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Three-fifths of colleges get C or worse in general education

An analysis of core education requirements at 1,007 colleges found that three-fifths of those schools require three or fewer of seven basic subjects, such as science, math and foreign language.

This is the third annual report on general education by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, titled *What Will They Learn?* The group has set out to illustrate the failings of America's colleges in requiring students to learn essential subjects over the course of their education.

Most colleges allow students to study pretty much what they please. Schools make some effort to guide course choices through a system of "distribution requirements," which typically state that students must take a certain number of classes in each of several broad areas of study.

But the general education system is deeply flawed, as higher education leaders openly admit. Very few schools come close to requiring that students learn any particular topic or work, for political reasons. Colleges are made up of competing academic departments and no department wants to be left off any list of "required" study.

Advocates of general education contend students should not be allowed to complete college without learning some amount of

essential knowledge. One approach would be to teach essential texts, as favored by the great books scholars at St. John's College. Another is to cover essential subjects, such as math, science, foreign language, composition, the fundamentals of U.S. history, economics, literature and composition.

ACTA reviews course requirements annually to see how many of those seven subjects are required at prestigious universities. This year's study reached every major private and public university in the land, according to the authors.

The report found that only 5 percent of colleges studied required economics as a field of study, while about one-fifth required U.S. government or history and 15 percent required intermediate-level foreign language.

College presidents typically dismiss this annual report as arbitrary and silly—even schools with core curricula don't necessarily require study of all seven subjects. But many in academia acknowledge that the broader complaint about general education is valid.

The analysis found only 19 schools that required six or more of the seven subjects. They include three military academies (though not the U.S. Naval Academy, which had to settle for a B) and a number of historically black institutions.

A schools include St. John's, Pepperdine University, Morehouse College, the University of Georgia and a number of Texas institutions, including Texas A&M.

Locally, nearly every D.C. university received a C. Johns Hopkins in Maryland, which received an F last year, raised its grade to D. Reading the fine print, I believe they got partial credit this year for requiring math *or* science, but not both. The University of Maryland got a D. James Madison and George Mason universities both earned Bs. The University of Virginia got a D.

Public institutions generally fared a bit better than private ones in the report: 12 percent of private colleges studied received F grades, but only 5 percent of public colleges.

Does anyone care?

Well, yes, according to the report's authors. They commissioned a Roper survey this year. It found 70 percent of respondents believe colleges should require students to take "basic classes in core subjects," according to a release. An even higher share of young adults, 80 percent, shared that sentiment.

More than half of respondents said they were surprised that many colleges do not require study of the basic subjects studied by ACTA.