

Commentary

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How to Fight the High Cost of Curricular Glut

By MICHAEL BUGEJA

The faculty owns the curriculum. I've heard that said for nearly 30 years now as a teacher at Oklahoma State and Ohio Universities, and as an administrator at Iowa State University. And I've come to some conclusions: The curriculum tends to expand with little regard to workload or demand; research does not inflate tuition as much as curriculum does, contrary to what many legislators think; and when universities change calendars from quarters to semesters, curriculum preoccupies the professoriate for years to come.

Curriculum management is at the source of issues consuming us in academe, including high tuition, low adjunct pay, shared governance, graduate education, academic calendars, and budgetary models. The issue has the most impact at Ph.D.-granting public universities, but any institution can benefit from analyzing the source of poorly managed pedagogy, for which both faculty and administration share in the blame and figure in the solution.

Simple as it sounds, we sometimes forget that the more courses in the catalog, the more faculty hours we commit to teaching them. Curricular glut occurs when new proposals are approved solely on the basis of pedagogy, rather than on workload, duplication, demand, and dollars. We should ask:

- *Is a similar course being taught elsewhere in any college on the campus?* If so, has the proposal been sent to that department's curriculum committee, faculty, and/or chair for official sign-off, without which the course cannot go forward?
- *Has demand for the new course been documented?* Has it been tested in existing modules (seminars, topics, workshops, independent studies) before even being proposed experimentally for the catalog?
- *Can your unit afford to add the course to its offerings?* Has the department's curriculum committee considered this question before advancing the proposal, with faculty members, the chair, and/or the dean providing documentation to ensure adequate resources?

Unless those issues are considered, before pedagogy is even analyzed, curriculum expands at the expense of people, resulting in these scenarios:

- *Low pay for adjuncts teaching inflated curricula.* Adjuncts teach more sections at cheaper prices than professors do, and so are required to staff the multitude of courses added to the catalog annually.
- *General education that few students generally want.* Departments with low enrollments in majors typically offer many of these liberal-arts and introductory classes under budget models that permit expansion without assessing relevance or demand.
- *Slower graduation rates.* Departments with few majors can cancel electives when staffing issues arise because so many other electives fulfill degree requirements. But when a department with many majors cancels classes because it has too few offerings in relation to demand, students cannot get into required courses and fail to fulfill degree requirements promptly.

- *Obstacles to faculty development.* Curricular expansion not only results in workload issues but also reduces research productivity, frequency of sabbaticals, and acquisition of grants to support graduate education.

In assessing glut, we need to ask: How many courses has each department added to the books in the past decade? How many have been deleted? How many majors does each department have (as opposed to how many students they teach)? How many credit hours did the department require for a degree a decade ago? How many now?

Without those data, departmental curricula can expand on autopilot.

Here's a formula to discern such expansion: Compare the number of majors in a department with the number of courses it lists in the catalog. For instance, the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University, which I direct, has about 800 undergraduate and graduate students with 50 course offerings. Our ratio is 16 majors for every active course. In your tally, don't count additional sections of any course, including university electives or general education. Count as one course so-called "yoked" classes (undergraduate and graduate sections that appear to be two offerings but are taught in the same class at the same time). Departments are suspect if they have ratios of five or fewer majors per listed course.

Now ascertain the percentage of its own majors that each department instructs in a given year across its entire curriculum. Anything less than 15 percent is suspect. Such a percentage typically implies that few students are interested in the major, although the department may be teaching thousands of students in general education or electives, often using adjuncts and teaching assistants. Meanwhile professors develop or teach courses required for "quality."

Let's talk about quality, a subjective topic that can inflate curriculum by rhetoric or politics rather than by fact or demand.

I have a doctorate in English, specializing in creative writing and emphasizing medieval through Restoration drama. In my view, a high-quality English department requires a literature course in Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1651), niece of Philip Sidney and one of the best writers of her era. Were I a freshly minted Ph.D., I might make a persuasive case for a Wroth course. Then I would leave my institution for a greener campus, but my class would remain, with colleagues arguing that they require a Wroth specialist because there is no longer any such scholar on the faculty.

