

How to Be "Smart" to the Core (Foreign Language not Necessary)

By Freddie A. Bowles
Fayetteville, Arkansas

http://www.corndancer.com/vox/gnosis/artcls_037054/gno_now047.html

No need to learn a foreign language in Arkansas schools: You are "smart" without one.

Arkansas education is in the news again . . . and again, but this time the news "cuts to the core" of academic excellence at the University of Arkansas Fulbright College of Arts and Humanities on the Fayetteville campus.

Legislative Edict Undermines Traditional Standards of Excellence.

The state's flagship university has decided to cut the much-lauded 66-hour core curriculum for arts and humanities to a more humble and modest 35-hour "minimum core" requirement, supposedly to comply with the Arkansas General Assembly's "Roger Phillips Transfer Policy Act," or Act 182 of February 2009.

Although Act 182 does not specifically address foreign language courses, its edicts have imposed changes on state universities that directly affect requirements related to credit hours and the design of baccalaureate degree programs. In the wake of these changes, foreign language education is suffering significant harm.

In practical effect, the changes in curriculum wrought by efforts to comply with Act 182 have led to the elimination of the foreign language requirement for a humanities degree in Arkansas unless the student is a foreign language major, although faculty in other major fields of study have the option to mandate a foreign language requirement.

The act and administrative reactions to it also undermine other traditional standards of excellence that have earned accolades and national respect for the liberal arts education provided by Fulbright College.

The law deals a stunning second blow to the beleaguered state of foreign language education in the state of Arkansas. The first was struck by the Arkansas Department of Education when it removed foreign language from the qualifications for new lottery-funded scholarships.

What a deal! You can now go to college without taking a foreign language class in high school, and with the passage of "Act 182," you can also earn a humanities degree without studying a foreign language.

What Barriers Are They Breaking — Credit Transfer or Academic Rigor?

Representative Mike Burris of Malvern (Democrat, District 26) introduced House Bill 1357, which became **Act 182** of the 87th General Assembly of 2009. He explained his support for the minimum-core concept this way: “This Act will tear down the barriers between two-year and four-year colleges and make it easier for students to transfer their credits,” as reported by the Arkansas Association of Public Universities.

Credit-transfer barriers weren’t the real issue. Transferring credits from a two-year to a four-year college or university was already a fairly seamless process.

The underlying reason for the bill was to eliminate the requirement that students from two-year institutions earn additional core curriculum credit hours at their new university. Transfer students complained about the additional course load — and legislators listened. They couldn't abide the fact that core requirements at some Arkansas universities exceeded the Arkansas Department of Higher Education Core Curriculum minimum of 35 hours.

For example, prior to the passage of Act 182, if I had attended Northwest Arkansas Community College and completed an Associate of Arts degree, I could transfer to the University of Arkansas with *all* of the hours I had completed at NWACC.

However, if I wanted to pursue my degree studies as an English major, I would have to pick-up an additional 21 hours of core curriculum, including foreign language, math, and science hours, in addition to the credit hours required to earn a bachelors degree in English.

21 Hours of Coursework Pass Away.

So, the issue addressed by state legislators had very little to do with transfer credits and very much to do with overcoming the expectations of academic excellence that some universities demand of students wishing to earn a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree.

With the passage of Act 182, the 21 additional hours of traditional liberal arts education, currently required by the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences, will no longer be necessary beginning with the freshman class of 2011.

In place of college-mandated requirements, individual programs within the Fulbright College will have to determine if they want to add the missing core classes to their programs of study.

News of these proposed changes began to trickle down to faculty at the flagship UA Fayetteville in fall 2009. Professors and instructors in the foreign language department were justified in their concern that enrollment would drop in foreign language classes — not only because of Act 182, but also because of changes in the high school core curriculum.

Gambling Revenues Prompt Changes Under the Banner of Opportunity.

With passage of the lottery and other gambling initiatives in the 2008 general election, educators and legislators knew that many millions of new dollars would soon become available to finance college scholarships. The bureaucrats and politicians began to craft legislation and regulations to put the scholarship program into effect. In the process, the two-year foreign language requirement for high school students was eliminated.

On the surface, the announcement wore a positive face. We quote the Department of Higher Education's **Financial Aid Division web**: "Due to additional funding made possible by the Arkansas Scholarship Lottery, the Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarship has been expanded to provide opportunities for higher education to previously unserved Arkansans (traditional and non-traditional students). The applications for the Academic Challenge Scholarship will be available on January 1, 2010. The scholarship will be available to high school seniors and non-traditional students."

In this case, "expanded" can also be viewed as diminished. It translates into no foreign language requirement for scholarship recipients.

According to standards set by the Department of Education (*see web page*), a student who wishes to receive the Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarship must take the "Smart Core" of classes consisting of the following courses:

- 4 units of English
- 4 units of Math
- 3 units of Natural Science
- 3 units of Social Studies
- ½ unit of Oral Communications
- ½ unit of Physical Education
- ½ unit of Health and Safety
- ½ unit of Fine Arts
- 6 units of Career Focus

Voices Rise Up against the Changes.

It took a while, but the ramifications of the changes to secondary and higher education standards began to unsettle educators and commentators concerned about academic excellence.

On Sunday, May 2, the University of Arkansas made the front page news in Section B, Northwest Arkansas, of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* with the headline, "UA Cuts Core to Aid Transfer Students," and again on Sunday, May 16, in Perspectives (Section H) with "Don't

Gut Stellar Core Curriculum,” from guest writer Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

The May 2 report was picked up by **The Ticker**, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* blog, under the headline “U. of Arkansas Cuts Core Curriculum, Eliminating Foreign-Language Requirement.”

