should learn.

DONALD A. OFFERMANN

During the last 15 years, in an effort to allow students more freedom to choose courses, many schools dropped or severely reduced course requirements, thereby making it possible for students to avoid demanding courses or to focus their studies on one narrow part of the program. As Yale President A. Bartlett Giamatti explained, "It is not enough to offer a smorgasbord of courses. We must ensure that students are not just eating at one end of the table."

Improvement vs. Repair

My school, like many others, accepted to some extent the "do-your-own-thing" philosophy of the 1970s. We reduced our requirement in English from four years to three, in mathematics from two years to one, in history from three years to two, and dropped requirements in the fine and practical arts.

Were we a mediocre institution in need of extreme reform, as *A Nation at Risk* suggested was the case with many American schools? Hardly. We continued to offer a high quality educational program even though the control over each student's program had been reduced with the requirements. For those students who responded well to counseling about their academic choices, there was little change in the quality of education they received. But for those who resisted such counseling, the quality of education suffered.

Of the 34 semester credits required for graduation, the school had control over the selection of only 16. It was indeed possible for our students to eat too much at one end of the table.

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A Nation at Risk did not come as a surprise, however. Many schools, including ours, were already actively engaged in curriculum reform when the report was published. We had set out to improve the quality of an already good program, not to replace a poor one. We wanted all our students to profit from the quality educational program available in our school, and we wanted that program to be appropriate for young people who would be living the greater part of their lives in the 21st century.

Contemplating the Ideal

Into the context of our local efforts came an invitation from ASCD to form a national network of 17 schools for the study of general education in the American high school. We accepted the invitation and were selected as a member school in the network. We saw an opportunity to compare our experiences



with others who were engaged in the same process. The network served that purpose admirably.

Mortimer Adler, Ernest Boyer, H.S. Broudy, Robert Bundy, Herman Kahn, and TheodoreSizer made major presentations to representatives of schools in the network. These presentations placed the issue of common learnings for all students (or general education components) on the philosophical level where it belongs.

The great temptation in any effort to strengthen an educational program is simply to require more. But more of *what* is the critical issue. To begin by tinkering with requirements, throwing in a bit more of this and a good chunk of that, will perpetuate the purposeless patchwork programs that have evolved. And what gets thrown in will be determined by the strength of the special interest groups at work.

Network speakers gave to representatives of individual schools the necessary background to begin their curriculum reform on the philosophical level. We found it most reassuring to our efforts that the network schools in their separate deliberations about curriculum reform, determined that a carefully worked out philosophy must precede any other steps in the process.

Thinking about general education raises agonizing issues. By definition it is that set of learning experiences all students *must* have. The ultimate question involved is, "What knowledge is of most worth, and what courses must be required of all students to ensure exposure to that knowledge?" To say to a student, "You must take *this* course" is clearly an arrogant denial of choice, a denial that a sensitive teacher does not take lightly. Is it possible to make a list of required learning experiences without being arbitrary and without operating

from raw personal preference? We wondered but were determined to do our best.

Our local committee (17 volunteers representing the various departments in the school, the counselors, the administration, and the board) met regularly over a two-year period. The first year was spent discussing the philosophical issues. We made a conscious effort to avoid departmental biases, deliberately blinding ourselves to the existing curriculum in order to minimize its influence. Like Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim, we found that "...to fling away your daily bread so as to get your hands free for a grapple with a ghost may be an act of prosaic heroism." We flung from our minds the "daily bread" of the existing curriculum so we could "grapple with a ghost" of the ideal curriculum.

If there is an especially memorable part of the curriculum review process in our district, it is this philosophical phase

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James L. Garrett



of the work. One teacher on the committee said, "Never before in my 22 years of teaching have I been asked to give serious attention to the issue of the substance of a general education. I find it exciting—but I am bewildered that I haven't been asked to do so before." I saw committee members come in at 3:30 p.m. to begin a committee meeting, tired after a full day's work but eager to begin the next discussion. It was a curious thing to see the energy level rise as the discussion proceeded. Critical issues have a way of generating the energy necessary to deal with them.

One School's Approach

We considered at length the changes that are taking place in our world, changes that predict the characteristics of the world in the 21st century. We envisioned that future marked by increased tension between impulses toward human interdependence and impulses toward autonomy manifested by the inequitable distribution of the world's economic resources. This tension will likely be exacerbated by uncontrolled population growth, especially in developing nations. Demand will be heightened for the exercise of moral judgment in the development and use of technology, and for cultural and values systems that are capable of co-existence in a pluralistic society. Ultimately, the tension between human interdependence and autonomy will be expressed in the continued struggle for world domination between democratic and totalitarian political ideologies.

What kind of general education program will prepare students for this type of future? Clearly, such a world will be marked by rapid change, creating a critical demand for lifelong learning skills to meet those changes. Students must:

- Use symbols for computation and communication as a basis for continued learning

- Know how to locate and process information

- Be able to make decisions
- Be prepared to deal with change
- Use creative imagination
- Recognize the interdependence of all people on the earth, the value in the variety of world cultures, and the need for a knowledge of history and geography

- Have a sense of self-worth, an appreciation of the intrinsic value of human life, and a recognition of the uniqueness of each person's potential.

