

# The Cheated Undergraduate

by STANLEY N. KATZ

*Newsday, Inc., 5/4/03 (posted with permission from the publisher)*

---

Are America's undergraduates being cheated out of an education of lasting value, even in our great universities? Recent studies suggest so. The latest, by the Association of American Colleges and Universities concluded that, "Public policies have focused on getting students into college, but not on what they are expected to accomplish once there."

It seems that little has improved since the Boyer Commission, headed by President Shirley Strum Kenny of Stony Brook University, concluded in 1998 that "although in a great many ways the higher education system of the United States is the most remarkable in the world . . . Nevertheless, the research universities have too often failed, and continue to fail, their undergraduate populations."

Universities are doing well at giving students practical, often pre-professional, knowledge, but poorly at enhancing their capacity to think out of the box, to be generally educated across the various academic disciplines, to make value judgments and to be informed citizens. Wouldn't it be good, for instance, if in addition to being able to find Iraq on a map and understand the role of the Mideast in international politics, your college-aged child knew how to formulate moral and political responses to the current crisis, informed by a knowledge of history and of great works of art, literature and ideas?

There is trouble in paradise, and the most common explanation is that universities are focused on faculty research to the detriment of their historic mission to teach. Faculty are chosen, compensated and promoted primarily for their promise as researchers, not teachers. Both faculty members and their institutions gain their reputations on the quality and quantity of their research. Teaching and undergraduate students are mostly an afterthought.

This has been true for some years, but now there is added pressure from the quickly developing "knowledge society" in which we live, where progress depends upon the real-time production of information and analysis across all domains of knowledge. We rely on the life and physical sciences, upon architecture and engineering, upon law and business, for example, to help us improve life in every way. This has the unintended consequence of favoring what seems to be useful knowledge at the

expense of seemingly useless knowledge, such as that produced in the humanities and even in the social sciences, and of favoring vocational training and scientific research over the more traditional concerns of liberal education. If hastening the transition from school to work is what society prizes most, we should not be surprised if universities oblige.

General or liberal education is a casualty of this trend toward educational utilitarianism. By liberal education, I mean broad exposure to the major domains of knowledge, and systematic training in logical thinking and in the principal forms of communication and expression. To make intelligent decisions on public matters that a democracy demands, a college student really needs to know the larger contours of history, the major currents of literature and philosophy and at least one foreign language. One-dimensional training does not equip students for a three-dimensional world.

In the mid-20th century, it was common to have general-education courses specially for freshmen and sophomores to provide this knowledge and to challenge them to think critically about it. These courses did not belong to any one department and were taught by faculty from across many disciplines. But now universities commonly rely on unimaginative survey courses in the standard disciplines (U.S. history, American government, English literature since 1600) instead. Then they compel juniors and seniors to "major" in one field. The resulting education thus includes an unsystematic smattering of general knowledge with a fairly cursory concentration in one discipline.

This is a good way to train men and women to perform skilled tasks, particularly when they "major" in fields deemed useful in the job world, but I doubt it is the best way to prepare them to be good citizens or to have the sophisticated and cultured intelligence necessary to advance civilization. Shouldn't university education aim for more than job skills of a high order?

What to do? One thing is to loosen the hold of academic departments. Because universities promote research, they build departments around research fields and then offer undergraduate courses based upon increasingly narrow faculty research interests. Students take a fixed number of courses in a "major," and, presto chango, they graduate with a degree in that field.

Such narrow training may make sense in the sciences, where majors frequently can use what they have learned in jobs or in graduate studies. But in the humanities and social sciences, it is not so clear. We pay too little attention to what students really need to know and to whether they can use their knowledge in a meaningful way.

What is a history major supposed to be able to do upon graduation? Few become historians. It will not do for most people (not least parents) to say simply that the student is now an "educated person." To what end?

When it comes to citizenship, we can ask the same question for any undergraduate major.

Of course we need disciplines and the structures they impose for a host of good intellectual reasons. These fields provide the methodologies through which we analyze the masses of data we absorb in studying any subject.

But undergraduates need both general analytical skills and deep content knowledge about subjects whose study crosses a number of different disciplines.

We would do better to challenge undergraduates to ask their most urgent questions about themselves, the world and the human condition - and to organize their curriculum around these questions. Students should be encouraged to think deeply and systematically about beauty, poverty, goodness, gender, war, disaster, progress - or whatever in their life experience commands the greatest intellectual and emotional urgency. They need to be able to build their own knowledge base, whether through existing courses, independent study or guided experiential learning. Students need not be limited to pre-packaged courses in various disciplines and loosely configured "majors." They need to be able to negotiate with faculty ways to gain the knowledge they need to solve the problems that absorb them. They need something more akin to "focus areas" than "major" fields.

Some universities have moved in this direction, with majors in environmental studies or diasporic studies, and this is a step in the right direction. Students have a role to play in designing their educations, within broad parameters set by faculty and focused on undergraduate learning. It will require a lot of faculty and student effort to determine where the fine line between chaos and creative opportunity lies.

But it can be done. Faculty work loads will need to become more flexible, and students will require more individually tailored advising. They will need units of instruction (only some of which rise to the length and complexity of courses) in order to mix and match learning experiences for different intellectual purposes. As opposed to lectures and examinations, student research will become the primary way that undergraduates learn. I imagine a university that is like a fabulous library with learned pedagogues as librarians, helping students select books when they need assistance and guiding them in their accumulation of knowledge.

Change is painful in any institution, and universities are more resistant than most, particularly in a depressed economy. But students deserve more than we are giving them, and they will take pleasure, I think, in working with us to discover new modes of educating themselves. If not today, then soon.