

Without a core, what's point of college education?

RALEIGH — With college tuitions continuing to increase and often exceeding the cost of a new car, many parents and students are wondering what they're getting for their money.



Jenna Ashley Robinson

Here in North Carolina, as in other states, it depends on the school. But as a general rule, many students are not getting enough.

While all North Carolina colleges and universities say they require undergraduates to take courses in such core subjects as English composition, mathematics, and science, a survey we recently conducted with the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) found only two colleges in the state — one a state school, the other private — that require undergraduates to study economics and only two others, both private, that require courses in U.S. government or history.

The survey analyzed course requirements in seven core subject areas at 48 of the 54 accredited baccalaureate colleges and universities in our state. Six schools were not included in the survey because they don't offer liberal arts degrees, are primarily technical schools, or because insufficient data were available. For-profit colleges also were excluded.

The core subject areas are composition, economics, for-

eign language, literature, mathematics, science and U.S. history or government.

The data were compiled and analyzed by ACTA and are included in its growing "What Will They Learn?" database. This database, which currently includes information on more 750 colleges and universities around the country, focuses not on the schools' reputations or ratings, but on what students are required to study.

In North Carolina, as elsewhere, what students are required to learn depends on the college.

The survey found just one school — Wingate University in Union County, near Charlotte — that requires students to take courses in six of the seven core subject areas, earning Wingate top honors in the survey, a grade of "A." At the other end of the spectrum, Guilford College in Greensboro was the only school to require courses in just one core subject: composition.

Interestingly, we found that most of North Carolina's public universities have core requirements at least as rigorous as our state's private schools.

Overall, some 22 North Carolina colleges and universities received grades of "B" in the survey, denoting required courses in four or five of the seven core subjects. The 22 schools included nine of the 16 universities in the state system: UNC Asheville, UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC Greensboro,

UNC Pembroke, East Carolina University, Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina Central, North Carolina State and Winston-Salem State University.

Eighteen North Carolina colleges and universities received grades of "C" in the survey, denoting three required core subjects; and six received Ds, denoting just two core requirements. Of the 18 schools receiving Cs, three were public universities: UNC Charlotte, Fayetteville State and UNC Wilmington. Of the six receiving Ds, two were state schools: Appalachian State and Western Carolina.

There is more, of course, to a high-value education than the courses students are required to take. There is the quality of the instruction. Facilities can matter and so can a host of other factors, such as whether students have opportunities to participate in research and whether diverse opinions are welcome on campus.

If you really want to know what students will learn, however, surveys like this are a good place to start.

Even art majors will someday become taxpayers. Some may even become gallery owners or museum administrators. Wouldn't it be useful for them to know something about economics?

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