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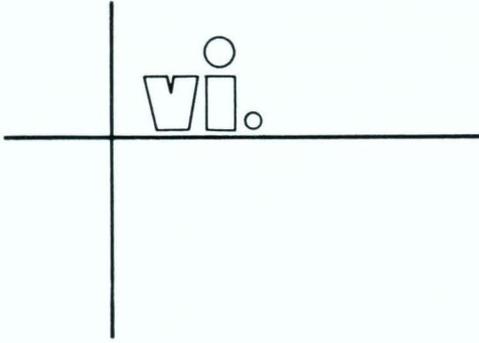


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Innovation or Renovation?

Undergraduate Curriculum Trends, by Paul L. Dressel & Frances H. DeLisle, *Washington: American Council on Education, 1969. 83 pp. \$2.00.*

This is a dangerous monograph. If read widely enough it could spoil all the good clean academic fun enjoyed by curriculum committees in the creative guessing that has traditionally shaped their efforts at reform.

Professors Dressel and DeLisle, supported by a Danforth Foundation grant, have reflected statistically a decade of change in specific curricular requirements and practices in 322 representative four-year liberal arts colleges and universities by the simple device of comparing the undergraduate catalogs of these institutions for 1957 and 1967. They selected that particular decade, they say, because of the apparent ferment of the period in higher education. Nevertheless, they conclude that "Despite all the talk about innovation, undergraduate curricula requirements, as a whole, have changed remarkably little in ten years."

The authors provide a brief prefatory historical account of patterns and causes of collegiate curricular change since Colonial times which, while it is familiar material, does establish a helpful context and a reminder of the cyclical recurrence of so much activity that periodically passes for innovation. In addition, they isolate those changes—calendars, credits, grading systems—which do not necessarily alter the educational experience of the student. In this sharpened perspective, the reader is better able to interpret their findings on curricular change in each discipline and area, and to decide what is really entitled to be called a significant trend. This approach dramatizes how slowly and cautiously, indeed, the academic mills do grind.

While we are assured that there is more renovation and tinkering than genuine innovation, this study clearly identifies and documents one strong direction: We are moving towards a heightened awareness of the student's individual needs, and greater flexibility in attempting to meet them. For one thing, while requirements persist, prescriptive and specific requirements are relaxing. This is reflected, for example, in decreasing requirements in English composition, literature, and speech; wider use of proficiency tests for comping out of writing, speech, and foreign languages; and a broader use in all areas of options and substitutes. The authors infer, both from catalog data and rhetoric, that we are more likely after a decade to view our students as individuals, with varying backgrounds and preparations and a greater mastery of skills, better prepared to profit from breadth of training and capable of assuming more responsibility for developing their own educational plans—though all such conclusions will shock most current student activists.

They report the same tendency in the section on "Provisions for Individualization," which discusses curricular features (other than concentration requirements and electives) that attempt to individualize learning. Here the authors note that "One-half or more of the institutions provide advanced placement, honors programs, independent study and seminar programs. This represents at least twice the number of colleges and universities making these provisions ten years ago." They note similar growth in study abroad programs, field and community work, comprehensive examinations, and residence hall experiments. Like it or not—and the authors do—that's where we are going.

Each reader of this study presumably will respond to particular statistics according to his own prejudices, hopes, and expectations. I offer a sample of my own: (1) *Appalling*. The prevailing practice of no undergraduate requirement of courses explicitly treating other cultures. (2) *I Told You So*. The one-year requirement in English composition is down from 60 per cent of the reporting institutions to 48 per cent. And 7 per cent require none. (3) *Raised Eyebrows*. The two-year foreign language requirement is up from 58 per cent to 67 per cent. (4) *Predictable Academic Irrationality*. As both the foreign language requirement and the number of study abroad programs increase, so does the number of the latter that require no proficiency in the language of the country visited. And History may still be found among either the Social Sciences or the Humanities (choose one). And courses in Business and Education fulfill some distribution requirements in the Social Sciences.

As I noted in opening, this study could deprive us all of the ancient joys of guessing, bluffing, and making convenient selection of useful data. But serious curriculum planners and reformers who want to

know in detail and breadth what is happening to collegiate curricula will find it a most valuable source.

Philip Denenfeld

