

# TOWN CRIER IV: Students come to UI 'horribly underprepared'

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For the past three years it has been my privilege to teach in the University of Idaho Core Discovery program.

Each year I look forward to meeting the new crop of first-year students. I love to see their passion for the adventures of college life. From a pedagogical perspective, however, I also have learned to dread the first few weeks of class. At the beginning of every semester, like clockwork, I inevitably get the same question from my students: "Is this going to be on the test?"

I take great pains to inform my students that I don't believe in tests, but prefer to assess their learning through reflective journaling, critical essays and research papers, but that response makes them very nervous and creates tremendous tension in the classroom.

The anxiety level reaches fever pitch when I give them their first assignment, usually a variation on the "This I Believe" essay format made popular by Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s and revived by NPR several years ago. There are always a handful of students who rise to the challenge, but the vast majority struggle to complete the assignment. Most

students provide me with a generic essay that tells me more about what they have been told they should believe than what they really think.

Every year it is more and more difficult to see my students struggle with expressing and understanding themselves. The rigidly prescriptive requirements of No Child Left Behind and the alienating nature of a standards-based curriculum is the primary reason why so many students come to the university unprepared for the academic demands of college courses. Regardless of how they perform on high school exit exams, like the WASL or ISAT, students are still coming to the university horribly underprepared.

The 2009 ACT College Readiness Report indicates only 21 percent of students meet the knowledge and skill benchmarks in reading, writing, math and science required to succeed in entry-level college courses. In a Feb. 6 interview, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan cited the statistic that 60 percent of college students have to take remedial courses in math or English before they can adequately compete at the college level.

Current educational methods in U.S. public schools alienate students by focusing on discrete, measurable, learning outcomes that are decontextualized and focused on getting students to pass standardized tests like the WASL and ISAT in the interest of keeping schools' scores high enough to avoid official sanctions while continuing to move students through with the lowest cost possible.

This focus on a single homogenized curriculum necessitates the marginalization of diverse voices and perspectives, creating students with narrow worldviews and little connection to place or community. For many students, learning has become a rote, mechanical exercise while creativity and critical-thinking skills, so essential to success at the college level, have been removed from the entire K-12 educational enterprise.

The core Curriculum at UI is committed to challenging and supporting this first generation of NCLB students through creative, interdisciplinary curricula that requires them to think about their place in their communities and their identity in the context of a broader, more diverse world of ideas. But the Core Curriculum at UI is a program hanging by a thread.

Since its inception more than 10 years ago, the core has had to beg and borrow from other colleges to maintain its status and solvency. The core curriculum has become an easy target for administrators and faculty who see it as a drain on limited resources that could be used to hedge against deeper departmental cuts in these years of tight budgets. But the core curriculum has a proven track record of promoting student retention and future success at UI. It has never been more important that first-year students at UI experience an outreach-based pedagogy that challenges the technocratic methods they have grown accustomed to in the public schools. In my opinion it's one of the few programs that might help them recover their humanity and re-install the wonder and passion of learning.

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