

2011

Canons, Curriculums, Numbers

Rebecca Gould, *University of Iowa*

Canons, Curriculums, Numbers

October 17, 2011

By **Rebecca Gould**

Recently, a fellow junior faculty member informed me that she had been asked by a senior colleague not to teach a class that she had signed up to teach a year prior, and which she had been busy developing for the previous several months. Her course drew on media from multiple disciplines in a rarely studied world area. Because she taught in a relatively obscure area, my friend hoped to attract students by reaching out to different disciplines. She only realized that she had overstepped her turf when a senior colleague in one of the disciplines her courses included requested that she not teach the course.

The reason? "You will steal our students," the senior faculty member warned his junior colleague. "We have to be considerate of each other during these times of budget crises and higher enrollment expectations," he added. Simmering inside, but maintaining a polite exterior, my untenured friend agreed to cancel her course so as not to "steal students" from her senior colleague's department.

This anecdote illustrates one effect of high enrollment expectations in public universities across the country: fomenting hostility and resentment across departments. Rather than strategizing across departments to increase enrollments or to channel them in new directions, faculty members threatened with inadequate numbers are commonly expected to take matters into their own hands and to resort to whatever means necessary to find — and keep — students.

Deemed accountable for the number of students in their classrooms and left without administrative means of adjusting this number through course requirements, professors turn against each other, against their departments, and, ultimately, against their mission of teaching, if not quite how to live, then how to think about living, the examined life. Recently at [the State](#)

University of New York at Albany, low enrollments were cited as the rationale for the destruction of programs in French, Italian, classics, Russian and theater. When it was alleged that faculty were unable to sell their product, no attention was paid to the administrative factors preventing faculty from selling their product. The cancellation of these programs at SUNY Albany prompted literary critic and public commentator Stanley Fish to proclaim in *The New York Times* that the crisis in the humanities had officially arrived.

Viewed superficially, the focus on high enrollments that increasingly dominates public — and not only public — institutions of higher education makes good financial sense. The more students, the more tuition dollars flow into the system. The more tuition dollars flow into the system, the more flexibility universities have to expand programs and make new hires. Everyone benefits, it would seem. But viewed from a longer-term perspective, making high enrollments the dominant measure of faculty success without attending to the impact of course distribution requirements on enrollments leads to disaster, financially as well as in other ways.

Prioritizing enrollments ignores the root of the problem, and turns students into consumers of a product they by definition do not fully understand (if students knew all they needed to know, they would have no reason to be at a university). Colleges used to see it as their mission to teach students how to determine what was important in life: to give them not just knowledge, but the critical thinking skills that enable distinctions between the important and the insignificant. This mission necessitated high requirements for the attainment of undergraduate degrees. It also ensured high enrollments in courses that today are viewed by many institutions as expendable. (As in Texas, where half of the physics programs in the state are in danger of being eliminated on grounds of low enrollments.)

At many institutions, rigorous core curriculums used to function, and in some cases still do, as mechanisms to guard against the erosion of humanistic knowledge in liberal arts educations. Here as elsewhere, high enrollments are essential to economic stability, and they should be facilitated by reflexive course distribution requirements. Both Columbia University and the University of Chicago require students to take a series of humanities courses that bridge literature, philosophy, and political thought. When I taught one of these courses as a Columbia graduate student, many entering freshman reported that they chose to attend Columbia on the basis of its core curriculum. Far from scaring student away, Columbia's strong core insured high

student enrollments.

While some faculty members at Columbia and Chicago complain about the contractual requirements that all permanent faculty teach in their university's core, this expectation promotes an equal distribution of labor among the faculty and effectively addresses the low enrollment problems that appear endemic to the liberal arts. Additionally, it ensures the economic viability of all the humanities departments that have a place in the university's core. For students who wish to learn about the civilizations and literatures of the past, there needs to be a structure in place not only to encourage such learning, but to make it mandatory for a degree. In the absence of such requirements, a university is little more than a vocational school. More effectively than team sports or fraternities and sororities, core curriculums create a community among students, who all read and discuss the same texts in their freshman and sophomore years.

In short, enrollments are not facts of nature, or even transparent barometers for undergraduate enthusiasm for or indifference to certain subjects. They are the direct consequence of undergraduate degree and major requirements, of policies that are eminently changeable and should be subject to constant debate and revision. The power to determine who signs up for which courses should not be vested exclusively in the hands of students, who after all are attending colleges and universities in search of intellectual guidance. Neither departments nor faculty should be faulted for attracting students unless the degree requirements that make certain courses more popular, because more necessary for graduating than others, are not similarly placed under critical scrutiny.

