plished has been a subject of less attention—and for understandable reasons.

There are, first of all, many possible ways to organize a curriculum to achieve agreed-upon goals. Indeed, the variety of options is part of the intellectual challenge of reorganizing undergraduate study. Even more important is the diversity of American colleges and universities. Student bodies and faculties differ, as do resources and missions. As Edwin J. Delattre notes in *Education and the Public Trust,* each institution must ask itself: "What should be the curriculum *here,* in this school, college, university? Why should *we* and *our* students study this curriculum?"

Nevertheless, different institutions can learn from one another, can profit by seeing how other colleges and universities have solved problems with which they are wrestling. Curriculum reform that proceeds in awareness of what is happening elsewhere is likely to move at a faster pace.

The NEH report, *50 Hours,* is a way of informing colleges engaged in curricular reform about how other schools are managing the task. Its aim is to be specific; its central device for organizing details is an imagined core of studies—fifty semester hours—that would encourage coherent and substantive learning in essential areas of knowledge.

So far as I know, this particular core curriculum does not exist anywhere. Parts of it can be found at different colleges and universities; so can alternatives to both the parts and the whole. Many alternatives are described in this report in order to call attention to the variety of ways in which substantive and coherent learning can be achieved.

Because it is not the proper role of government to determine a nationwide curriculum, it needs to be emphasized that *50 Hours* is not offered as a single prototype. Instead, it is a way of providing information about various models to individual faculties that must decide the undergraduate course of study. *50 Hours* is intended as a resource for the many dedicated and thoughtful men and women across the country who are working to improve undergraduate education. It is meant to support them by placing their individual efforts into a larger context of national questions and concerns.

Administrators, as well as faculty members, often initiate discussions about reform; and this report is also intended for them. Governing boards, too, sometimes encourage reform: In 1986 the Louisiana Board of Regents mandated general education requirements for state colleges and universities in order to ensure study of essential areas of knowledge; in 1989 the Massachusetts Board of Regents called on that state's public colleges and universities to revise general education with the aim of developing in students a broad range of abilities and knowledge.

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Why is a core important?

A 1989 survey funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and conducted by the Gallup Organization showed 25 percent of the nation's college seniors unable to locate Columbus's voyage within the correct half-century. About the same percentage could not distinguish Churchill's words from Stalin's, or Karl Marx's thoughts from the ideas of the U.S. Constitution. More than 40 percent could not identify when the Civil War occurred. Most could not identify Magna Carta, the Missouri Compromise, or Reconstruction. Most could not link major works by Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton with their authors. To the majority of college seniors, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" were clearly unfamiliar.

Education aims at more than acquaintance with dates and places, names and titles. Students should not only know when Columbus sailed but also perceive the world-altering shock of his voyage. They should not only know what Plato wrote but also understand the allegory of the cave. When education is rightly conceived, events and ideas become, in philosopher Michael Oakeshott's words, "invitations to look, to listen and to reflect." But students who approach the end of their college years without knowing basic landmarks of history and thought are unlikely to have reflected on their meaning.

A required course of studies—a core of learning—can ensure that students have opportunities to know the literature, philosophy, institutions, and art of our own and other cultures. A core of learning can also encourage understanding of mathematics and science, and *50 Hours* includes these fields of inquiry. The National Endowment for the Humanities must be concerned with the literature major who has no understanding of physics as well as with the engineer who graduates without studying history. Both are less prepared than they should be to make the subtle and complex choices today's life demands. Both bring limited perspective to enduring human questions: Where have we come from? Who are we? What is our destiny? Kant struggled for answers in his study; Boyle, in his laboratory. Thoreau, Gauguin, and Einstein took up these questions, approaching them in different ways, but sharing a common goal. All the various branches of human knowledge, as physicist Erwin Schrodinger once observed, have the same objective: "It is to obey the command of the Delphic deity," to honor the ancient injunction, "Know thyself."

> "...common learning engages students with their democratic heritage, it invites informed participation in our ongoing national conversation: What should a free people value? What should they resist? What are the limits fo freedom, and how are they to be decided?"

To the task of learning about oneself and the world, a required course of studies can bring needed order and coherence. At one midwestern university where there is no core, students choose from almost 900 courses, with topics ranging from the history of foreign labor movements to the analysis of daytime soap operas. The result is all too often "a meaningless mosaic of fragments," in naturalist Loren Eiseley's words. "From ape skull to Mayan temple," he wrote, "we contemplate the miscellaneous debris of time like sightseers to whom these mighty fragments, fallen gateways, and sunken galleys convey no present instruction." A core of learning shows the patterns of the mosaic. It provides a context for forming the parts of education into a whole.

