From the SelectedWorks of Jayne Marie Comstock

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Moving Beyond the Core Wars What Matters Most: Blending Theory and Practice to Produce Essential Learning Outcomes

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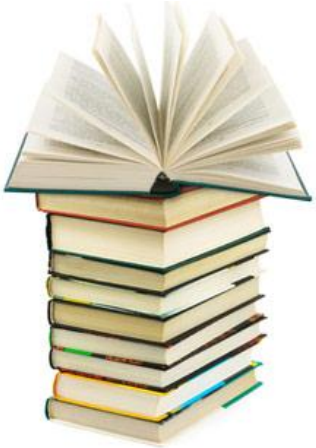

Sometimes we academics are our own worst enemy. At a time when we should be focused on increasing access to quality degree attainment, we continue to derail public confidence by creating false dichotomies and pitting ourselves against each other. This time, it's over the question of "Which Core Matters More?" — the issue du jour and the subject of a Chronicle article on 9-25-11.

The big question: "Should colleges' general-education programs emphasize core skills or a core curriculum?" *Seriously?* Call me progressive, but I thought best practice moved beyond this either-or fallacy nearly 20 years ago.

The teaching philosophy that I wrote for my own tenure and promotion in the mid-nineties proudly noted that I had successfully made the switch from focusing on what I "want to teach" to what students "need to learn."

I knew then what I know now. To be successful in our technologically advanced, global society, students need to be both well-rounded and ready for successful employment. Readying relatively unprepared students for life-long success in our contemporary global environment is not our problem, it's our job.

Some of us do it better, for sure.

Our measurable success rates show this performance difference in retention rates, graduation rates, placement rates. But we don't all start with the same student population, and we don't all have the same specific educational mission, so those often-comparable measures should not be compared out of context.

What we *do* all have in common is the obligation to provide quality education — whatever the students' major or career path. And, we must provide the learning community in which students can achieve the learning outcomes essential for all US citizens (and I paraphrase from the AAC&U): critical and creative thinking skills, written and oral communication skills, teamwork and problem-solving skills, and information literacy, as well as knowledge about our physical and natural world, cultural differences, history, languages, and the arts, plus a sense of ethics, social responsibility, and the motivation to put all of this to action for the greater good.

We have a monumental responsibility. We are building our collective future with every writing assignment, lecture, lab, or experiential learning activity we design.

Despite the fact that the American Council of Trustees and Alumni seems to value the "Great Books," basic-content approach more than other approaches, I don't think we can create essential learning outcomes if we focus primarily on content. Sure, we should expose students to broad and deep levels of content. But they need much, much more from us. And, frankly, they deserve it.

Dozens of high-quality universities like Butler, Northwestern, Drake, even Ivies like Brown and Yale, earned a "C" or worse on the American Council of Trustees and Alumni rating system, in part, because we offer programs like First Year Seminars and "writing across the curriculum" instead of one single course dedicated strictly to composition. Therefore, I think the letter grade says more about the value of the rating system than it does about the quality of education provided at these institutions.

I wish our grade were different, but I can live with it because I know for sure that the repeated expectations to write for various audiences and purposes throughout students' college career will make them better writers.

Our measurable outcomes are outstanding. I don't lose sleep over our retention rates, major field test results, graduation rates, or placement rates.

And I don't lose sleep worrying about whether or not graduates from quality schools are equipped to manage our collective future.

These graduates have learned to know themselves and to respect diverse others, and they can reason, create, analyze, compute, communicate, relate, and produce. They understand the importance of context and history – and, unlike some traditional academics, they also understand how to carry all of this forward into a technologically advanced, globally connected, democratic society.

These students are not "academically adrift"; they have found their own "true north" — it is just that they need not necessarily have found it on pages written by what some students might call "a bunch of dead white guys."

We have important attainment goals to advance. We must stop focusing on traditional definitions of what it means to be "educated"; and we must stop bickering over which core matters most.

What matters most is that our students learn to be intellectually prepared, ethical, productive, socially responsible, democratic citizens in a global society. We need to act in ways that inspire our students to achieve those learning goals. We need to blend theory and application in ways that show that we truly mean it when we say there is nothing quite as practical as a solid liberal arts education.

That's what matters most.