



## Fragmenting the Curriculum

Daniel Bonevac

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Faculty members rarely pay much attention to course offerings outside their own fields. A few years ago, however, a colleague and I looked over our university’s course schedule in a more comprehensive way. What struck us was not the politicization of some courses—though that is real, and has become more widespread<sup>1</sup>—but the fragmentation of the curriculum. There are still introductory survey courses, and there are still the kinds of courses—on Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Kant, and other central thinkers, for example—that used to form the bulk of university education. But it isn’t always easy to find them. The vast majority of courses, even at introductory levels, are more specific, narrowly tailored to fit a faculty member’s research interests rather than an undergraduate student’s needs.<sup>2</sup>

Survey courses, in particular, used to constitute the heart of a college education. No matter what majors students might choose, they were bound to encounter the core, foundational texts of a variety of central disciplines, and of Western Civilization itself. Some survey courses introduced students to

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Stephen H. Balch, “Report to the Select Committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives,” November 9, 2005, National Association of Scholars, [https://www.nas.org/images/documents/report\\_to\\_the\\_select\\_committee.pdf](https://www.nas.org/images/documents/report_to_the_select_committee.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>The number of courses offered in the humanities and social sciences has exploded, so that the percentage reflecting central areas of disciplines has shrunk. See Stephen H. Balch and Rita C. Zurcher, *The Dissolution of General Education: 1914–1993*, National Association of Scholars, [https://www.nas.org/images/documents/report\\_the\\_dissolution\\_of\\_general\\_education\\_1914\\_1993.pdf](https://www.nas.org/images/documents/report_the_dissolution_of_general_education_1914_1993.pdf), 11–12. A stress on interdisciplinary work and cross-listed courses contributes to this trend. See Peter Wood and Michael Toscano, *What Does Bowdoin Teach? How a Contemporary Liberal Arts College Shapes Students*, National Association of Scholars, [https://www.nas.org/images/documents/What\\_Does\\_Bowdoin\\_Teach.pdf](https://www.nas.org/images/documents/What_Does_Bowdoin_Teach.pdf), 63–67

**Daniel Bonevac** is professor of philosophy at the University of Texas–Austin; [bonevac@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:bonevac@austin.utexas.edu). His book *Reduction in the Abstract Sciences* received the Johnsonian Prize from *The Journal of Philosophy*. The author of five books and editor or co-editor of four others, Professor Bonevac has published numerous articles and served as chair of the Department of Philosophy at UT–Austin from 1991 to 2001.

disciplines such as physics, psychology, economics, philosophy, and English literature, exposing them to writers and topics the faculty thought essential grounding for further work in the field. Others, such as Western “civ” and various humanities courses, drew on several fields to introduce broad themes central to the human condition.

These courses had their drawbacks; they were broad enough in scope that they could not explore any one topic in great depth. They could be slow to change in response to new discoveries and developments. But they exposed students to great texts and great ideas, to central problems and methods, preparing and inspiring them to further study and giving them a cultural and intellectual literacy that enabled them to be intelligent observers even of fields they would not pursue.

Readers of this journal probably know that Western Civilization and other broad interdisciplinary humanities courses have almost disappeared. They were almost universally required in 1964; usually available, but no longer required in 1989, and only rarely available by 2010.<sup>3</sup> Less well known is the dwindling of traditional survey courses in particular disciplines. They have not disappeared. Many colleges and universities still teach Introduction to Psychology, Introduction to Philosophy, and other introductory survey courses. But only rarely are they required as prerequisites for other more specialized courses. Alternative introductory-level courses, moreover, have proliferated. At some institutions they have crowded out traditional surveys almost completely. Increasingly, moreover, they satisfy basic education requirements. The result: many students emerge without much exposure to any discipline outside their majors, having studied only narrow slices of them. Even within the major, students often glimpse a series of snapshots, missing the big picture.<sup>4</sup>