The above is hypothetical. I happen to believe that a high-quality English department should teach Shakespeare, Wroth, and a range of diverse voices across the cultural and literary spectra. But that is not the issue. You can't burn the curricular candle at both ends — quality and general education — without also burning out the faculty, as well as tuition dollars.

When you add such courses, it is at the expense of other classes needed by students in other majors. Faculty members in the popular programs are stretched so thin teaching their own majors that they cannot offer sections to nonmajors. Is it fair that colleagues in my hypothetical English department will teach five to six semester-long courses per academic year, facilitating an inflated curriculum, while counterparts in the sciences and social sciences teach half that amount, with adequate time for research? Is it fair that my fictitious English-department colleagues cannot take regular sabbaticals or, if they do, require others to teach more to cover the workload?

We considered those and related issues carefully at the Greenlee School. After an assessment, faculty members opted to streamline curriculum, deleting intermediate-level courses and reducing workload from five courses to four per year, with releases for advising and research. Ultimately, with our savings, we hope to collaborate with other departments in the areas of science and risk communication, in keeping with the university's strategic plan, and to regularly schedule sabbaticals without begging for funds or requiring colleagues to teach extra courses to pick up the slack.

All this enhances research and professional development, which enrich the classroom. That's quality, too.

Glut also tends to occur at institutions that made or are making the transition from quarters to semesters. The faculty may own the curriculum, but the administration owns the calendar.

Periodically, regents and legislatures, too, own the calendar. In the 1960s they recommended that institutions change from semesters to quarters for year-round operation to handle the spike in population of college-age students. In the 1980s, lawmakers fathomed the cost of year-round operations and recommended a switch back to semesters. In 1988-89 alone, 60 institutions made the conversion to semesters. Conversions to the semester system continued in the 1990s, with only about 15 percent of institutions still on quarters, according to one study. More recently, the Minnesota Legislature required that its 36 institutions switch from quarters to semesters.

In each of those moves away from and back to semesters, thousands of courses were very likely added to catalogs. That, in my view, is the chief source of glut.

Iowa State made such a transition in 1980, and we're still finding artifacts of the quarter system: courses with such prefixes as "Beginning," "Intermediate," and "Advanced" and the suffixes "I," "II," and "III."

Quarter systems handle glut more efficiently than semester systems for a simple reason: an extra term in the academic year. The quarter's pedagogical foundation emphasizes diversity of subject matter. The semester emphasizes depth of subject matter, with adequate time for research. Problems occur when faculties try to maintain their hitherto diverse pedagogical culture by squeezing an extra term's worth of classes into a two-term cycle.

That is to be expected. After all, what faculty can easily make the shift to a different culture on an administrative or legislative time clock? What professoriate wants to cut as much as a third of course work? What dean wants to tell faculty members that without such cuts, professors are looking at workload issues that may linger long into the future?

Instead, what professors are apt to hear is that there is no clear empirical evidence concerning which system, quarter or semester, is more effective as a learning vehicle.

That is the wrong research question.

How about a study exploring these common-sense hypotheses?

- Colleges on semesters that have never experienced a changeover will have fewer courses in their master files than colleges that were on quarter systems and transitioned to semesters.
- Departments making the switch to semesters will tend to (a) expand the content of courses to meet semester credit-hour requirements; (b) preserve four-credit-hour courses by reducing them to three credits to meet semester-hour requirements; (c) add electives to maintain the diverse pedagogical culture of the quarter system; and (d) increase the number of semester hours needed to earn a degree in their major, protecting curricular turf.
- Colleges transitioning to semesters will tend to experience (a) a lapse in research productivity as dozens of hours each week are dedicated to curricular debate and overhaul, new and/or revised course preparations and extra teaching loads; (b) corresponding declines in the percentage of successful promotion and tenure cases because of a preoccupation with curriculum rather than research; and (c) an increase in requests for new positions to handle increases in workload.

