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## Meta-Majors, Sampler Platters, and Sneaky Ambition

Submitted by Matt Reed on November 8, 2015 - 9:44pm

**Blog:** [Confessions of a Community College Dean](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

High-toned liberal arts colleges often like to have interdisciplinary freshman seminars. Community colleges generally can't, partly because our definition of "freshmen" is more heterogeneous -- does the freshman year start at enrollment, or when developmental classes are done? what about for dual enrollment students? -- but mostly because anything interdisciplinary often won't transfer.

That's more a function of neglect and bureaucracy than conspiracy. Many four-year schools have checklists into which courses must fall to be accepted. If a course doesn't fit a category neatly, it either doesn't make the cut at all, or makes it only as a "free elective." Free elective status is where credits go to die. So we can run Intro to American Government all we want, but, say, The Politics of Protest Movements is a non-starter.

The gap in first-year course ambitions has stuck in my craw for years. If quirky and interesting first-year courses are available to the elites, they should be available to everybody. Fair is fair.

So that's the starting point with which I came to the idea of meta-majors. As I understand them, meta-majors and guided pathways are related and complementary attempts to improve student success rates by being much more prescriptive with entering students. In practice, the idea is to make the transfer checklist the 'default' setting for student course selection. If students are kept on the straight and narrow, the theory goes, they're less likely to get lost. If they only take courses that count, they'll make progress more quickly, and be likelier to finish.

Meta-majors and guided pathways strike me as very promising ways to improve student success, both at the community college and upon subsequent transfer. But they're vulnerable to the critique that they "solve" the tyranny of the checklist by surrendering to it. They seem to sacrifice adventure for safety.

Unless...

(People who know me know to get a little nervous when I start a sentence with either "unless..." or "what if...")

Unless the Big Intro course -- the meta-major -- is interdisciplinary and ambitious in its own right.

The most effective meta-major class I've seen was the Intro to Health Careers class at Holyoke. It was a sampler platter of the various occupations within the allied health field, taught on the assumption that many students who had identified nursing as a career goal didn't know that many other options even exist. They'd spend some time learning about other roles in the industry, with the goal of finding the one that fits them best. Some students peeled off into social work, some into nutrition, some into public health, some into medical coding. The ones who continued with nursing were fewer, but better chosen; after a couple of years, both the diversity of the nursing class and the NCLEX pass rate went up. When students who actually wanted to be nurses were the ones in the nursing track, they did better. That's not surprising; they wanted it more.

Okay, you say, but what does that have to do with the rest of the curriculum? How would that work in, say, humanities?

And that's where I sneak my ambitious little friend, interdisciplinarity, back into the plan.

Imagine a Humanities 101 course along the 'sampler platter' model, but with a theme. For example, with "Love" as a theme, the class could offer glimpses into "love in art," "love in music," "love in literature," and the like. (And before anyone cracks the inevitable joke, no, "Love" will not be a lab class.) The social sciences could use money, sex, or power. If you can't find something interesting among those three topics, well, I just don't know what to tell you. Building the sampler platter class around a hook would give it some coherence, would allow faculty to branch out a bit from always doing the

same old thing, and would likely give the students a reason to care.

If the meta-major class is part of a package, it's likelier to transfer. And if it helps students identify their interests early on, and thereby to make more strategic course selections as they go, it's likely to reinforce the 'guided pathways' structure. In other words, we may not have to choose between ambition and safety. We could have both.

Wise and worldly readers, what do you think? Could a meta-major structure offer the venue for community college students to get a meaningful version of what students at elite places get?

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