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By **MICHAEL POLIAKOFF** | September 4, 2011

## Failing grades on core subjects

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For way too many college students, their diploma could be a “ticket to nowhere.”

At Vanderbilt University, a course called “Country Music” can serve as the only collegiate history course a student takes.

At Vassar College, a class that studies *Sex and the City*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *Gossip Girls* can count as a student’s foundation in English composition. According to this year’s freshman handbook, the course will spark “sophisticated conversations” and introduce students to “critical reading and persuasive writing.”

Solid core requirements are increasingly falling to the wayside as the “do as you please” model chips away at the basics. When 18-year-old first-year students are left to construct their own curriculum, they are often left with a haphazard smattering of unrelated classes, leading to an education with gaping holes in it. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni has been sounding this warning for the last two years with its “What Will They Learn?” college ratings, and our 2011-12 edition, covering 1,007 colleges and universities, is grim:

Even as our economy jolts and sputters, only 5 percent of schools have an economics requirement.

Barely 15 percent require an intermediate-level foreign language, even in today’s globalized society.

Less than one-fifth of colleges and universities require a basic course in U.S. government or history.

Little more than one-third

require a literature survey.

More than a third do not require a college-level math course, and 16 percent lack a rigorous writing course.

The damage shows.

Forty-five percent of students failed to show significant improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills in their first two years at college, according to a study released by New York University professor Richard Arum. After four years of college, 36 percent didn’t show any significant improvement.

Businesses are noticing.

An overwhelming majority of employers believe that institutions need to improve student achievement for America to remain competitive in the global market, according to a study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills survey found that fewer than a quarter of employers deemed the entry-level skills of four-year college graduates excellent, and more than a quarter called their writing skills deficient.

A diploma should be more than a receipt for tens of thousands of dollars of supposed education. A diploma should tell employers that the bearer is knowledgeable in basic math and science, has a sophisticated grasp of writing, and knows what makes our free society tick.

Federal and state governments spend tens of billions of dollars on education every year, and higher-education costs are rising rapidly. If Americans are paying billions of dollars for education, shouldn’t one return on their investment be well-educated graduates?

The “What Will They Learn?” study grades schools by how many fundamental subjects they require of all students. Nearly 30 percent of the schools get a D or an F, meaning they require two or fewer of the seven core-curriculum subjects examined in the study. Another third get a C for requiring three courses. The findings correlate with trends we see among graduates: diplomas built on a faulty curriculum and that lead nowhere.

Of the 68 Pennsylvania institutions in the study, not one earns an A for requiring at least six of the core courses. Fine schools otherwise, perhaps, but on average they require fewer than three of the crucial seven subjects.

Perhaps saddest and most dangerous of all is the absence of interest in a basic understanding of America. When Roper surveyed seniors at elite universities a decade ago, it found that only 22 percent knew the phrase “government of the people, by the people, for the people” was from the Gettysburg Address. Only 34 percent could identify George Washington as the American general at the Battle of Yorktown.

The father of the Constitution, James Madison, wrote: “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

But don’t ask college seniors who the father of the Constitution is—77 percent don’t know much about what happened right here in Philadelphia.

The full results of the ACTA ratings are available at [www.whatwilltheylearn.com](http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com).