



An Inconvenient Curriculum

by Marcus Ford and Peter Friederici

Abstract

If colleges and universities are to live up to their responsibility to educate tomorrow's decision makers, they must develop a different, less convenient, curriculum: one that addresses real-world issues. Granted, most universities already have courses dealing with some of these issues; however, these courses often are buried within majors and tend to be upper-division courses that have prerequisites. As a result, students can graduate having completed all of their liberal studies or general education requirements and all of the courses required in their majors and know next to nothing about the world around them. General education requirements must be reconfigured so that they address the global and regional issues to which students will have to respond in their lifetimes. A university curriculum that focuses attention on real-world issues—however inconvenient—is more useful than one that does not.

Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) has done more to educate the general public about climate change than has the work of all American colleges and universities put together. That a single movie has done more to advance public discussion of what surely is one of the most important issues facing humankind today than have the very institutions that are charged with educating the next generation of decision makers is sobering.

Climate change wedes the physical and natural sciences with economics, political science, and inquiries into intergenerational equity and other values, which makes it complex and unlike the simplistic science requirements at most

colleges and universities. Students not majoring in the natural sciences—which is most students—meet graduation requirements by taking introductory courses in one or more sciences. Such courses were created not to encourage investigation of important contemporary issues, but rather to introduce the subject matter and methodology of a particular academic discipline.

That's convenient for professors who don't feel comfortable reaching beyond their traditional fields; however, traditional disciplines have roots in an era very unlike today's global age. Colleges and universities must instead develop a different, less convenient, curriculum—one that addresses real-world issues such as climate change. Today's students will find their world shaped by many complex issues, such as energy needs and costs, the role of religion in world affairs, the needs of changing populations for food and water, and the interaction between economic development and the natural environment. Gaining an understanding that no single discipline has the tools to provide all the answers to such problems is critical to tomorrow's decision makers.

The academic balkanization of knowledge allows many students to conclude that some methods of inquiry, such as science or economics or the academic study of religion, have little utility for everyday life. Employing academic disciplines to understand real-world problems would make it clear to students that an intermingling of different methods of inquiry is exactly what is needed—not just on, but off campus.

The blame here lies with faculties, which determine requirements for college degrees. General education programs today constitute a tragedy of the commons. These programs are shaped by individual interest groups that are more concerned about making sure their courses have sufficient enrollment or, more nobly, that students understand the methodology of their particular academic discipline, than they are about what students need to know to live responsible lives. Because each department is protecting its own interest, the general interest is neglected. Just as some individual nations have determined that to limit their greenhouse gas emissions is not in their short-term economic interest, individual academic departments often are not willing to set aside their short-term goals for the common good.

General education requirements need to be reconfigured so that they address global and regional issues that students will face. Yet the challenge is not only to faculties. Funding issues, too, will need to be resolved. General education courses typically serve double duty, satisfying both individual major and campus-wide requirements. Even if issues-oriented courses are not required for a major area of study, these courses still should be offered, which means they will need financial support. In fact, because these courses may be team-taught and because they must reflect changing current issues, they might need to be updated more regularly and require more resources than traditional courses.

The curricular changes we are suggesting are not minor. They are not impossibly difficult either. They are merely inconvenient. The question that all of us in higher education must ask ourselves is not how difficult it would be to rework curricula, but rather what the costs—social, environmental, and moral—of *not* restructuring them would be.

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In other words, what is the cost of maintaining the status quo at a time when the world is changing more dramatically than at any other time in human history?

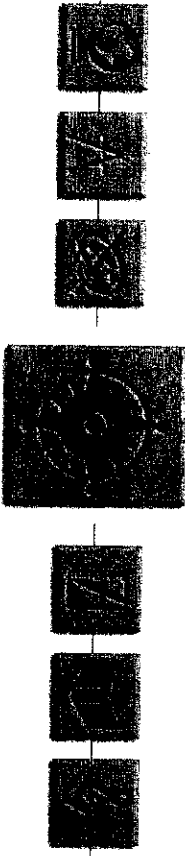
In our view, that cost is unacceptably great. A democratic nation cannot be run effectively by citizens who lack knowledge about the most pressing issues of the day. We cannot leave the task of education to the media or the film industry. The task of educating the next generation is the responsibility of the nation's universities. This task is a more urgent responsibility than ever, and our past failure is no excuse for not succeeding in the future.

Reference

An Inconvenient Truth, 96 min., Paramount, 2006.

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