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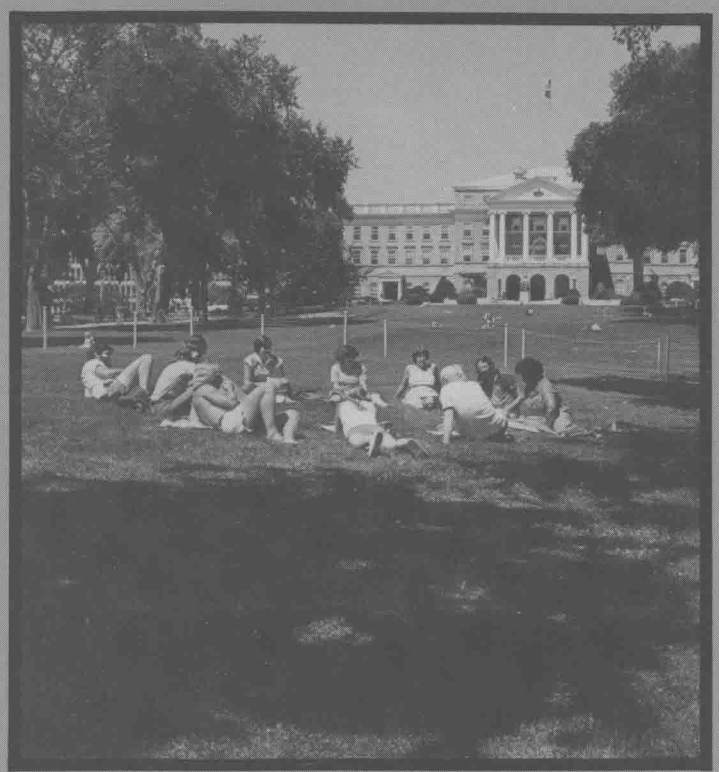

Perspectives on the Undergraduate Experience

Edited by
Clifton F. Conrad
Jennifer Grant Haworth

ASHE READER SERIES

CURRICULUM IN TRANSITION: PERSPECTIVES ON THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

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Jennifer Grant Haworth

ASHE READER SERIES
Mary Ann Sagaria, Series Editor

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I

PERSPECTIVES ON THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

Curricular Transformations: Traditional and Emerging Voices in the Academy

JENNIFER GRANT HAWORTH AND CLIFTON F. CONRAD

The purpose, content, and meaning of the undergraduate curriculum has been vigorously debated throughout the history of American higher education. From the antebellum debates over the classical curriculum at Yale and William and Mary to the biting critiques recently leveled against "relativism" in higher education (Bloom, 1987), the undergraduate curriculum has served as an historic theater for defining, producing, and legitimating knowledge. In the past decade, the curriculum has been enacted by a wide range of actors who hold a vital stake in higher education—including academics, policy-makers, students, and representatives of the business community (Conrad, 1989). Their perspectives have focused on both a reassertion—and a reexamination—of the centrality of the traditional canon in the undergraduate curriculum. This dynamic interplay between traditional and emerging stakeholder voices has recently contributed to an intriguing transformation of the American undergraduate curriculum.

By curricular transformation, we are referring to those informal and formal procedures through which knowledge within the curriculum is continually produced, created, and expanded by a wide range of stakeholders acting within a broader social and historical context. The recent introduction—and, in numerous cases, incorporation—of emerging modes of inquiry, perspectives, and pedagogical techniques into the undergraduate curriculum suggests that the purpose, content, and meaning of the undergraduate curriculum is in the midst of major reexamination and change. In this essay, we reflect on the various forces transforming the undergraduate curriculum across three lines of inquiry. First, we explore the contemporary context and discuss four informing forces that have catalyzed recent developments in the undergraduate curriculum. Second, given this contextual background, we discuss the knowledge claims recently articulated by two broad groups of stakeholders and examine their consequences for the undergraduate curriculum. In our final section, we investigate how new knowledge claims are being legitimated by stakeholders within the academy and illustrate how this development has led to a transformation of the undergraduate curriculum.

