

Dear Editor:

### **Letter to the Editor: "Puzzling Pathways..."**

To say that I found your well-researched and highly relevant April 19, 2018 feature story titled ["Puzzling Pathways..."](#) nightmarishly depressing would be a severe understatement. While those of us who had opposed, several years ago, the revamping of the Gen Ed curriculum, in the form that Andy Stott and his colleagues had hatched and later publicized to the campus-wide faculty, as not only cumbersome and unworkable in practice, but educationally unsound and an unnecessary budgetary burden to boot, what your feature story has revealed is exactly what we had feared. However, what some of my colleagues and I were unprepared for, is the magnitude of the rot that has set in, in how the Gen Ed curriculum is being implemented in practice. The canned responses from the relevant administrators that attempt to whitewash what is going on is, to say the least, laughably pathetic.

When the content of Gen Ed courses is brazenly, unabashedly, and cynically, labeled what it is really not, in order to, in effect, exempt a section of the student body from fully participating in the Gen Ed program, represents at a broader level a reflection of the kind of corruption we are increasingly witnessing in society at large today among those who control the levers of power: an unashamed proclivity for fakery (undergirded by a disdain of the vilest kind for general decency). As a colleague sardonically mused when we were discussing what your story has reported, it is like suggesting that because the subject matter of, say, a course in astrophysics is stellar black holes, dark energy, and dark matter, the course can be sold to the unwary as a course on the sociology of race and ethnicity in United States. Or imagine this scenario: a traveler asks if there is a direct flight between Buffalo and Anchorage and is told such a flight does not exist but is then cynically placated with the comment that airlines are a mode of transportation, they can take you to many places; so just hop onto any flight going anywhere. To those of us who have spent their entire teaching careers teaching and believing in the value of the liberal arts wing of the university curriculum, this approach not only contemptuously devalues what we do, but also sends an absolutely wrong message to students: Gen Ed courses are a waste of time.

Whether or not we should attempt to solve the problem of climate change is not a technical matter, it is a political matter; a question such as how big a space exploration program should we have is not a technical question, it is a political question; to what extent should we address environmental pollution is not a technical matter, it is a political matter; should we build a new bridge Peace Bridge that would be so aesthetically riveting that it would help put Buffalo prominently on the world tourist map is a not a technical question, it is a political question; and so on; and so on. True Gen Ed courses, not fake ones, also deal with these kinds of serious and highly relevant societal questions that at first blush may appear to belong entirely to the terrain of STEM fields. Many in the scientific community around the country (and the world) are slowly beginning to wake up to this fact, but we have a long way to go. Vide the "March for Science" protests of scientists in Washington, D.C., something completely unheard of hitherto.

The sad truth is that there has always been a misguided strong undercurrent in this university of trying to push it toward becoming primarily an "institute of technology," albeit in practice but not necessarily in name. We should be reminded, however, of the fact that even that world's premier institute of technology, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, discovered a long time ago that it could not in all conscience send its graduates out into the world completely unaware of

how society works—from the perspective of such profound matters as civic engagement, civil society, democracy (to be understood in its dyadic sense of procedural and authentic), human rights, civil rights, the rule of law, inclusivity of the historically marginalized, governmental separation of powers, war and peace in an age of a voraciously limit-less military industrial complex, societally-crippling economic inequality, law and social justice, and the like. Hence, its curriculum substantively includes a liberal arts and social science component. In fact, M.I.T.'s arts and humanities fields are ranked as among the best in the world. (Incidentally, M.I.T. has launched a five-billion-dollar—yes with a “b”! —fund raising-campaign under the banner “The MIT Campaign for a Better World.”)

The United States today has a military presence in almost every country in the world, except in an obvious few. This is worth pondering. In other words, there is probably no country on the planet that has had and has as much influence in shaping the modern world as the United States; and, of course, the reverse is also true—there is probably no country on the planet that has been shaped by the forces of world history as much as the United States has. Yet, our English expatriate friend Andy Stott, together with his fellow geniuses, did away with that centerpiece of the former Gen Ed program, the world history courses (aka World Civ). How can a research university aspire to offer world-class education, as UB aspires to do, and yet cannot find a practical way to require all its students to be knowledgeable about even the broadest contours of world history (let alone U.S. history) before they graduate?

In the final analysis, your feature story raises this fundamental question: What is a university education for? Is it simply for vocationally training students to attain narrowly defined career goals or is it supposed to accomplish more than that? Those who first developed universities in the Western world, in places like Bologna, Oxford, Salamanca, and Cambridge, knew the answer and it is one that has stood the test of time: education in an institution that aspires to higher teaching and learning must go beyond preparing students for narrow career goals—and that is where Gen Ed courses, that is true Gen Ed courses (not bogus ones masquerading as Gen Ed courses), come into play. A university education is not just about building better mousetraps; it is also about comprehending human relations, at both societal and individual levels. Consider, if, someday, humans end up establishing a settlement on Mars (as the people behind the Mars One project, for example, hope to do), “rocket science” alone will be insufficient to underwrite its success. There will still be the same thorny questions that have plagued human societies on this planet from time immemorial to be dealt with: those relating to how best we can live with each other in peace and harmony. Gen Ed courses are meant to explore these thorny questions (even if the current state of the world leaves one with much pessimism).

In fact, there is more to bona fide Gen Ed courses. They are not only about enhancing/imparting knowledge of the current and past circumstances of our society, they also aim to teach students what all faculty and administrators alike (in Western democracies) love to claim that their universities do: critical thinking skills. I define critical thinking as a mode of thinking that is specific to true intellectuals (not pseudointellectuals). That is, in addition to its foundational principle that *information* as distinct from *knowledge* is only a means to the acquisition of the latter and that all knowledge rests on a matrix of *logically* interconnected ideas and concepts and which themselves are a product of *disciplined* analytical reasoning. Further, genuine critical thinking is characterized by a number of immutable cognitive hallmarks; and salient among them, most would agree, are a fiery passion for truth; a profound belief in the value of not only honest but

socially responsible research; patience and open-mindedness to take seriously the views of others; a deep sense of commitment to the acquisition of knowledge and information on a variety of issues, both, personal as well as public; a fanatically uncompromising honesty in confronting personal biases, prejudices, stereotypes, etc.; the recognition that education in an institution of higher learning encompasses much more than training for specific narrowly defined career goals; possession of limitless curiosity regarding all kinds of subject matter; and a refusal to make judgments that are not based on reasoned reflection.

A final thought: to those among us faculty who send their children to elite private colleges and universities (instead of here at UB), which anecdotal evidence suggests are the majority of UB faculty, here is a question: Would they be satisfied with the current botched Gen Ed curriculum if their children were attending UB?

Sincerely,