

It's Time to End College Majors as We Know Them

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At the dawn of the 20th century, the emerging industrial economy demanded that American colleges evolve from a curriculum that had focused almost solely on preparation for a handful of professions, such as law and the clergy, to one that was more vocational in nature.

Entirely new higher-education institutions — including the land-grant universities founded a few decades earlier — were started with the intention that disciplines like engineering, education, and architecture were subjects and majors that students should pursue in college. In 1908, even Harvard's president, Charles W. Eliot, endorsed the idea of electives in the curriculum, a clear indication that no longer could any one person really know everything worth knowing through a single major.

Now, more than a century later, higher-education institutions find themselves in a similar situation. This time, however, it's the digital economy instead of the industrial economy demanding a new set of skills. The problem is that the taxonomy of academic majors that broadened significantly over the past hundred years can no longer keep pace with the churn of knowledge needed to compete in nearly every profession.

Should Colleges Replace or Enhance Unpopular Majors?

Assumption College is doing the former; U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign the latter. Idea Lab looks at why, how, and what's at stake.

Should Colleges Let Ailing Majors Die or Revamp Them?

As the work-force analytics firm Burning Glass Technologies showed in a 2015 report, so-called hybrid jobs — which require a set of skills that aren't as neatly packaged as a major in college — are growing quickly. For example, the report said employers' demand for skills in digital marketing and mobile development had doubled over five years, and demand for data-science skills had tripled. Even colleges known for reforming their curriculum are often unable to move fast enough, nor is it worthwhile for them to do so, given the speed of change in many industries.

The future of work calls for something more radical: the elimination of academic majors as we have come to know them.

While cross-disciplinary research has long been a focus of many scholars, majors for the most part continue to be controlled by departments that are cut off from one another. The current collection of majors is how faculty members are organized on many campuses, and how budgets are allocated between schools and departments.

One urgent need is to make what students study in college truly span all academic disciplines. Right now, in choosing a major, undergraduates automatically narrow their focus at a time when they need both breadth and depth. The learning that is called for has been referred to as T-shaped: The vertical bar of the T represents deep understanding of one subject (the current conception of the major). But just as critical is the horizontal stroke, which allows people to work across a variety of complex subject areas with ease and confidence.

Joseph Aoun, president of Northeastern University, in his book *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (MIT Press, 2017), has suggested a complementary learning model that he calls "humanics." It blends technical, social, and data skills, and, in the process, develops "higher-order mental skills" like critical thinking, systems thinking, entrepreneurship, and cultural agility, enabling people to easily toggle among various jobs and tasks.

In such a scenario, we can imagine clusters of study designed around the knottiest problems facing the world — supplies of food, water, and energy; climate change; digital literacy; the future of work itself.

Dispensing with the historical array of majors might also ensure that colleges don't simply copy one another's lineups of programs, but rather create collections of subjects that play to institutional strengths.

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Take, for example, Arizona State University, where I'm a special adviser to the president. It has created entirely new schools and colleges, where students can earn bachelor's degrees in innovation in society and the science of health-care delivery. As the university's president, Michael Crow,

has asked, Why does every institution need a political-science department? A chemistry department? "We should be offering students various pathways for learning while retaining the grounding knowledge," he says.

Another key reform is to put an expiration date on these new pathways of learning. Colleges are adept at starting majors but almost incapable of stopping them. Each new cluster of knowledge should be reviewed every year for necessary changes and every five years to determine if it should be dissolved or extended.

Just as at the turn of the last century, higher education must respond with new educational pathways to match the complexity of society and the economy of tomorrow.

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