

Changing Graduation Requirements at California Community Colleges: An Ethical Dilemma

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The Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges (The Board) will consider raising graduation requirements for Associates Degrees in Math and English. Currently students who are transferring to a four year institution are required to complete English 1A and 1B and a transfer level Math course such as Introduction to Statistics. However, students who want to graduate with an Associates Degree are not required to be held to the same (transfer level) requirements. The proposed English requirement for Associates Degrees would require students to successfully complete an English course at the university transfer level (English 1A) or equivalent from the current requirement which is to complete a course one level below English 1A. The proposed change in the Math requirement for Associates Degrees will be the successful completion of Intermediate Algebra instead of Beginning Algebra.

In a recent vote the statewide Academic Senate (2006), the official voice of community college faculty approved by a two thirds majority, the changes in graduation requirements. This debate, according to an interview with Kimberlee Messina, Academic Senate President of Santa Rosa Junior College, lasted for several years and in spite of the two thirds majority, continues to be a source of friction statewide. The Education Code (California State Legislature, 1999) entrusts academic issues such as this to the purview of faculty, therefore the vote carries great weight with the State Chancellor and The Board. In other words, there is a high likelihood that the requirements will take effect. This statewide vote has not stopped the conflicting debate at several local colleges however. The debate, as analyzed in this paper, centers around the conflicting ethics of critique and care.

The purpose of this paper is not to examine the merits of the issue. No empirical studies citing the graduation rate of students or the number of students passing algebra will be marshaled to make a case for or against the proposed new requirements. The purpose of this paper is to examine the ethical aspects of the issue using common ethical frameworks; the ethics of critique, care and justice, the utilitarian approach and what a consequentialist might propose.

Ethic of Critique

From the perspective of the ethic of critique (Shapiro & Stefkovich 2005), opponents argue that community colleges will restrict access to students of low socio-economic status (SES). Students of low SES typically have fewer academic skills and struggle with college courses. They may take courses that lead to a certificate in disciplines for career opportunities, or they may wish to advance to a degree in that discipline or in a general degree (social science, science, general education, etc). They may do so as the Associates Degree may be the only degree within reach for them or they may choose to get the degree to build their resume and get an edge on job candidates without a degree. Requiring a higher level of Math and English skills would likely discourage students from obtaining a degree and clearly limit the number of degrees awarded.

There is great discussion whether the knowledge and skills gained from Intermediate Algebra and college level English are useful in the workplace. Would welders, childcare workers, dental assistants, auto mechanics, or paralegals need to solve X and Y equations or be able to impart the meaning of Chaucer in their work world? If not, does this limit their ability to earn a degree? Opponents of the proposal would argue that there is a class bias by raising requirements to levels not needed for the graduates or their future employers. They claim the higher standards are a not so subtle way of maintaining or widening the gap between the educated classes of power and privilege and the working classes who would then be denied easy access to college degrees in greater numbers.

Proponents could marshal an argument under the ethic of critique as well. College education, regardless of the level, should be set at a certain standard. People who have completed any form of higher education should be able to be trained in the discipline and logic that successfully solving algebraic equations implies. Graduates should be able to relate to the Canon of Literature to better understand the human condition. To not require this of graduates with Associates Degrees is to leave them as second class citizens.

A question arises for each side: Would the higher standards give access to the graduates a "seat at the table?" Are higher standards a smoke screen to keep out a majority of the students from under representative groups from achieving higher status and access to power? If both questions are true, is it better to help the few at the expense of the many?

Ethic of Care

Opponents would argue from the paradigm of the ethic of care (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005) that it is not fair to allow students to struggle and "suffer" who may not have the knowledge and skill sets to master Intermediate Algebra and English. Institutions should not coerce students into positions where they know the odds against success are high. Nor should they impose barriers that will significantly delay the time for students to achieve their objectives. Think of the hours, months and years many students would waste struggling to achieve the new requirements. Many would fall by the wayside, some after multiple attempts to pass. Students cannot learn the virtues of discipline nor empowerment that are part of the ethic of care, if they have given up their academic career because they cannot meet the new requirements. Aside from their loss of time and the stress inflicted, which is and of itself a great harm, what message does it send--that those "who can't even get an Associates Degree are not worthy members of society?"

Proponents could advocate their position under the ethic of care as well. This might come under the rubric of "tough love." In the long run, society through its community colleges should nurture, support students and encourage them to stretch themselves. Sustainable self-esteem comes from genuine achievement. Empowerment and discipline can only

come through achieving success and mastering material that society uses as a bench mark of the educated. Under the ethic of care, the issue could be summarized as: Is it caring to require higher standards on students trying to get an Associates Degree or is it caring to have lower standards?

Ethic of Justice

The principle of rights is an important aspect of the ethic of justice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). Opponents could claim the rights of the colleges or any subset of the college such as curriculum committees and departments. In other words, the right of faculty to set higher standards or not would be abridged if the new requirements are adopted. Since some colleges currently have the higher standard, requiring all colleges to adopt the higher standard would impinge on the rights of students and potential students to choose which degree and requirements for that degree at each college might be best for them.

Proponents would argue the aspect of the ethic of justice which centers on the collective will of society. If society evaluates the value of an Associates Degree and finds it lacking, it can require higher standards to earn the degree for the good of the student or potential student whether the student perceives it is for their own good or not. Supports of these changes assert that under the ethic of justice, the motive behind the higher standards matters less than the process that society has created on its way to becoming a requirement. Once it is a requirement, it must be followed.

Clearly within the confines of the ethic of justice there is a fundamental clash of values. The values of freedom of the individual versus the collective will strike at the core of many issues, and graduations requirements for Associates Degrees are no exception. As Beckner states, "The danger in using laws as moral guides is in the thought that if it's legal, if it seems to be consistent with a law, it's all right. There are many actions that may seem legal, but they would be judged unethical and/or immoral by generally accepted standards. It may be legal, but that doesn't necessarily make it right. We must have guides to moral action in addition to the law." (2004, p.2) This is a key distinction that must be considered as we evaluate changing the Education Code and the graduation requirements.

The Utilitarian Approach

Under the utilitarian approach (Josephson, 2002) opponents would make the case that if there are fewer students earning the Associates Degree, in other words if more students fall by the wayside, then the solution is simple, do not impose the higher requirements. Opponents would also argue that the loss of productive output to society of the additional time students spend in college trying to achieve the higher requirements would be a loss to society. They might further make the case that there is little to suggest that the higher requirements for the Associates Degree would increase the productivity of the people who earned the degree.

Proponents would take the opposite tact. The greater good is served by having people who have earned Associates Degree who can function at a higher level by virtue of the higher Math and English requirements for the degree. Society is served because those graduates will be more productive members of society. It also means the degree is more valuable and thus more students would work harder to achieve a more meaningful degree. Even if they do not earn the degree they will have likely picked up valuable knowledge and skills along the way.

The utilitarian approach would seem to lend itself to several tests. Are students who graduate under the higher standards more productive? Are they more in demand than students who graduate without the higher standards?

It would seem one aspect of ethics might lend itself to framing the issue for both sides. Consequentialists (Josephson, 2002) might pose a question: How does society regard the value of the Associates Degree? Among educators, specifically those with input on the decision, what should the Associates Degree represent? It would seem the answer to this second question, within the context of the first, would provide much clarity and place the focus on the ultimate goal and whether the proposed new requirements should be approved.

References

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