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By **DANIEL DE VISE** | November 21, 2010

College ratings ignites debate over core requirements

Johns Hopkins University is America's premier research institution. Yet a student could complete a bachelor's degree here without ever taking a course in science. Or math. Or history. Or English.

Students at Johns Hopkins—and many other prestigious colleges—choose classes the way a diner patron assembles a meal, selecting items from a vast menu. Broad distribution requirements ensure that students explore the academic universe outside their majors. But no one is required to study any particular field, let alone take a specific course. Shakespeare, Plato, Euclid—all are on the menu; none is required.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a Washington-based advocacy group, handed out F grades in August to Hopkins and many of its peers, inviting debate on a basic question: What, if anything, should America's college students be required to learn?

The group faulted the schools, including Yale, Brown, Cornell, Amherst and the University of California at Berkeley, for failing to require students to take courses in more than one of seven core academic subjects: math, science, history, economics, foreign language, literature and composition.

"At Stanford, you can fulfill the American cultures requirement by taking a class on a Japanese drum," said Anne Neal, president of the trustees group.

"We're certainly not saying that Harvard or Hopkins or Yale are not good schools, or that their graduates are not smart kids," said Neal, who attended Harvard and Harvard Law. "What we're saying is that those

schools don't do a good job at providing their students with a coherent core."

Some higher education leaders say Neal misses the mark. The point of a college education is to teach students to think, solve problems and change the world, they say, not to download a compendium of facts.

Brown University's New Curriculum, liberated from the strictures of general education in the 1960s, was "designed to produce independent, creative thinkers who will make a difference in the world," said Katherine Bergeron, dean of the college at Brown.

Brown is an outlier. Most colleges do expect their students to learn certain material, a priority reflected in nearly universal requirements that students take courses in several broad academic categories.

Yet many deans acknowledge that the system is flawed. Curriculum decisions are intensely political. Any attempt to list "fundamental" courses or texts will elicit howls of outrage from departments that are passed over.

"No one wants to be left out," said Harry Lewis, a Harvard professor and former dean of its college.

The old school way

It wasn't always this way. College faculties taught from the same, fairly static list of Western scholars until the late 1800s, when the American research university took shape and students began to choose their own majors.

A wave of immigrants in the early 1900s prompted a return to "core" academic programs that surveyed

the Western intellectual tradition for students who hadn't learned it in high school. The academic freedom movement of the 1960s set off another pendulum swing.

Today, only a handful of national universities require students to survey the span of human knowledge. Two schools, Columbia University and the University of Chicago, are known for century-old core programs that have managed to survive. They cover enough subjects to earn each institution a B from the advocates of general education.

"If you tried to start a core curriculum today, the battles you'd fight would have to be enormous," said John Boyer, dean of the college at Chicago. "Once you have it, you don't want to lose it, because it's very hard to get it back again."

More extreme is the "great books" approach of St. John's College in Annapolis, where students follow a four-year syllabus of essential texts. St. John's campuses in Maryland and New Mexico are two of 17 colleges that receive an A in general education.

St. John's students emerge with a working knowledge of ancient Greek and a foundation in the classics, a skill set that defined an "educated man" two centuries ago.

"They are perfectly capable of coming up to someone at a cocktail party and talking about their soul," said Eva Brann, a senior faculty member.

But the great books model is at odds with the structures of research universities, whose faculties succeed by cultivating academic specialties.

Even liberal arts schools, whose faculty are theoretically supposed to

focus on teaching, are caught in the “centrifugal forces” of specialization when they hire faculty from doctoral programs at research universities, Lewis said.

Ratings criticized

Within the higher education establishment, the new A-to-F ratings have not been warmly received. Many scholars mistrust the group behind them, founded in the mid-1990s by a group including conservative activist Lynne Cheney, partly as a foil to collegiate liberalism. Even supporters cannot agree whether the raters have chosen the right way to measure general education.

But the idea behind the ratings has broad appeal.

“I think the criticism that students may not be learning enough in general education resonates with most colleges,” said Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges in Washington.

Ekman contends that Neal’s group overstates the problem. Most general-education course lists, he said, require students to choose among “highly specified courses”—a student who doesn’t read Shakespeare will “be taking Milton or Chaucer instead, which isn’t bad.”

Neal says the group’s examination of more than 700 college catalogs proves otherwise. “It is quite possible to avoid American history,

or Plato or science,” she said. “Many colleges don’t even require their English majors to take a course on Shakespeare.”

The schools awarded “A” grades by the raters are an unusual bunch: highly structured military academies, a few public universities with unusually deep general-education lists (the University of Texas at Austin), tradition-minded Christian institutions (Baylor University) and the “great books” schools. All require at least six of the seven “essential” subjects.

Harvard, meanwhile, got a D. Only a few of the nation’s top national universities and liberal arts schools fared better. Not by coincidence, the group released its ratings—expanding on a smaller effort a year earlier—to coincide with the popular college rankings from *U.S. News & World Report*.

Georgetown University received a D for requiring just two of the seven prescribed subjects, composition and foreign language. The College of William and Mary, which requires foreign language, math and science, drew a C.

Hopkins students must complete 30 credit hours outside their major. To guarantee academic balance, a humanities major must take at least 12 credits—roughly four courses—in math, science or engineering. A math major must take 18 credits in humanities or social science. It would be difficult, but not impossi-

ble, for a humanities major to satisfy the distribution rules while avoiding natural science entirely.

“Everything we teach constitutes ‘essential human knowledge,’” said Katherine Newman, dean of the university’s college of arts and sciences, “but that’s a huge range of territory, and we encourage students to make some serious choices about what they specialize in.”

Chung-Ha Davis, a senior science major from Brandon, Fla., acknowledges that his Hopkins education has left “some gaps in my knowledge, where people say there shouldn’t be a gap if you’ve had a university education.”

He says he has traded breadth for depth.

“If you want to go somewhere in life,” he said, “you’ve got to pick one thing and get really good at it.”

Bruce Marsh, a professor in the earth and planetary sciences department, said he wishes all Hopkins students got a firm foundation in collegiate science.

Marsh does his part. Students sign up for “Guided Tour: The Planets” expecting Star Trek. What they get is a dose of the scientific rigor for which Hopkins is known.

“We have to kind of seduce them into these classes,” Marsh said. “We kind of sweet-talk them until they’re beyond the add-drop period. And then we put it to them that they have to know what the hell a planet is.”