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I. The Contemporary Context

In his inaugural presidential address at Harvard in 1869, Charles William Eliot suggested that "the institutions of higher education . . . are always a faithful mirror in which are sharply reflected the national history and character" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 5). From the colonial colleges and land-grant colleges to the movement for equality of educational opportunity during the last three decades, American institutions of higher learning have actively responded to the prevailing trends and social values of the day. Three broad societal changes and one significant change within academe have acted as powerful informing forces on the recent development of the undergraduate curriculum.

Changing Demographics

The ethnic composition of American society has diversified markedly over the past decade, a trend that is expected to continue well into the twenty-first century. By 1996, for example, it is expected that one out of every three 15-24 year olds will be a member of a minority group. The percentage of non-minority white youth aged 15-24 is expected to decline by 12 percent while the number of Hispanic youth aged 15-24 is expected to increase by 44 percent (Wetzel, 1987).

This increasing diversity is reflected in college and university enrollments. Since 1980, there has been a richer blend of age, race, and ethnic backgrounds among college and university students than ever before in American higher education. Between 1978 and 1989, the number of adult students (aged 25 years and older) attending college increased by approximately 24 percent, whereas the number of traditional age college students (18-24 years) grew by only 7 percent over the same time period (NCES, 1989). Similarly, the number of women enrolling in postsecondary education increased 26 percent between 1978 and 1989 (NCES, 1989).

Minority enrollment in higher education has also increased over the past decade. Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 18 percent of all college and university students represented minority groups in 1988, an increase from 16 percent in 1980. This increase occurred, despite the drop in black student enrollment from 9.2 percent in 1980 to 8.7 percent in 1988, because Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander student enrollments increased notably over the past ten years (NCES, 1989). Although the modest gains in minority student enrollment are troublesome, four out of every five institutions report that they are currently involved in activities designed to increase minority enrollment and retention (El-Khawas, 1989).

Traditionalist Educational Policy Agenda

With the publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983, the first indication of an impending traditionalist policy agenda was recognized on American college and university campuses. Under the bully-pulpit political leadership of then Secretary of Education William Bennett, calls for a return to the fundamentals of the higher learning were stressed by both the popular press and many academics. These fundamentals included greater attention on basic skills acquistion, a renewed emphasis on studying the humanities and the great books of Western civilization, and stronger calls for assessing student learning and development.

The back-to-basics movement in higher education has experienced a revival of interest over the past decade. A number of educational reform reports have suggested that

colleges and universities must pay greater attention to strengthening basic writing, mathematics, communication, and logical reasoning skills among undergraduate students (NIE, 1984; AAC, 1985; Boyer, 1987). This renewed emphasis on basic skills appears to have been precipitated by studies indicating the academic underpreparedness of today's college-aged youth. According to one recent study of 250 four-year institutions, one out of every seven freshman students was in need of remedial coursework in English or mathematics (Roueche, Baker, and Roueche, 1985). In response to this growing concern, a large number of institutions have recently instituted mandatory basic skill assessments for students. A 1989 study of 366 two- and four-year institutions, for example, found that basic skills testing was firmly in place at 65 percent of all postsecondary institutions and that another 19 percent had initiated plans for testing (El-Khawas, 1989).

The reassertion of the intellectual and social value of the humanities and the traditional great books canon has likewise found expression on college and university campuses across the nation. Initially promoted by Bennett (1984), Allan Bloom (1987) and E.D. Hirsch (1987) have recently penned best-selling volumes that have argued for the inherent worth of the humanities as a course of study—and the great books as the preferred curriculum—in undergraduate education. Colleges and universities have responded to this call: in 1986, 42 percent of universities, and 35 percent of four-year colleges required that original texts be used in their humanities courses (El-Khawas, 1986).