## Gerrymandered Requirements

Over the past two decades, colleges have been moving away from traditional distribution requirements defined by broad areas—arts and humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences—toward requirements

<sup>3</sup>Glenn Ricketts, Peter W. Wood, Stephen H. Balch, and Ashley Thorne, *The Vanishing West: 1964–2010: The Disappearance of Western Civilization from the American Undergraduate Curriculum*, National Association of Scholars, (May, 2011), <https://www.nas.org/images/documents/TheVanishingWest.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>This trend began in the 1970s and reached full flower in the 1990s. See Stephen H. Balch and Gary Crosby Brasor, *Losing the Big Picture: The Fragmentation of the English Major since 1964*, National Association of Scholars, (2000), [https://www.nas.org/images/documents/report\\_losing\\_the\\_big\\_picture.pdf](https://www.nas.org/images/documents/report_losing_the_big_picture.pdf)

defined, in theory, by intellectual skills. For the past decade, Harvard students have had an extensive set of general education requirements, taking a course in each of these areas, at least one of which must include “Study of the Past”:

1. Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding
2. Culture and Belief
3. Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning
4. Ethical Reasoning
5. Science of Living Systems
6. Science of the Physical Universe
7. Societies of the World
8. United States in the World

In fall 2018, eight courses satisfied the first of these, Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding. Only the first three approximate traditional survey courses:

Modern Art and Modernity  
 Shakespeare, the Early Plays  
 Elements of Rhetoric  
 Anime as Global Popular Culture  
 California in the 60s  
 Literature and Medicine  
 Nazi Cinema: The Art of Propaganda  
 Monuments of Islamic Architecture

The Ethical Reasoning Options for that semester:

Classical Chinese Ethical and Political Theory  
 What is a Republic?  
 Adam and Eve  
 Money, Markets, and Morals  
 Political Justice and Political Trials

For United States and the World:

The World’s Religions in Multicultural America  
 American Society and Public Policy  
 Dilemmas of Equity and Excellence in American K-12 Education

Surely it's different for Science of the Physical Universe? Maybe not:

The Climate-Energy Challenge

Science and Cooking: From Haute Cuisine to Soft Matter Science

Finding Our Way

How to Build a Habitable Planet

I don't mean to criticize any of these courses. Many of them sound fascinating. But few are anything like traditional survey courses. How much of a background in literature and art does a student get from Anime as Global Popular Culture? How much of ethics does a student absorb in Political Justice and Political Trials?

Princeton has a similar list of distribution requirements:

1. Epistemology and Cognition
2. Ethical Thought and Moral Values
3. Historical Analysis
4. Literature and the Arts (two courses)
5. Quantitative Reasoning
6. Science and Technology (two courses)
7. Social Analysis (two courses)

Epistemology and Cognition courses include, in addition to courses one might expect on cognitive psychology and the theory of knowledge:

African American Studies and the Philosophy of Race

America Then and Now

Language, Identity, Power

Sensory Anthropology

Theoretical Orientations in Cultural Anthropology: Conspiracy Theory and Social Theory

Empire of the Ark: The Animal Question in Film, Photography and Popular Culture

Mythbusting Language

Intonation: Melody in Language

My own university's requirements are even more gerrymandered to fit faculty interests. Our "flag" requirements, which supplement other distribution

requirements, are Quantitative Reasoning, Cultural Diversity in the United States, Global Cultures, Ethics, and Independent Inquiry. Lower-division (i.e., freshman/sophomore level) courses satisfying the Cultural Diversity requirement include:

- Introduction to Asian American Studies
- Immigration and Ethnicity
- Asian American Creative Arts
- Introduction to Black Studies
- Black Queer Art Worlds
- Music of African Americans
- Ethnicity and Gender: La Chicana
- Mexican American Literature and Culture
- Gay and Lesbian Literature and Culture
- Women, Gender, Literature, and Culture
- History of Mexican Americans in the US
- Racial Linguistics
- Latinx Health/Disease Studies
- History of Rock Music
- Introduction to Hip-Hop

