

THE BUFFALO NEWS

By **MICHAEL POLIAKOFF** | October 23, 2011

Make college count with a solid curriculum

Could a college diploma be a “ticket to nowhere”? Sad to say, but that’s exactly what the time, expense and dream could amount to for way too many of our nation’s college students.

At Vanderbilt University, a course called “Country Music” can serve as the only collegiate history course a student takes.

At Vassar College, a class that studies “Sex and the City,” “The Devil Wears Prada” and “Gossip Girls” can count as a student’s foundation in English composition. According to this year’s freshman handbook, the course will spark “sophisticated conversations” and introduce “students to critical reading and persuasive writing.” Incredible, but true.

Solid core requirements are increasingly falling by the wayside as the “do-as-you-please” model chips away at the basics. When 18-year-old first-year students are left to construct their own curriculum, they’re often left with a haphazard smattering of unrelated classes, leading to an education with gaping holes in it.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni has been sounding this warning for the past two years with its “What Will They Learn?” college ratings; and the release of our 2011-2012 edition, covering 1,007 colleges and universities, is grim:

Even as our economy jolts and sputters, only 5 percent of schools have an economics requirement. Barely 15 percent require intermediate-level foreign language, even in today’s globalized society. Less than one-fifth of colleges and universities require a basic course in U. S. government or history. Little more than

one-third require a literature survey. More than a third fail to require a college-level math course, and there is even a hard-core 16 percent that lack a rigorous writing course.

The damage is all too real and it shows. Forty-five percent of students failed to show significant improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills in their first two years at college, according to a study by New York University professor Richard Arum. After four full years of college, 36 percent didn’t show any significant improvement whatsoever.

And employers are noticing. Almost 90 percent of employers believe that institutions need to increase the quality of student achievement for the United States to remain competitive in the global market, according to a study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills survey found that less than a quarter of employers deemed the entry-level skills of four-year college graduates excellent, and more than a quarter called their writing skills deficient. Not a lot of bang for that tuition buck.

A diploma should be more than a receipt for tens of thousands of dollars of supposed education. A diploma should tell employers that the bearer is knowledgeable in basic math and science, has a sophisticated grasp of writing and knows what makes our free society tick.

Federal and state governments spend tens of billions of dollars on education every year—money that comes from the paychecks of hard-working Americans. And higher education costs are rising rapidly, with

no end in sight. As a society, we value education. But if Americans are paying billions of dollars toward education, shouldn’t they be getting some sort of return on investment, in the form of well-educated graduates?

In the council’s “What Will They Learn?” study, schools are graded “A” through “F” depending on how many fundamental subjects they require of all students. Nearly 30 percent of the schools get a “D” or an “F,” meaning they require two or fewer of the seven core curriculum subjects examined in the study. Another third get a “C” for requiring three courses. The findings, in a word, correlate with trends we are seeing among today’s college graduates: diplomas built on a faulty curriculum and that lead nowhere.

Of the 78 New York institutions in the study, only two—the U. S. Military Academy in West Point and CUNY Brooklyn—earn an “A” for requiring at least six of the core courses. Fifteen earn an “F” for requiring one or fewer of the core classes. Fine schools otherwise, perhaps, but on average, they require less than three of those crucial seven subjects.

This isn’t good enough for the 470,000 students enrolled in those New York colleges and universities. The council’s ratings are available at www.whatwilltheylearn.com.

The desire for a responsible college curriculum runs strong among citizens, as findings from a nationwide Roper study this summer show. Seventy percent said colleges should require all students to take basic classes in core subjects. Fifty-seven percent believe that colleges are doing only a “fair or poor” job of pre-

paring students for the job market.

Perhaps saddest and most dangerous of all is the absence of interest in basic understanding of America. When Roper surveyed college seniors at elite universities some 10 years ago, only 22 percent knew that the phrase “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” was from the Gettysburg Address, and only 30 percent could identify the Voting Rights Act as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society Program.

The Father of the Constitution, James Madison, wrote, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

But don’t ask college seniors who the Father of the Constitution is—77 percent don’t know much about that.

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