The call for accountability has likewise spread across American colleges and universities. In the mid 1980s, several national reform reports—including those by the National Institute of Education (1984) and the Association of American Colleges (1985)—recommended that colleges and universities implement systematic student assessment programs to monitor and track student learning outcomes. According to a 1989 American Council of Education survey of 366 two- and four-year postsecondary institutions, approximately 70 percent of the surveyed colleges and universities had institutionalized some form of assessment activity (El-Khawas, 1989). For the most part, these assessments have targeted basic skills (65 percent), higher order thinking skills (25 percent), general education (25 percent), and major subject content areas (26 percent) in the undergraduate curriculum (El-Khawas, 1989).

Increasingly Pluralistic Environment

Over the past fifteen years, an increasingly pluralistic environment has emerged both within and outside of the academy. Grounded in societal demographic changes, the international trend toward a global economic marketplace, and the growing environmental recognition of the world as a global village, pluralistic perspectives have surfaced in the American undergraduate curricular landscape in the form of global, gender, and ethnic studies courses.

A number of stakeholders have recently given voice to this pluralistic perspective. In their reform reports, the Association of American Colleges (1980 and 1988) became one of the first major groups to call for the inclusion of multicultural and global perspectives into the undergraduate curriculum: "The first curricular priority is to implant a strong international dimension into the core of general education requirements. The curriculum should be expanded to introduce students particularly to non-Western cultures" (AAC, 1980, p. 4). Several government agencies and private foundations—including the

Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the Lilly Endowment, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—have provided funding for implementing global, gender, and ethnic studies into the undergraduate curriculum. The entrance of greater numbers of women and minorities into the professioriate has likewise advanced both feminist and multicultural world views.

These pluralistically-inspired courses and program innovations are generally characterized by both a high degree of interdisciplinarity and the use of perspectives and texts not traditionally represented in the Western civilization canon. Pluralists and educational traditionalists have recently locked horns over the legitimacy of representing multiple world views in the undergraduate curriculum. This debate has been most recently illustrated by the curriculum revision projects at the University of California-Berkeley and Stanford University, where both universities have recently revised their general education requirements to include pluralistic perspectives (Mooney, 1988).

Competing Perspectives in the Academy

The recent dynamic interplay between traditionalist and pluralistic perspectives has generated a spectrum of colorful debates among scholars in academe. The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has used a militaristic metaphor to describe the recent debate as a "raging battle" where the epithet was the weapon of choice: "Name calling has pitted 'objectivists' against 'relativists,' 'presentists' against 'historicists,' and 'foundationalists' against 'interpretivists'" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 219). Not unlike the debates at the turn of the century between scientists and liberal humanists, this recent exchange over the legitimacy of competing epistemologies, modes of inquiry, and perspectives appears to cut both across—and within—disciplines and professional fields.

This "raging battle" has largely centered on the validity of the traditional, postivist approach to scholarly inquiry. A growing number of scholars have recently objected to the epistemological view that truth is objective and exists "out there" to be discovered through value-free, neutral, scientific methods (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The emergence of diverse new perspectives—including interpretivism, feminism, multiculturalism and critical theory—has offered competing epistemologies where truth is viewed as subjective and existing, at least in part, within the realm of an individual's personal and cultural experiences. Because of the constructed nature of knowledge, these scholars argue that new modes of inquiry—such as oral history, ethnography, hermeneutics, and the greater use of interdisciplinary and comparative studies—must be used to achieve not only a critical understanding of their own disciplines, but of the world as well.

As the formal medium for communicating knowledge within the university, the curriculum is heavily influenced by the prevailing events, values, and beliefs of the society in which it is situated. In the past ten years, three broad societal changes—the increasing cultural diversity of American society, the resurgence of traditionalist values and attitudes, and the fuller recognition of pluralistic perspectives—as well as the internal conflict over epistemologies and modes of inquiry within academe, have acted to transform the undergraduate curriculum. These contemporary developments have been facilitated by a diverse group of stakeholders holding multiple perspectives for the purpose, content, and meaning of the undergraduate curriculum. As our next two sections

will suggest, these perspectives have contributed to fundamental changes in the undergraduate curriculum.