For Ethics, they include, in addition to some surveys such as Issues and Policies in American Government, Constitutional Principles, Introduction to Ethics, Introduction to Psychology (?), British Literature (??), and Elementary Statistical Methods (???):

- Introduction to Black Studies
- Introduction to Jewish Latin America
- Introduction to Classical Mythology
- Classical Archaeology: Methods and Approaches
- Ethical Foundations of Computer Science
- Professional Communication Skills
- Environmental Science: A Changing World
- Creating a Sustainable Society
- Introduction to Health Promotion
- Social Entrepreneurship in China
- Humans and a Changing Ocean
- Music and Culture
- How to Change the World

## The Doctor-Patient Relationship Scientific Inquiry: Inspiration

This list brings out a feature of skills-based requirements at many universities: In practice, they make little intellectual or educational sense. They are not only “broad and nearly formless,” “catchalls for a vast array of only distantly related courses”; they are utterly incoherent.<sup>5</sup> One could examine the lists of courses satisfying a requirement and have little idea what the requirement was supposed to be about. Our department (Philosophy) had to fight for years to add Ethical Theories to our university’s Ethics list—a list so selective that it includes Classical Archaeology and Elementary Statistical Methods. No one understands the criteria by which courses on the lists are chosen. They seem to reflect rent-seeking on the part of faculty, who are designing courses in their own interests rather than seeking to fulfill coherent educational and intellectual objectives.

Not all universities have replaced or supplemented traditional distribution requirements. Yale University is admirably traditional—two courses in each of arts and humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and quantitative reasoning—and its course offerings in many disciplines still center on surveys of central areas. This isn’t universal—first-year History offerings include History of Food and Cuisine, Fashion in London and Paris, and a History of Modern London—but the default at Yale still seems broad and student-centered.

There are other promising signs. Harvard’s replacement of its current structure may signal an emerging sense that the fragmentation of the curriculum has gone too far. Several colleagues and I created the Thomas Jefferson Center for Core Texts and Ideas which has among its lower-division offerings this semester such courses as:

Introduction to Ancient Greece  
Classics of Social and Political Thought  
Judaism, Christianity, Islam  
The Bible and Its Interpreters  
Ancient Philosophy  
History of Religions of Asia  
Rise of Christianity  
Western Civilization in Modern Times

<sup>5</sup>Balch and Zurcher, 5.

Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion  
Constitutional Principles: Core Texts  
Reacting to the Past  
Early Modern Philosophy  
Justice, Liberty, Happiness

Programs such as this enable faculty to teach broad, interdisciplinary survey courses of the kind that used to be commonplace but have largely died out.

Each fall I teach a course called Ideas of the Twentieth Century under the rubric of our first year signature courses. It is a broad, old-style humanities course that combines perspectives from philosophy, literature, history, and the arts, including readings from Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Shaw, Kipling, Eliot, Yeats, Fitzgerald, Freud, Christie, Camus, Borges, Lewis, Hayek, Bellow, Murdoch, Didion, Rawls, Nozick, and Solzhenitsyn. Harvard has Humanities Colloquium courses:

From Homer to García Márquez: Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Sappho, Murasaki, Bernal Díaz, Shakespeare, Douglass, Du Bois, Woolf, García Márquez, the Declaration of Independence, and The Federalist Papers

From Joyce to Homer: Joyce, Nietzsche, Mary Shelley, Austen, Pascal, Marguerite de Navarre, Dante, Augustine, Sophocles, Homer, and the Arabian Nights

At many universities, courses like these no longer fit within departmental structures. Departments usually list courses under their heading only if a certain percentage of their content falls clearly within that discipline, and broad humanities courses easily fail such criteria. But many universities have programs that allow faculty the freedom to teach interdisciplinary courses of this kind. Texas has Humanities, Liberal Arts Honors, and the Plan II Honors Program, as well as Core Texts and Ideas and the signature course program. Harvard has GenEd and Humanities. Faculty need to find and develop others.

