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Core Curriculum Not Emphasized in Universities By Jordan Cash

Are Nebraska college students receiving a well-rounded education? According to a study by the American Council for Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), the answer is no.

The study, entitled "What Will They Learn," is a study of 1,007 four-year higher learning institutions in all 50 states examining whether the schools require seven core subjects: Composition, Literature, Foreign Language, U.S. Government or History, Economics, Mathematics, and Natural or Physical Science. In most cases, the study focused on the Arts and Sciences or Liberal Arts divisions for the examination.[\[1\]](#)

Of particular interest are the grades that Nebraska's institutions of higher learning received. Among the twelve Nebraska colleges included in the study, none received A's for their core curriculum, two-Creighton and Nebraska Wesleyan-received B's, five-UNL, UNK, Concordia, Doane, and Wayne State-were given the average grade of a C, UNO, Peru State, Chadron State, and Bellevue University were all given D's, only Hastings College was given an F.[\[2\]](#) If Nebraska were a college student, these grades would earn them the dismal GPA of 1.66, a D+ performance.

Nebraska's universities should not be too discouraged though; three-fifths of higher education institutions get a C or worse when it comes to core curriculum, even the prestigious Harvard and Yale were not spared from bad grades, receiving a D and an F, respectively.[\[3\]](#)

Yet the fact that a lack of required core curriculum is common does not mean it should be ignored. Core curriculum provides a basic foundation of learning, giving students basic skills in a wide variety of areas. The study's authors explain that the subjects chosen were specifically for four reasons: 1) to be proficient in reading and writing; 2) so the student understands enough math, science, and economics to function in 21st century society; 3) to be able to communicate in a more interconnected society by speaking a foreign language; and 4) to have enough knowledge of American history and government to be an informed citizen.[\[4\]](#)

The move away from this core curriculum speaks to the tendency of colleges, and even students, to focus on the utility of a college education rather than the breadth. With the price of college skyrocketing, this is a legitimate concern. It is noteworthy that if a student were required to take one class in each of the aforementioned subjects, and then

possibly another class in the foreign language, math, and science categories, in the University of Nebraska system, that would amount to thirty credit hours. A student taking fifteen credit hours a semester could then complete all core curricula in their freshman year. The University of Nebraska Regents recently announced 120 credit hours would be enough to graduate in most subjects,[\[5\]](#) so that would leave three full years for students to focus exclusively on their major, entering their upper-level studies with a base foundation in the seven critical, yet diverse areas described above.

A utilitarian focus on trade skills and major-specific classes instead of allowing for a core curriculum of broad classes can hurt students seeking employment after graduation. A survey of employers asking what basic knowledge and skills are the most important for employers hiring college graduates found the most important skills were found to be the ability to communicate effectively in both writing and speaking, as well as reading comprehension-skills that any good composition or speech class should teach-following those skills, basic knowledge of math and science were rated to be of great importance. About a fifth of employers considered knowledge of foreign languages and competency in government and economics to be important skills.[\[6\]](#) Other studies have shown that an in-depth knowledge and broad range of skills are required to succeed in today's workforce,[\[7\]](#) showing that the focus on a utilitarian education is not a completely viable strategy for students who wish to succeed.

Some colleges have turned to a distributive system whereby students choose classes from broad core categories like Humanities, Social Sciences, or Natural Sciences. In fact, it is this system that could explain several of the bad grades for Nebraska's universities. The webpage detailing the University of Nebraska at Omaha's score is full of notes describing how requirements are not upheld to the standards that the ACTA is looking for because it uses a distributive system, which allows students to pick and choose what they want to learn.[\[8\]](#) For example, UNO's general requirements for students in the College of Arts and Sciences in the category of Social Sciences only requires students to take four Social Science classes from four different sub-categories. However, there are seven sub-categories, which means that students could graduate without a course in economics, political science, or psychology if they focused on other sub-categories.[\[9\]](#)

Colleges must prepare students for careers in the real world, but a college education should also bestow a certain depth and breadth of knowledge. Not all of ACTA's recommendations must be implemented to increase the variety of a student's knowledge and skill, but Nebraska's higher learning institutions must be aware of what employers are looking for, and insure students are getting the broad and well-rounded education they are paying for.

[\[1\]](#) What will they Learn? "FAQ" and "Rating Criteria." Accessed September 14, 2011:

Rating Criteria- <http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/criteria>; FAQ- <http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/faq#Why-did-you-choose>.

[2] What will they Learn? "Institutions in Nebraska." Accessed September 14, 2011: <http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/schools/states/NE.html>.

[3] Daniel de Vise, "Three-fifths of colleges get C or worse in general education," in *Washington Post*, August 30, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2011: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/three-fifths-of-colleges-get-c-or-worse-in-general-education/2011/08/30/gIQAn1VepJ_blog.html; Daniel de Vise, "Eight ways to get higher education into shape," in *Washington Post*, February 20, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2011: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/11/AR2011021104924_5.html#four.

[4] What will they Learn? "FAQ" <http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/faq#Why-did-you-choose>.

[5] Kevin Abourezk, "NU Regents approve reducing number of credit required for most programs," in *Lincoln Journal Star*, September 9, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2011: http://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/article_b620a1a3-c979-5e33-a653-593df5a8c49f.html.

[6] Jill Casner-Lotto and Mary Wright Benner, *Are They Ready to Work?: Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce*. Sponsored by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and The Society for Human Resource Management. 2006, page 18. A pdf of the study may be found at http://www.p21.org/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf.

[7] Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views On College Learning In The Wake Of The Economic Downturn*. Survey conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. January 20, 2010. Pdf of the study may be found at http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2009_EmployerSurvey.pdf.

[8] What will they Learn? "University of Nebraska-Omaha." Accessed September 14, 2011: <http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/schools/3086>.

[9] A pdf of the UNO College of Arts and Sciences Basic Requirements for Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree can be found at

www.unomaha.edu/cas/docs/basic_requirements_fall_06.pdf.



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