

Quality...

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sions have been examining degree programs, graduation requirements, test scores and other factors. They are reporting some weaknesses and calling for big changes in the nation's college programs.

One of the most influential reports is "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education," issued in October by the National Institute of Education. In its report, a seven-member NIE task force concluded that U.S. college curriculum "has become excessively vocational in orientation, and the bachelor's degree has lost its potential to foster the shared values and knowledge that bind us together as a society."

The NIE panel cited declining scores on 11 of 15 subject tests on the National Graduate Record Exam between 1964 and 1982 as cause for concern. The sharpest reported drops were in subjects that require verbal skills.

The report also noted an increase in the number of vocational — as opposed to liberal arts — degrees awarded from 51 percent in 1971 to 64 percent in 1982. The result, the report said, has been the rise of narrow, specialized college programs that are "isolated from each other" and students who "end up with fragmented and limited knowledge."

Among other recommendations, the NIE report advised university officials to review their curricula and set standards of "knowledge, capacities and skills that all students must develop prior to graduation." It also recommended at least two full years of liberal education for all bachelor's degree candidates — even if it means lengthening some degree programs beyond four years.

A December report of the Nebraska Citizens Commission for the Study of Higher Education also called for at least two years of arts and sciences courses in the state college and university bachelor's programs.

"There is nothing sacred about the present amount of time set aside for earning a college degree or certificate," the report said, "and there is little evidence that present curricular priorities, with their heavy emphasis on employment-specific courses, best

serve the interests of students or society."

G. G. Meisels, dean of the UNL College of Arts and Sciences, said he has seen the shift to more vocational education, as job markets have tightened and employers have sought graduates with specialized training. Unfortunately, he said, too many graduates are trained for entry-level jobs "without the broader background necessary for growth and perspective."

But UNL officials aren't ready yet to make radical changes in the university's undergraduate programs, Meisels said. Unlike most U.S. universities, UNL has no common degree requirements; each college sets its own standards for a bachelor's degree. A sudden change to include the recommended two-year liberal arts course probably wouldn't work at UNL, he said.

Meisels is chairman of the Chancellor's Commission on General Liberal Education. Chancellor Martin Massengale appointed the commission in January to "launch a comprehensive university-wide review of the status of liberal education." Meisels said the commission's findings may lead to future changes in UNL curriculum.

For now, however, the study has been informal and philosophical. Commissioners have met in open forums with UNL students, faculty members, parents and alumni to explore such questions as:

1. "What are the desirable qualities in an educated person, regardless of vocation or profession?"
2. "To what degree do you think current UNL graduates reflect these qualities?"
3. "What do you believe we could do to develop better these qualities in our students?"

No mention of credit hours, degree requirements or specific subject knowledge is allowed in these meetings, Meisels said. The commissioners now are more interested in the definition of an "educated person" than in finding the means to educate him.

Discussions so far have been "lively," Meisels said. So far the educational needs determined for all students include the ability to communicate, to think creatively and analytically and to develop broad interests and perspectives.

After the commission submits its first report — probably

within a year, Meisels said, it may make specific recommendations to broaden undergraduate education. But the changes probably won't include a two-year liberal arts requirement, nor a specific set of courses that all students would have to take, Meisels said.

Dean Stanley Liberty of the College of Engineering and Technology, said it would be difficult — if not impossible — to fit two years of liberal-education courses in the engineering curriculum. The program now is "tied to accreditation standards" of a national board, and students would have to stay in school too long to meet all the requirements, he said.

Most engineering students are "not so narrow as they're painted to be," Liberty said. He guessed a lot of them would take more courses in literature, social sciences and humanities if they had room in their schedules.

Maureen Honey, assistant professor of English, said requiring a set of mandatory general courses probably won't work, either. As an undergraduate at Michigan State University, Honey said, she had to take four survey courses designed to cover humanities, social science, natural science and American thought and language.

"They thought they were hitting all the bases," Honey said. "They were at least popular courses on campus. They were just watered-down, survey-type courses that did not deal with issues in depth." Bad experiences in these survey courses discouraged many students from pursuing the subjects further, she said.

Meisels said overview courses within specific majors might be developed to help students tie their disciplines to other fields.

No college curriculum can cover everything, Meisels said. Perhaps the most important job the commission can do, he said, is to make faculty members more aware of students' common needs. With this awareness, he said, professors can emphasize broad issues in their courses and inspire students to keep learning past graduation.

"We have an excellent faculty here that are highly committed to students," Meisels said. "...If you have a good faculty, you're going to see students develop, no matter what the graduation requirements are."

Officials question value of graduate exam

By Ann Lowe
Staff Reporter

Falling scores on the national Graduate Record Exam recently led education analysts to think the quality of education is slipping at U.S. colleges and universities.

But testing officials say this may be a hasty conclusion and that test scores may be unfair measures of learning.

According to a recent study by Clifford Aldeman, senior associate of the National Institute of Education, average GRE scores declined in seven subject areas between 1970 and 1982. Verbal skills on the GRE General Test dropped by 28 points during the same years. As a result of this and other studies, the NIE has called for a review of U.S. baccalaureate programs and stronger liberal arts requirements in

undergraduate curricula.


Alice Irby, vice president of the Educational Testing Service, which gives the GRE, disagrees that test scores indicate a slip in education. In a February article in Higher Education and National Affairs, Irby pointed out that scores on seven GRE subject tests went up as scores on the other seven declined. The report also noted a 21-percent increase in scores on quantita-

tive tests on the general exam.

Irby wrote that changing score data may show a shift in student interest — away from humanities and social sciences toward math and technology — instead of an overall decline in ability.

Tom Ewing of the ETS information services division said the kinds of students who take the GRE may influence the scores.

The number of foreign students at U.S. colleges and universities has increased since the early 1970s, Ewing said. Foreign students now account for at least 10 percent of the graduates who take the GRE. English is not the native language of most of these students, and many of them have majored in math and science. This may account partly for the drop in verbal scores and rise in math scores, he said.




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