### **No Prerequisite**

In part contributing to the proliferation of narrowly defined courses, and in part resulting from it, is the abandonment of prerequisites. Courses without listed prerequisites have grown from six percent of the curriculum in 1939 to seventeen

percent in 1964, forty-one percent in 1993, and a much higher percentage today.<sup>6</sup> In my own department, for example, only five percent of undergraduate courses have specific course prerequisites. Twenty-two percent require a certain number of previously completed philosophy courses without specifying any courses in particular. Seventy-two percent have no prerequisite at all.

In the sciences, prerequisites are alive and well; students have to take Algebraic Structures I before taking Algebraic Structures II. They have to take Computer Organization and Architecture before taking Automata Theory, Neural Networks, Robotics, or Software Engineering. The structured nature of the curriculum limits the number of students who can take more advanced courses, but it makes it possible for those courses to exist. Students can go further and deeper into a subject because they come in with the needed conceptual tools. Courses that have to start from ground zero, assuming no background, have to spend much of their time teaching basic concepts and methods.

Few courses in the humanities, however, have prerequisites. Students do not have to take Introduction to Philosophy before taking higher-level philosophy courses. The quality of higher-level courses suffers as a result. The professor has to spend a large portion of class time teaching students what they need to begin studying the subject, leaving little time for the subject itself, or teach the subject to a group of students who struggle to understand the issues. The more theoretical the subject, the worse the problem becomes.

I am surely not the only faculty member who finds teaching upper-level courses disappointing. Skepticism, The Analytic Tradition, Objectivity—I love the subject matter, and could be said to teach them well if “teach” were an intransitive verb. But few of my students have the background to study those topics. Courses on ethics work better; the issues are more practical and intuitive, and work in those areas presupposes less conceptual machinery.

My one real disaster in teaching illustrates the problem nicely. I once taught a senior seminar for philosophy majors on John Stuart Mill’s *A System of Logic*, one of the great works of the empiricist tradition. The book covers much more than logic; it lays out Mill’s theory of knowledge, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language. It also provides the philosophical foundation for his utilitarianism. I interpreted the work as Mill’s answer to Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, offering a directly referential theory of language, a sophisticated view of scientific method, a theory of inductive inference, and a consequentialist theory of value in response to Hume’s skeptical challenges. Students displayed no interest in any of

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<sup>6</sup>Balch and Zurcher, 13–14.



it. It was not until almost halfway through the term that I found out why: they had never read Locke or Hume! They had no idea who they were. Only a few had even taken Introduction to Philosophy. And these were senior philosophy majors!

This problem is not new. The war on prerequisites began fifty years ago. In my first semester in college I was able to enroll in two senior seminars—one on James Joyce and one on Virgil's *Bucolics* and *Georgics*. (I did well in the former, but was hopelessly over my head in the latter.) Even so, almost everyone back then, by convention or by regulation, started studying a subject by taking a comprehensive survey course. Almost everyone in more advanced courses knew the basics.

That is no longer true. How well prepared will students be to take Romantic Poetry or The Development of the Novel if their only background in college-level literature is California in the 60s? How are students going to do in Cognitive Psychology or Skepticism if their only relevant background is Empire of the Ark: The Animal Question in Film, Photography and Popular Culture? In my own department: how well prepared are students to take a senior seminar in Sellars, Rorty, and Brandom if their only background is Human Nature, Contemporary Moral Problems, and Philosophy and Film?

In short, gerrymandered requirements, narrow course offerings, and a lack of prerequisites combine in pernicious ways. Few students emerge with an education as broad or as deep as was common a generation ago. They experience little more than a series of disconnected vignettes.

### **Distorted Disciplines**

Gerrymandered requirements, narrow course offerings, and the absence of prerequisites create another problem. They distort student choices, pushing students into courses they would not otherwise take. They also distort department course offerings, leading departments to place their own resources where they would not otherwise put them. Required courses occupy a significant portion of students' schedules, leaving fewer opportunities for students to take courses that they and the faculty consider more important.