II. Stakeholder Knowledge Claims on the Undergraduate Curriculum

There have been few periods in the history of American higher education when the purpose, content, and meaning of the undergraduate curriculum has been debated as vigorously or as publicly as in the decade of the 1980s. One diverse group has provided high-pitched critiques of American education, arguing that dramatic changes are needed to revitalize the collegiate curriculum. Their proposals have included pleas for reclaiming the national legacy (Bennett, 1984), restoring curricular integrity (AAC, 1985), re-opening the American mind (Bloom, 1987), and ensuring the cultural literacy of our youth (Hirsch, 1987). A second, highly diversified stakeholder group has argued that the current curriculum is narrowly defined by a myopic world view that has minimized the knowledge claims of various groups, including women, minorities, and non-Western authors (see, for example, McIntosh, 1981; Schuster and Van Dyne, 1984; Andersen, 1987; Rosaldo, 1989; Tierney, 1989b). The diversity and vitality of perspectives generated by these two stakeholder groups has drawn national attention to the purpose and substance of the undergraduate curriculum in our nation's colleges and universities. In this section, we discuss the knowledge claims recently articulated by these two stakeholder groups and briefly examine their consequences for the undergraduate curriculum.

Stakeholder Knowledge Claims: Traditional Voices

As noted above, several individuals (Bennett, 1984; Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987; Cheney, 1989) have recently published policy reports and national best-selling books calling for the revitalization of the undergraduate curriculum. Presenting what is widely considered a traditionalist agenda for curricular reform, these stakeholders have argued that the curriculum has become watered down by "relativistic" points of view, becoming little more than a "supermarket" of electives where the central role of the "humanities has been siphoned off, diluted, or so adulterated that students graduating know little of their heritage" (Bennett, 1984, p. 5). These stakeholders have called for a reinstatement of the liberal arts course of study and the traditional great books canon as two mandatory steps toward restoring the educational integrity of the undergraduate curriculum.

From an epistemological perspective, these "traditional voices" are firmly rooted within a particular view of knowledge—logical positivism—that has been the predominant mode of inquiry within the academy since the beginning of the American research university in the late nineteenth century. This epistemology assumes that knowledge exists "out there" and can be discovered through objective and empirical means. From this perspective, knowledge is viewed as a series of lawlike, absolute, universal truths that exist independent of, and external to, the knower. The scholar's task is to act as a detached observer in the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

This guiding epistemology is revealed in the traditionalist's knowledge claims concerning the purpose and content of—and, to a lesser degree, the pedagogy within—the undergraduate curriculum. Believing that the kinds of "knowledge most worth knowing" in a Western, democratic society are based in those universal truths of Western civilization that have endured the test of time, traditionalists argue that the purpose of

the undergraduate experience is to expose students to the time-honored truths of their society. For many in this group, these truths are best revealed in the humanities:

> I would describe the humanities as the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the human experience. The humanities tell us how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled with life's enduring questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? . . . We should want all students to know a common culture rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage (Bennett, 1984, p. 6).

Many traditionalists further argue that if students are to learn the truths of their common culture, the university must provide programs based upon the "judicious use of great texts" (Blooom, 1987, p. 344) which provoke:

> Awareness of the classic—particularly important for our innocents; an acquaintance with what big questions were when there were still big questions; models, at the very least, of how to go about answering them; and, perhaps, most important of all, a fund of shared experiences and thoughts on which to ground their friendships with one another (Bloom, 1987, p. 344).

These "great texts," according to traditionalist reformers, "embody the best in our culture . . . no student citizen should be denied access to the best that tradition has to offer" (Bennett, 1984, p. 29).

