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By **DANIEL DE VISE** | **College Inc.** | November 22, 2010

Some area schools rate well in general education

In a story that published Sunday, I examined a new set of college ratings that attempt to measure how well universities do in providing a general education. By that I mean ensuring students learn essential knowledge and skills in math, science, literature and composition, foreign language, history and economics.

Many interviews with elite universities and their critics pointed to two main conclusions.

First, no one is particularly happy with the general education system. Colleges that attempt to make a list of essential courses—or even disciplines—risk getting shouted down by the departments that are left out.

Second, no one can agree on a practical definition of general education. Schools that require students to take each of the seven subjects cited in the “What Will They Learn?” database earn A’s. But students at most of those schools can still avoid essential knowledge if they seek out obscure or eccentric courses. Many admire the core programs assembled at Columbia University and the University of Chicago, which dictate a portion of each student’s education. But the St. John’s College model, which dictates all of it, is clearly not for everyone.

One thing I neglected to do, and have been reminded about by several readers, is to tell how our many local universities fared in the general education ratings. I define “local” here as the District, Virginia and Maryland.

Here, then, is a sampling of local universities as measured in the gen-ed ratings. Don’t see your alma mater? Search for the school here.

“A” schools

St. John’s College, Annapolis

The “great books” school is one of just 17 colleges awarded A grades for requiring at least six of seven subjects measured in “What Will They Learn?”: math, science, composition, foreign language, economics, history and literature. St. John’s doesn’t actually have gen-ed requirements per se. Instead, all students read the same stack of essential books and learn the same languages, including Ancient Greek. The books include works in most of the subjects covered in the ratings.

“B” schools

University of the District of Columbia

As a public institution serving students with severe academic deficits, UDC has general education requirements that mirror the graduation requirements of a high school. Math, science, composition and literature all are required.

U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis

The service academy weds a fairly prescriptive list of core disciplines to the elective structure of a “civilian” university. Requirements include composition, literature, science, math and history.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County

UMBC, a math-science powerhouse, has unusually lengthy and specific gen-ed requirements. Math, science, foreign language and composition are all required.

George Mason University, Fairfax

Mason’s “foundation requirements” emphasize “skills—in writing, speaking and working

with numbers and technology—that can be applied to any major field of study and career goal.” They require math, science, foreign language and composition.

Hampden-Sydney College, Hampden Sydney, Va.

This liberal arts school has a long tradition of core requirements that cover five of the seven items on the “What Will They Learn?” list.

Other “B” schools

Bowie State University, Bowie; Coppin State University, Baltimore; Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Va.; James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Va.; Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, Va.; Stevenson University, Stevenson, Md.; Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Va.; Virginia State University, Petersburg, Va.; Washington & Lee University, Lexington, Va.

“C” schools

American, Catholic, Howard and George Washington universities, Washington; College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va.; University of Maryland, College Park; University of Richmond; Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Va.

“D” schools

Georgetown University, Washington; St. Mary’s College of Maryland, St. Mary’s City; Towson University, Towson, Md.; University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Va.; University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

“F” schools

Frostburg State University, Frostburg, Md; Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.; Washington College, Chestertown, Md.