Without such studies, all manner of misconceptions endure. Legislators and regents advocating for more teaching and less research will nevertheless tend to support the semester rather than the quarter system, overlooking the fact that quarters require more teaching, with grading (three rather than two midterms, finals, etc.), scheduling, and advising occurring year-round.

Administrators may focus on cost issues associated with calendars, registration, and operations rather than on whether the change strengthens the existing culture, strategic plan, and mission statement. Neither administration nor legislature will allocate sufficient budget increases to offset human-resource costs so that operations proceed smoothly throughout the long transition to a new culture. Finally, professors experiencing the changeover in years to come will not feel as fully informed as they should be about the cost of the transition in terms of workload and related pressures.

Every university should invest in a campuswide curriculum portal, using technology as a vehicle for transparency. The administration should underwrite curricular assessments conducted by the faculty senate, with data and reports available for all to see. Such a portal also might explain issues of workload and resources; enable downloads of templates and best practices; track course proposals and catalog changes, creating a digital archive; ensure interdepartment sign-off on issues of duplication or collaboration; post agendas and dates of all department and college curriculum meetings with attachments of materials under consideration; and disseminate minutes of those meetings, with votes and rationales.

Keep this in mind, too: We're living in the Internet age, which presumes that people have access to information. Curricula used to be one-way information streams like newspapers, television, and radio. The Internet and convergence changed that. We don't need a new, narrowly defined course on every innovation or discovery. Neither do we need to approve "dissertation" courses of new hires nor keep on the books outdated courses of senior professors. Newbie and pre-emeritus alike should not teach what they demand but where demand exists.

Perhaps the best solution to curricular glut, in the absence of rigorous faculty oversight, already is being instituted across the country: responsibility-centered budgeting. RCB shifts the cost of operations to academic units that pay for space, equipment, and, at some places, even custodial service.

How does that affect curriculum? Typically tuition is tied to enrollment and demand. Departments that teach their own majors or large classes to majors in any field get the lion's share of tuition. Too little demand, and departments have to rethink or streamline the curriculum, canceling classes and focusing on what is and is not essential for quality.

To be sure, responsibility-centered budgeting at times creates undue competition among departments trolling for students and so works against interdisciplinary collaboration. At worst it can threaten institutional priorities such as diversity and multiculturalism. For instance, an African-studies program may rely on low-enrolled history, political-science, or economics courses. If there are too few teachers to staff those narrow but vital classes, or if departments lure students with ludicrously popular ones — "History of Social Networks," "Politics of YouTube," "Economics of Microsoft" — the climate and status of the entire institution may suffer.

But those problems can be managed more easily than can curricular glut. Courses tied to strategic goals and/or institutional climate can be exempt from considerations of student demand. Interdisciplinary offerings can be rewarded when carryover funds are disbursed at the end of fiscal years. To accomplish that, the key is to keep budget authority at the college or program level.

I ran these ideas by an administrator at an institution considering a transition from quarters to semesters and a switch to responsibility-centered budgeting. He had doubts. "The model you propose assumes a great deal of intellectual honesty on the part of the faculty," he said. "That is, once they receive clear information and logically consider the costs of the present system (no sabbaticals, high workloads, etc.) and the benefits of the change (more research, manageable workloads, etc.), professors then will find a way to cut the number of courses. In practice, other forces will also have an effect, such as professors' personal agendas and self-interest."

Agendas and self-interest are at the core of the curricular glut. Thus it behooves all of us, from adjunct to administrator, to consider reform, so that balance is achieved between quality and demand, especially when new budget models are in play. Finally, factor this: Intellectual honesty is nurtured by administrative transparency. You can't have one without the other on issues as volatile as curricula and budgets.

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Section: Commentary

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