Butler University

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Layering on Learning Helps It Stick

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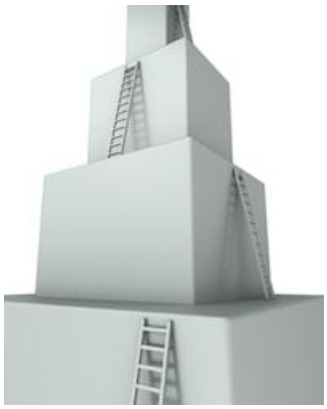

The beginning of a new semester always energizes me. Despite all of the frantic last-minute course preparations and start-of-the semester programming, most academics I know delight in the opportunity to renew their old course plans, launch new course or program ideas, and reinvest in the work we do best — fully engaging students so that they can continue to churn through the transformative process that quality higher education experiences provide.

We are fortunate to have two designated times each academic year when we re-ignite our passions, re-new our collegial relationships, and re-start the ongoing dialogs that go to the back of our minds during semester breaks.

Detaching a bit allows ideas to germinate and interconnect. And that is what happened to my ideas about quality general education over the past few weeks.

I read with great interest Michael Mendillo's January 1 Chronicle commentary on AP credit. And judging by the number of substantive comments that were posted, so did many other people.

The AP credit debate is not what drew my attention. Most institutions I know about have resolved this issue in a way that serves student interests well. We allow students to bring in their AP credits but limit the amount of AP credit that can be used to fulfill requirements; use AP credits for advanced placement in general education or majors but exempt key courses in the curriculum from AP credit substitutions.

To me, Mendillo's more provocative point was to call to question whether high school students are ready to actually pay attention to the broad elements of liberal education and to accept the critical thinking challenges that a strong core curriculum provides.

I really started thinking about this when I was in leadership roles in the School for Professional Studies at Saint Louis University, which provides a blend of liberal arts and professional programs for working adults. With rare exception, the SPS adult students were eager to take their required courses in general education. They invested heavily in the challenges of learning history, literature, ethics, science, and philosophy, as well as honing their writing skills. As you would expect, most were apprehensive about the required math class. But I never had to explain to them the value of a liberal arts education — these working adults understood what they were missing and were hungry for it. And most gobbled it up in a way that made me know it would stick.

On the other hand, it has also been my experience that many (but certainly not all) traditional undergraduates bemoan having to complete their core curriculum requirements. We've all heard it a thousand times. "I'm an **accounting** major, why do I have to take **history**?" (You can fill in the blank with dozens of other examples).

I believe that part of the reason students love to hate their liberal arts requirements is that many institutions conceptualize the liberal arts as “general education” and encourage students to complete their distribution requirements in their first two years so that they can get on to the important coursework in their major.

A better approach — one more likely to produce essential learning outcomes — is to develop a Core Curriculum designed to be taken across the four years of a traditional undergraduate education. The best of these programs begin with a First Year Experience that, among other things, helps students acquire skills that promote learning readiness and success in advanced classes, including information literacy, and college-level competencies in writing, reasoning, and communication.

A strong Core Curriculum also ends with a capstone experience that, whether embedded in the major or not, provides students the opportunity to integrate what they learned from their major course with what they learned from the rest of their academic experience through a culminating learning project.

In between these book-ends, a strong Core Curriculum engages students in big questions and includes courses designed to promote an understanding of the natural and physical world, as well as to achieve self-efficacy, communication competencies across contexts, social responsibility, ethical judgment, critical and reflective thinking, problem-solving skills, cultural awareness and sensitivity, global knowledge, and a hunger for life-long learning.

Getting to this type of core educational experience does not require a large influx of financial resources. A typical core is about 30 credit hours, regardless of the content. What is required is a commitment to the essential learning outcomes and an understanding of the importance of layering on learning, rather than stuffing it into the minds of 18- to 19-year-olds.

As Hutchins and Adler long ago wrote*, youth acquire disciplines and habits that will make it possible for them to continue their education, but people “cannot expect to store up an education in childhood” that will last their entire life.

In the end, both **timing** and **content** are important considerations when designing higher education grounded in the liberal arts. We need to create content with the essential learning outcomes in mind. And we need to create course sequencing — acknowledging that, if we want it to stick, we need to encourage moral reasoning and cognitive complexity to develop in our students over time, as their personal experiences and educational endeavors prepare them to accept self-transformations.

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