A core of learning also encourages community, whether we conceive community small or large. Having some learning in common draws students together—and faculty members as well. When that common learning engages students with their democratic heritage, it invites informed participation in our ongoing national conversation: What should a free people value? What should they resist? What are the limits to freedom, and how are they to be decided?

When students are encouraged to explore the history and thought of cultures different from their own, they gain insight into others with whom they share the earth. They come to understand unfamiliar ideals and traditions—and to see more clearly the characteristics that define their own particular journey.

Is there time in the curriculum for a core?

Almost all colleges and universities have requirements in "general education"—a part of the curriculum that is specified for all undergraduates, regardless of major. The hours set aside for general education are the hours from which a core of learning can be constructed. The larger and more complex the educational institution, the more difficult it is to commit hours to general education. A school that offers an accredited engineering program has to recognize that few engineering students will be able to graduate in four years if they devote much more than a semester to the humanities and social sciences. Schools offering a bachelor's degree in music must face the demands of the National Association of Schools of Music, an accrediting association that expects students to devote 65 percent of their coursework to studying music.

Nevertheless, even doctorate-granting universities, the most complex institutions of higher education, require, on the average, more than thirty-seven semester hours in general education. For all four-year institutions, the average requirement in general education is fifty-two semester hours. There is time at most schools for a significant core of learning.

As it is now, however, these hours that could be devoted to a core are all too often organized instead into loosely stated "distribution requirements"—mandates that students take some courses in certain areas and some in others. Long lists of acceptable choices are set out in catalogs. Specialized offerings for the most part, they often have little to do with the broadly conceived learning that should be at the heart of general education. Indeed, some courses seem to have little to do with the areas of human knowledge they are supposed to elucidate. At a public university in the West, it is possible to fulfill humanities requirements with courses in interior design. In 1988-89 at a private university in the East, one could fulfill part of the social science distribution requirement by taking "Lifetime Fitness."

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Some core programs do offer choices: Alternative possibilities for mathematics and science are almost universal. Choice within a core can work well, so long as each of the choices fits within a carefully defined framework and aims at broad and integrated learning. The University of Denver's core, for example, offers five, year-long options in the arts and humanities. In one course, "The Making of the Modern Mind," philosophy, literature, music, and art are studied from the Enlightenment to the present. A second course, "Commercial Civilization," emphasizes history, political thought and institutions, and classical economic theory from the origins of capitalism to contemporary times.

Is a core too hard for some students? Too easy for others?

The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk,* recommended that college-bound high school students take four years of English, three of social studies, science, and mathematics, and two years of foreign language. Students who have completed such a course of studies should be ready to undertake the work required by a program like *50 Hours.* Entering students who lack necessary verbal and mathematical skills should prepare for core work by taking remedial courses. Such a plan benefits the core and can be of value to remedial programs as well by providing a well-defined goal for teaching and learning. The faculty of the remedial and developmental programs of Brooklyn College of the City University of New York recently dedicated a conference to Brooklyn's core curriculum to recognize its importance for their work.

In *50 Hours,* students are expected to write papers of varying length in every course, including those in science and mathematics. The practice of organizing ideas and presenting them coherently is a useful tool for learning in all subjects. Students who write in every course also come to understand that clear and graceful expression is universally valuable, not merely an arbitrary preoccupation of English departments. Some students who are prepared for core work may still need extra practice in composition. For them, writing-intensive sections of required courses can be designated—as they are at Brandeis and Vanderbilt universities.

Students who come to college well-prepared may have read some of the works assigned in the core. But so long as those works are profound, provocative, and revealing, these students will again be challenged. Indeed, a criterion for choosing works for the core should be that they repay many readings. They should be books that remain fresh, full of power to quicken thought and feeling, no matter how many times we open their pages.

Why is establishing a core so difficult?

Curricular change has never been easy: Henry Bragdon, writing about Woodrow Wilson's years at Princeton, called it "harder than moving a graveyard." And the way in which higher education has evolved over the last century has complicated the task.

The forces that have come to dominate higher education are centrifugal rather than centripetal, weakening the ties that individual faculty members have to their institutions. As professional advancement has come increasingly to depend on the esteem of other specialists on other campuses, there has been less and less incentive for scholars at any single college or university to identify fully with that institution and the shared efforts necessary for a complicated task like curricular reform.

At the same time, faculty responsibility for the curriculum has grown. If it is to change, the faculty must come together and act for the common purpose of changing it. "We have a paradox," Professor James Q. Wilson observed after curriculum reform at Harvard. "The faculty is supposed to govern collegially, but it is not a collegium."

The increasingly specialized nature of graduate study is also an impediment. Many