

A Proposal That All General Education Requirements be Abolished¹

Beryl Clotfelter

The proposal is that the only requirements for graduation be completion of 120 (or 124) credits with satisfactory grades and completion of a major—departmental, interdisciplinary, or general. No more than 48 credits in one department could be counted toward a degree.

Arguments for such a simple statement of graduation requirements reflect both an educational philosophy and a judgment about how well certain types of programs are working and are likely to work in the immediate future. The most important arguments center on the role of the general education part of a college education (as distinct from work in or directly related to the major field) and on certain beliefs about the conditions under which learning takes place.

Those of us who favor this sort of requirements statement see a college experience not as the capstone of an education, but rather as a time to begin the process of self-education which should continue throughout life, and we think that the most important function of the general education part of that experience is to help students acquire the interests and skills necessary for them to educate themselves. We reject the assumption, implicit in our present system of requirements, that a proper basis for planning a college education is the listing of the “things that everyone should know.” Knowledge is now too diverse and vast to permit anyone to pick out the portion which can be included in a four-year study plan and say of it, “This is what every liberally educated man should know.” We are resigned to the fact that all students will graduate ignorant of some things we consider important, but we shall be satisfied if those graduates have developed the ability to work independently from inner motivation so that they can learn the things they need to know after they leave Grinnell.

Our present set of general education requirements implies that all students arrive at Grinnell with approximately the same set of experiences, that they will all respond to the same stimuli here, and that they all have similar goals for their education. Each of these assumptions is false, as everyone on the faculty knows, yet we persist in treating students as if their differences were unimportant. One advantage of eliminating general requirements would be that each student could have a program suited to his unique background, interests, and goals.

We believe that there exists no single best route to general education for all students, and we suspect that enthusiasm for what is being studied is often more important than the specific subject matter. And since one of our goals is to help the student begin to take responsibility for his education, we wish to have him more involved in the planning of that part of it which will take place at Grinnell than he now is.

Our perceptions of the way programs are actually working now lead to the conclusion that student resentment against requirements is often so intense that it constitutes a real impediment to education, with the number of students who are turned against courses or disciplines by the fact that they are required probably equaling or exceeding those who discover a fondness for a discipline after

¹ Submitted circa February 1970

they are required to try it. We know that students often go through required courses learning just enough for a satisfactory grade and then promptly forget most of what they learned, and we suspect that in many cases much of the time spent in required courses is time wasted for both the student and the teacher. We also observe that when uniform courses are required of all students some teachers whose enthusiasm for the courses is less than total must be impressed into teaching them with the result that the teaching is not the best the teacher is capable of delivering under better circumstances. Teachers do not often announce to classes that they dislike the course and do not want to teach it, but those attitudes are often conveyed subtly (and probably unconsciously) to their students. Since it seems almost axiomatic that learning occurs best when interested students are taught by enthusiastic teachers, we hope by abolishing the traditional requirements to increase the number of occasions when this ideal condition can occur. If one gives up the notion that certain specific works or facts must be taught to all students, he is free to permit instructors to design courses for the general education program which reflect their own interests and competencies. This is not to imply that only professional courses are contemplated or even that the courses now required should be dropped, for a vigorous general education program of optional courses should be maintained, and the faculty should insist that each department do its part in such a program.

All of us believe in the advantages of the breadth of education which the present requirements are intended to insure, but we believe that the actual learning which occurs in these required courses is often less than it should be, and we think that if students can be persuaded to take the courses instead of being forced to take them more learning will take place. This faculty, like many others, has long deluded itself by assuming that forcing students to sit in required courses produces a broad education. Genuine education requires a more active participation by the learner than required courses elicit from many students, with the result that the greatest benefit of the system of requirements may be to the collective conscience of the faculty rather than to the students.

Two major criticisms of the no-requirements plan have been offered – one, that some students will take all their work in a narrow area and will not have much breadth in their college education, and the other, that the plan places great responsibility on the advising system, a system whose past performance gives little reason for optimism about its capabilities.