My university's current set of requirements, for example, have led to large enrollments in our Introduction to the Philosophy of the Arts course and a steep drop in enrollments in Introduction to Philosophy, Introduction to Ethics, and Introduction to Logic. Do we think that aesthetics is more important than logic, ethics, or a historical overview of philosophy as a whole? No. Neither do our students. But the requirements encourage aesthetics and discourage other areas. At Princeton, similarly, course requirements push students toward ethics and epistemology—and, inevitably, away from metaphysics, logic, and history of

philosophy. Requirements for courses in Global Studies, Cultural Diversity, The United States and the World, and the like herd students into certain kinds of courses and thus away from certain other kinds that a majority of the faculty probably judge to be more central to their fields.

This has two disadvantages. One is obvious: Student and faculty time and effort could be used more productively. Another is less obvious but perhaps more important. Students in classes that they do not want to take and do not consider important to their development are harder to teach. Students in other courses are also harder to teach, because they lack the background they might have received from courses that would have been more important to their intellectual development. Wisely constructed requirements might retain the first of these disadvantages. But they would escape the second. The requirements at many contemporary universities, however, are not wise. Students remain ignorant of central issues in their fields, bereft of the capacities the courses they did take were supposed to nurture.

## Why?

Why are we offering students a hodgepodge of intellectual nibbles rather than a balanced diet? Recommending a return to survey courses that serve as prerequisites for more specialized work and a return to a few basic and well-defined requirements is fine. But it is unlikely to have any effect if we fail to address the reasons higher education has taken a wrong turn.

The core difficulty, I am convinced, is that faculty no longer can reach a consensus on what would constitute a good foundation for work in their own fields, much less for college students in general. The collapse of consensus about the overall shape of the curriculum happened decades ago, as the battles over multiculturalism and Western Civilization that took place around 1990 attest. The move to skills-based requirements happened in reaction to that. Perhaps, its advocates thought, we can reach a consensus about the kinds of things people need to be able to *do*, even if we can't reach a consensus about the kinds of things they need to *know*.

We could, it turned out, but the agreement was not easily operationalized. How were capacities such as quantitative reasoning, ethical reasoning, and the like to be defined? Which courses developed them, and to what degree? We have seen the result: a maze of requirements, each displaying little coherence. Negotiating the maze leaves students unprepared for serious higher-level work. And the lack of coherence means that the choice of requirements and the lists of courses fulfilling them are the outcome of faculty competition and, once again, rent-seeking rather than rational deliberation.

Another thing that has changed since 1990 is the collapse of consensus within some core disciplines—not so much about what a basic survey ought to include, but about whether a basic survey is necessary or even useful at all. Physicists still agree about what ought to be taught in Introduction to Physics; mathematicians still agree about what ought to be taught in a first calculus course. Psychology, philosophy, and a few other fields, until recently, have been in a similar position. English professors, American historians, and other humanists and social scientists agree about what ought to be taught in basic survey courses to a lesser extent, but in practice diverge only moderately from traditional conceptions of the core. What has collapsed is the consensus that students need to study that core. Wars over the canon, in short, have quieted only because the canon itself has been pushed to the sidelines.

The collapse of a consensus supporting the canon often understates the situation. In many disciplines, a new consensus that rejects the canon has taken its place. Sometimes, as at Bowdoin, what has replaced it is a minimal set of requirements designed to allow students and faculty maximum flexibility.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, as at UT, the replacement is an extensive set of requirements that bear little similarity to any traditional conception of a college education and seem mostly to reflect faculty self-interest.

We are living with the consequences: a decline in rigor as well as in a common culture. As Emily Dickinson put it:

The abdication of Belief  
Makes the Behavior small—  
Better an *ignis fatuus*  
Than no illume at all—(1551)

<sup>7</sup>What Does Bowdoin Teach?, 67.