The erosion of core curriculums, particularly at public universities, needs to be considered in connection with the increasing importance of high enrollments. Stories abound of courses being canceled in recent years because too few students signed up, and, even worse, of faculty being denied their contractually guaranteed sabbaticals, or being rejected for promotion from associate to full professor, on the basis of their low enrollments. Universities cannot survive without students, so the stress on enrollments, as far as it goes, makes sense. What does not make sense is isolating discussions of student enrollments from the intimately related questions of degree requirements and core curriculums.

Enrollment-based promotional decisions are being made at research universities that had

previously never resorted to such algorithms for measuring the worthiness of disciplines, departments, or individual faculty. When faculty are held exclusively responsible for the empty seats in their classrooms, administrators abdicate their own responsibility to ensure that courses necessary for living the examined life and for furthering the boundaries of human knowledge are valued, or at least supported financially, by the student body. Students cannot be expected to know what kinds of classes they most need before they have even signed up for them. Degree requirements and robust core curriculums are needed to guide students in the right directions.

If the new stress on high enrollments in public education is to be made consistent with the value of liberal arts education, the task of increasing enrollments should be a collaborative effort between administrators and faculty. This job of finding students should not be outsourced to professors exclusively. When the burden of ensuring high enrollments is shouldered onto the faculty, teachers become at once the producers and sellers of knowledge. In worst-case scenarios, faculty are left without administrative support, forced to teach only those courses that sell, and denied access to the administrative means of making their courses count towards degree requirements.

There is nothing new in the logical need to ensure high enrollments in every course. What is new is the disappearance of an administrative support system for keeping enrollments high through rigorous humanities distribution requirements and core curriculums. If students were required to take courses in literature, premodern history, and non-European civilizations, in cultures and world regions they might otherwise not be able to locate on a map, faculty's mandate to maintain high enrollments would be fully compatible with their even more important task of teaching the examined life.

A revival of the core across American public universities — perhaps with each university working in collaboration with its peers to streamline a humanities-based core — would effectively address the enrollment problem that is frequently at present currently outsourced to faculty and thus left entirely to students' discretion, even as teachers are deprived of the ability to actively intervene into the system, and to ensure through course requirements that the humanities flourish at higher institutions of education of the future.

The need to restructure core curricula is not limited to public universities. Both public and

private universities continue to overwhelmingly privilege European intellectual and literary traditions in their core, with Homer and Ovid, Augustine and Benjamin Franklin, topping the required reading lists, and, even more troublingly, deemed to constitute a single homogeneous and foundational canon of "Western" civilization. Such homogeneity neglects the fact that Homer's geographical provenance was Asia Minor and Augustine was born in Africa.

Columbia's [Global Core](#) requirement that requires students to take two classes engaging with the "variety of civilizations and the diversity of traditions that, along with the West, have formed the world and continue to interact in it today" is a step in the right direction. But, when compared to Columbia's more rigorous requirements for courses in European traditions, the imbalance between the administrative support for undergraduate study of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East on the one hand and American and European civilization on the other is still starkly apparent.

This imbalance between the support for European legacies and for global knowledge means that it would be retrograde to argue for a return to an age when students were required to study Greek and Latin in order to receive their degrees, and when these were the only classical languages they were able to study or which would help them in their paths towards graduation. The change that is needed is two-pronged, with the first prong reaching into our diverse pasts and the second reaching into our global futures.

This may mean adopting a flexible core, along the lines of what [Dan Edelstein](#) has described at Stanford University. We have much to learn from an age when university requirements guaranteed that humanities courses would be valued, and where student choice alone did not determine what faculty were allowed or encouraged to teach. But we need to transform the obsolete curriculums made normative by prestigious and non-prestigious universities alike, which propagated Euro-American exceptionalism while doing little to instill in students an awareness of the world's diversity or to infect them with enthusiasm for the relevance of the humanisms of all cultures to their responsibilities as citizens of the world.

A core curriculum that is accountable to the world, and not just to American or European civilization, that reaches out to students while requiring them to answer to the highest intellectual standards, is both feasible and necessary at any public or private institution. The needful changes will take courage and imagination to implement, but they could not be timelier. A revised core is also the best solution, intellectually and economically, to the fear of numbers that has come to

dominate higher education, and that has made it all the more likely that students will walk away from the podiums where they receive their diplomas never having internalized the Socratic maxim that the unexamined life is not worth living. In the absence of such changes, one fears that faculty who have lost their ability to communicate the intrinsic value of the pursuit of knowledge to their students will also lose the ability to communicate this maxim to themselves.

Rebecca Gould is assistant professor of literatures of the Caucasus and the Islamic world at the University of Iowa.