In response to the first criticism one can say two things. Experience with Grinnell students leads to a confidence that the number who would choose to spend their four years here pursuing a narrow specialty is small; most want to explore many areas or could be easily persuaded that only by studying in several parts of the college could they get maximum benefit from their time at Grinnell. If there are students who are so determined to stay in one area that advice and persuasion will not deter them, the benefit they would derive from courses into which they might be forced is problematical, and furthermore no one can be sure that their long-term education is not best served by that sort of intense experience in college. Breadth can come after Grinnell, and one may hope that the inevitable exposure to people in many disciplines during a four-year sojourn on this campus will produce curiosity and interest that will lead to breadth of education eventually.

With regard to the second criticism, one reason the Grinnell advising system for underclassmen is unsatisfactory is that the elaborate system of requirements seems to both the advisor and the advisee to relieve them of the necessity of talking about anything important. After students declare majors, their major advisors discuss with them their plans for a career, their special interests, etc., and by common agreement the advising at this point becomes good. The freshman and sophomore advisor usually does little, however, but try to help the student fit all his requirements into the schedule, and the requirement scheme makes that reaction almost inevitable. Removing requirements will not guarantee good advising, however, and probably it is not possible to devise a system which will have this effect. Having become disillusioned by all schemes and devices to insure that everyone will act as he should, at least some of us think that the most we can do is increase as much as possible the opportunities for good advisor-advisee relationships to develop and to permit whatever relationships do develop to be used. One such system which may hold promise is this: Assign freshmen advisors on the basis of general field of probable major interest. Encourage each freshman to change advisors during the first semester, choosing someone with whom he has become acquainted, perhaps one of his first-semester teachers.

Two things could be done to take some of the pressure off the advisors and to minimize the effect of failures in the system. One is to send to students before they arrive on campus carefully prepared advice on planning a college program, and the other is to prepare several model programs which would give the bewildered freshman some concrete suggestions.

For a specific student a Grinnell education might develop something like this: Before he arrived on the campus, he would be sent a booklet pointing out that the major responsibility for planning his college education rests on him and discussing some of the considerations which should go into that planning, notably the need for early exploration of areas in which he might want to major and the arguments for doing a reasonable amount of work in all the main divisions of the college. When he arrived on campus for a somewhat longer New Student Days than we now have, he would be assigned an advisor who would discuss with him his high school preparation, his goals, and the sort of schedule which seemed reasonable for the first semester. If he lacked specific ideas about what he wanted to take, the student could be advised to follow one of the model plans until he developed more definite ideas of his own. Most freshmen probably would take a series of courses not greatly different from those which they now take.

If during the first semester the freshman developed a rapport with some other faculty member greater than he had with his original advisor, he would change advisors, subject only to the restriction that the person he had chosen were not overburdened with advisees. The goal would be to make his formal advisor someone with whom he could easily discuss his educational progress. At all registrations the advisor's signature on the registration card would be merely an indication that the student had talked with some faculty member about his enrollment; the advisor would not be able to coerce the student by withholding his signature.

In succeeding semesters he would continue very much as at present, developing a major and at the same time continuing to take courses in other parts of the college. The typical student, we are convinced, would want to take courses over a range of disciplines similar to that now required, but he

might take them at different times. Every time a student enrolled in a course (with the possible exception of required courses in major sequences) he would be doing so because he had chosen to take the course; his attitude would almost certainly be different than if he had been forced into the course. Our experience with Grinnell students convinces us that the number who would choose only the courses which seem easiest is virtually zero; the inducement to departments to offer "snap" courses in order to become popular would be slight or nonexistent.

Students would be protected against the despotic power of departments in three ways. The number of credits in one department applicable toward a degree would be limited, so that no department could require its majors to take most of their work in that department. The establishment of interdisciplinary and general majors will offer alternatives to departmental majors and would help curb departmental excesses which might develop. And third, the faculty, acting through the Dean of the College, would require all departments to devote some reasonable part of their manpower to general education courses, designed for the non-major.

The proposal that general education requirements be abolished is offered not to subvert the traditional goals of a Grinnell education but to realize those goals more fully. Given the preparation which students in the 1970's will bring to college and the attitudes which those students have, we think that the best way of achieving our educational goals is likely to be the abolition of requirements, and we firmly believe that such action should be taken immediately.