Without these fundamental truths, traditionalists maintain that students will lack the requisite knowledge needed to be productive and informed citizens in American society. Diane Ravitch has argued that "students cannot learn to ask critical questions or to think conceptually about the past or about their own lives as political actors unless they have sufficient background knowledge" (1988, p. 129). Through the study of the humanities and the great thinkers of the past, the traditionalist-crafted undergraduate experience is designed to provide students with the requisite "background knowledge" in order to live wisely and well.

The traditionalists' pedagogical approach is likewise deeply rooted within their epistemology. In her discussion of teaching in the undergraduate core curriculum, Lynne Cheney references the pedagogical wisdom of the *Yale Report of 1828*:

> "The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture," an 1828 report from Yale University noted, "are the *discipline* and the *furniture* [her italics] of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge" (1989, p. 14).

When knowledge is viewed as a series of absolute and universal truths that exist independent of, and external to, the knower, the teacher is viewed as a kind of sage whose task is to impart these universal truths to students neutrally. Given that the aim of a college education is to exercise, condition, and strengthen the intellect, the pedagogical element of the traditionalist's epistemology becomes important only insofar as it more fully engages students in the content of their inquiry.

Traditionalist knowledge claims have contributed significantly to the growing conservative policy agenda that has swept over American education during the past ten

years. Their influence over the purpose and content of the undergraduate curriculum has been apparent in a number of areas, including recent movements to increase the amount of general education required by undergraduates, the fuller integration of liberal education into professional undergraduate education programs, as well as the new emphases placed on basic skills, humanities, and great books instruction (Conrad and Haworth, forthcoming). Ironically, perhaps the most instrumental goal of the traditionalists—to establish interdisciplinary core curricula—has not experienced much success. According to a recent survey of 284 four-year institutions, only 2 percent had implemented an interdisciplinary core curriculum for their general education program (Locke, 1989).

Although some recent reform reports, such as Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* and Cheney's *50 Hours*, have recommended that universities select their "most distinguished faculty" to teach core courses, traditional stakeholder perspectives have generally made few recommendations to improve pedagogical practices within the undergraduate curriculum. An exception is the recent AAC report, which includes substantive pedagogical suggestions for "reorienting teaching" that go beyond content issues and address the process of teaching (AAC, 1988). Specifically, the report encourages active student learning through an improved understanding of how students "hear, understand, interpret, and integrate ideas" (AAC, 1988, p. 28) and suggests that teachers enlist their students as "coinquirers" in the learning process.

Stakeholder Knowledge Claims: Emerging Voices.

A chorus of new voices has recently been heard in the academy. These stakeholders—although expressing diverse points-of-view—have shared a single perspective in common: the belief that knowledge, as it is currently understood in the undergraduate curriculum, is partial, incomplete, and distorted. Calling for an end to the exclusive dominance of the traditional canon in the undergraduate curriculum, these scholars have argued for an expansion of curricular borders in higher education to include various cultural and theoretical perspectives.

While highly diverse in their own scholarly visions, these new voices share the view that knowledge, at least in large part, is a social construct. This perspective is directly antithetical to the traditionalists' epistemology that knowledge is an objective entity that exists "out there," external to, and independent of, the knower. By contrast, in this other, more contingent approach to knowledge, the interaction between the individual and his or her cultural context is critical to the construction of what is—or is not—considered knowledge. As William Tierney has described it, this epistemological view ". . . assumes that reality is defined though a process of social interchange that cannot be readily mapped, graphed, or controlled" (1989b, p. 43). Rather than employ "one single, simple, unilateral rationality," this epistomological perspective maintains that "there are many rationalities" which are contingent upon "the mores of the enterprise, the individuals involved in the organization, and the socio-historical context in which the organization resides" (Tierney, 1989b, p. 43). Given the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, the scholar's task is to articulate these "multiple constructed realities" (Berger and Luckmann, 1973), not through a detached, neutral stance but, instead, through reflexive inquiry that recognizes the dynamic interplay between the researched and the researcher (Rosaldo, 1989).

An array of emerging knowledge claims regarding content and process in the undergraduate curriculum have been expressed recently by these stakeholders. Firmly rooted