The comments expressed outrage, disbelief, and disappointment along with opinions that supported the faculty’s right to make changes and the legislature’s prerogative to dictate to public colleges and universities. One respondent suggested that “They ought to at least be required to relinquish the ‘Fulbright’ part of their name in adopting such pathetic standards. Really, how far are we from just saying, ‘Look, whatever you’ve already learned and done in your life is pretty much equivalent to our degree, so you pay us, and we’ll give you the degree.’”

The UA Chancellor, Dr. G. David Gearhart, assured the public in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*: “What we’re trying to do in the state is get more students with baccalaureate degrees.”

We Were Going to Do It Anyway.

William Schwab, Fulbright College Dean, pointed out in the same article that the college was already planning to “adjust its ‘bloated’ core” before Act 182 was passed, even though outside institutions such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni listed UA on the A list for its extensive general education requirements. The list ranked UA Fayetteville on an equal tier with Baylor, UT-Austin, and City University of New York.

Enrollment at UA now stands a good chance of increasing thanks to “an ease of transfer” (Gearhart, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, May 2).

Should we as faculty and engaged citizens be concerned about the ability of these new students to complete their studies successfully and earn a diploma? Do greater numbers of undergraduates equate to greater numbers of graduates?

Without the “bloated,” rigorous core, will these new enrollees be able to build the solid academic foundation necessary to sustain an intense and demanding transition into upper level classes? Or have we chosen an easier, softer way?

How Do We Parse the Issues?

According to the *Democrat-Gazette* (May 1), only 17 per cent of students who enter a two-year college in Arkansas go on to graduate. At Arkansas universities, only 38 per cent of students graduate. Shall we expect higher percentages of success with the passage of Act 182, or will the dismal rates show further decline? Does “expanded” opportunity actually translate into diminished opportunity?

For sure, we can be grateful the UA won’t support “a two-tiered system in which transfer students would be required to have only 35 credit hours of core courses and students who

originate their college career at UA would be held to a higher standard and greater number of required core courses." We quote Dean Schwab in an e-mail to the *Democrat-Gazette* (reported May 2).

Heaven forbid. The last thing we want for our students are higher standards.

Paul Greenberg, an editor at the *Democrat-Gazette*, reminded readers in his column on May 23 that "A broad liberal education is the antithesis of a technical, specialized education, which is what results when each department of the university decides for itself what general education courses it will require for its specialty. Education, like modern society itself, is now to be broken down into specializations.... It's a formula for mediocrity, but always be sure to call it equity."

To Diminish the Value of Languages Also Diminishes the Heart and Mind.

A century ago, an educated person took foreign languages to increase reasoning skills and sharpen the intellect. Learning French, German, Spanish, Italian, Greek, or Latin was an intellectual exercise that enriched the soul by opening one's heart and mind to another way of interpreting reality.

What makes us think we no longer need those same skills today? As we draw closer and closer to the other nations and people of the world, can't we see the intrinsic value of learning how to communicate with others in their own languages?

Retrenching into a monolingual and monoculture society — or, as Greenberg notes, into myriad specializations — de-educates our children and pushes us backwards until eventually, the left hand won't know what the right hand is doing.

What, Then, Can We Do?

A practical solution for helping us put the "human" back into "humanities" would be the requirement for students to graduate from high school with two years of a foreign language if they are college-bound. More than 60 per cent of the world's people are already multilingual (Richards & Rodgers, 2003, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, 2nd ed.). Why do we in the U.S. downplay language skills when it's obvious that our students need a second or third language to compete in an expanding global economy?

If we can't manage to convince the masters of the high school curriculum to respect languages, then let's try to convince the two-year colleges to require their graduates to complete a minimum three-semester language block.

Finally, we need to convince leaders of the academic departments at Fulbright College to restore the foreign language requirement to their degree standards, as is their option under Act 182.

Let's face it. We are surrounded by other vital languages — even in Arkansas, where 29 languages other than English are spoken, according to the **2005 American Community Survey** on the Modern Languages Association website.

In Arkansas, the survey tells us, 6,548 citizens speak German, 6,031 speak French, and 113,174 speak Spanish. Wouldn't it be gracious on a personal level — and practical on a global level where economies and cultures are increasingly integrated — if our children could communicate in German, French, or Spanish, too?



EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1990 the State Board of Higher Education voted to establish a minimum set of required courses for a baccalaureate degree. At that time, institutions were able to add courses to this "core" to fit the context and expectations of their colleges and faculties.

The Minimum Core

Agenda Item No. 9 April 20, 1990
State Minimum Core Required for Baccalaureate Degrees

Act 98 of 1989 (Arkansas Code 6-61-218) provides that the State Board of Higher Education “shall establish in consultation with the colleges and universities a minimum core of courses which shall apply toward the general education core curriculum requirements for baccalaureate degrees at state supported institutions of higher education and which shall be fully transferable between state institutions.” The term “State Minimum Core” will be used to describe the core identified for purposes of this legislation.

The following list of courses, with accompanying specifications, is proposed to implement this legislation:

State Minimum Core

- English/Communication
- English Composition 6
- Speech Communication 0-3
- Math 3 -- College algebra or course as sophisticated as College algebra. *(Institutions may require students majoring in math, engineering, science, and business to take higher math as part of the State Minimum Core.)*
- Science 8 -- Science courses must include laboratories. *(Institutions may require students majoring in math, engineering, science, education, and health related professions to take higher or specific science courses as a part of the State Minimum Core.)*
- Fine Arts/Humanities 6-9 *(Must be broad survey course(s).)*
- Social Sciences
- US History
- Government 3
- Other Social Science 6-9 *(Institutions may require students majoring in engineering to take either six hours of humanities and social sciences at the junior/senior level or substitute an additional six hours of higher math and/or additional science as part of the State Minimum Core.)*

TOTAL 35