The action of the committee following this philosophical phase, in summary was to list the learning experiences necessary to fulfill the concept of general education idealized by the committee, to survey the school and community to determine consensus, and then make a final list.

When we had determined components of the idealized curriculum, the committee placed them beside the real curriculum to determine where the real fell short of the ideal. We surveyed existing courses within the current requirements and in the total program to determine which experiences of the ideal curriculum were not provided in the required courses and which were not available in the total offerings of the school. This done, the committee proposed ways to provide the missing experiences.

Defining a Quality Education

The result was a proposed cluster arrangement of requirements, which the school and community considered and modified in discussions that progressed throughout the school year. This cluster arrangement provided what the committee believed was an ideal: to increase school control over student course selection while maintaining an element of student choice.

This proposal, unanimously approved by the Board in October 1983, permits students to choose some courses within the mandatory clusters:

Mathematics, Science, and Technology Cluster (9 credits)—Specified: 2 mathematics; 2 mathematics or equivalent; 2 science; 1 health education.* Unspecified: 2 credits selected from the cluster.

Communications Cluster (8 credits)—Specified: 6 English. Unspecified: 2 credits selected from the cluster.

Historical, Cultural, and Global Studies Cluster (8 credits)—Specified: 2 American history; 2 world history or equivalent. Unspecified: 4 credits selected from the cluster with no more than 2 from any one department.

Practical Arts Cluster (3 credits)—Specified: 1 consumer education or equivalent.* Unspecified: 2 credits selected from the cluster.

*May be taken freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior year.

This cluster arrangement enables the school to increase its control over student course selection while maintaining an element of student choice."

Berry Teacher



Fine and Performing Arts Cluster (2 credits)—Unspecified: 2 credits selected from the cluster.

Physical Education (maximum 4 credits)—Specified: 1/2 credit (the value of one semester's work) for every semester a student attends school up through eight semesters.

Driver Education (30 clock hours of instruction)—Students who successfully complete a full semester of driver education will receive one-half credit, which will take the place of the required physical education credit for that semester.

Completing these cluster requirements will yield 34 credits in four years

of high school. Students must complete six additional credits in freely chosen electives to graduate—a total of 40 credits. Regardless of accumulated credits, students are required to complete at least four courses per semester for eight semesters.

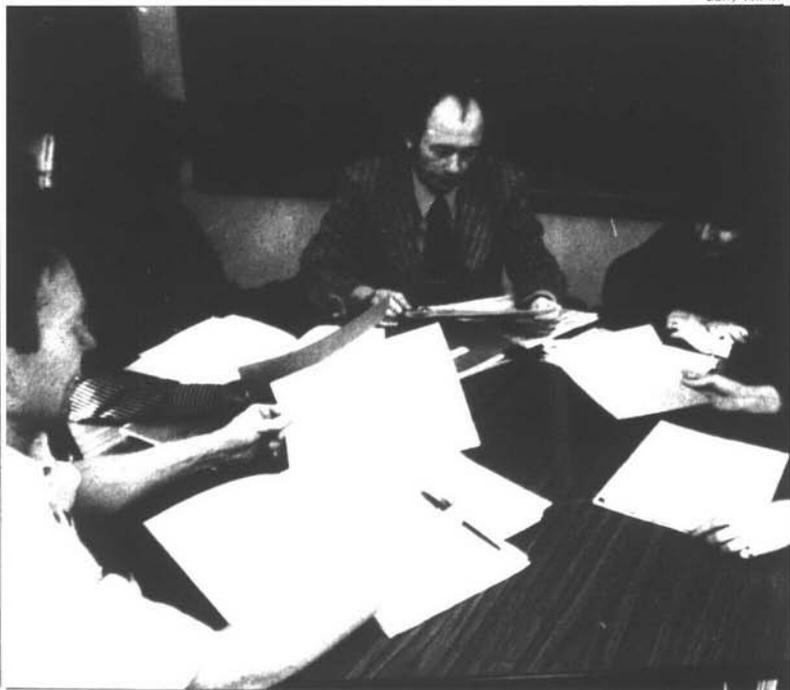
Two weaknesses in the existing curriculum are not addressed in the proposed cluster requirements: computer literacy and oral communication. To strengthen the program in these areas, we propose a strong institutional commitment to using the computer in all courses and clusters in which it can serve as a tool for academic work. Likewise, oral communication skills should become a more significant element in

courses where reports, deliberation, and debate are appropriate.

What we find most other network schools learned in the process of curriculum reform is the absolute necessity of taking time to carefully develop a definition of general education for all students. Once this critical issue is resolved, the approaches to ensuring that all students will participate in the desired experiences will vary widely from school to school.

Instead of merely tinkering with requirements, American educators must devote their energies to establishing priorities for students—priorities that express a vision of quality education for all. □

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Barry Teacher

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