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**Title** Challenging the Liberal Arts: Undergraduate Education in the United States and United Kingdom

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### Challenging the Liberal Arts: Undergraduate Education in the United States and United Kingdom

This study compares the undergraduate curricula of the United States and the United Kingdom in order to analyse curricular structure and its impact. The American system exemplifies a liberal arts approach to undergraduate education with breadth, choice, and depth embodied in its degrees. This approach takes two different paths, creating more structured degrees in the sciences with many requirements and ordered sequencing of courses, while allowing much more freedom and lack of focus with few requirements and little sequencing of courses in the social sciences and humanities. This lack of structure has serious consequences, with most students failing to complete their degrees on time and showing limited evidence of achieving advanced learning outcomes. By contrast, all degrees in the British system follow a tightly focused and highly structured curriculum. This approach creates very narrowly educated students, but over 80% successfully complete their studies on time and are expected to complete high impact activities, such as research projects, as part of their degrees. While a smaller proportion of British students enter higher education compared to their American counterparts, the country produces more graduates when controlling for population. Comparing the two systems emphasizes the impact of the curricular structure and underscores the freedom and incoherence in the American system and strict narrowness in the British. The study demonstrates how science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects in the U.S. bridge these two systems by providing a coherent, ordered approach to their degrees while still encouraging well rounded students through providing breadth and choice in their degrees.

The analysis includes eight subjects spanning the major disciplinary areas of the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and professional degrees in the United States and United Kingdom. The results suggest consistent patterns in each country across subjects and universities. One key question addressed by this study involves analysing the extent to which these generalized accounts of degrees in the US and UK reflect the current reality and how they vary across different subjects. The state of knowledge of the American curriculum relies on surveys that are dated (Lattuca and Stark 2011) or only examine a small subset of universities (Ratcliff et al. 2001; AAC&U 2007) that may overestimate the American commitment to the liberal arts model. Studies of the UK also appear dated (Squires 1990; Tight 2012). The rise of for-profit institutions and continuing controversies over the cost of universities in both countries have become major issues since the previous research took place, and it is unclear what impact these changes have had. How many institutions still require general education and what does it look like? How many courses does the major require, and how many free electives are offered? A more definitive, up-to-date picture of the degree and how it varies across institutions and subjects is needed.

Another question is to what extent are degrees in each country structured versus incoherent and fragmented? Incoherence has been a long running complaint about American education, but exactly what this means and its impact is rarely explained. To what extent do degrees meet the minimal expectations set out in the American Association of Colleges and Universities reports (AAC 1991; AAC&U 2007)? These reports set minimum standards of an introductory course, a sequencing of intermediate and advanced courses, teaching methods or modes of inquiry for that subject, and providing some sort of summative experience. However, research suggests that many degrees fail to meet them (Ishiyama 2005; Kain 2007). How do British degrees compare? Further, to what extent do degrees require students to take part in high impact practices (Kuh 2008) that are associated with more advanced learning outcomes and student engagement? While American degrees have a patchy record on coherence and high impact practices, it has

traditionally been seen as a minimal standard for British degrees. Again, these assumptions have not been recently tested recently across universities or subjects, and this study will demonstrate how much these generalisations still apply after years of change in response to market forces.

The methodology involves surveying the degree requirements of eight subjects: biology, business, engineering, English, history, political science, psychology, and sociology, across all 140 universities in the United Kingdom in as well as a random sample of 150 institutions from the United States for 2014-16. The requirements will be analysed for 1) what proportion of the degree is in the concentration or major; 2) what proportion of courses in the concentration or major are required; 3) what proportion of the degree outside the subject is required (general college); 4) what proportion of the degree consists of electives; 5) does the degree require a course in methods or modes of inquiry; and 6) does the degree require a research project as a culminating experience? This data will provide a definitive answer to the question of how coherent degrees are across countries, subjects, and universities.

The analysis contributes to the literature by describing a successful alternative to a liberal arts degree and analysing exactly how it compares to the American model. It is the first analysis using a representative sample of colleges and universities that gives current depiction of the sector. Its unique contribution will come from clearly depicting an alternative to a liberal arts education that highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the American approach. It suggests that the successful outcomes associated with British higher education affirms the importance of curricular coherence and questions asks whether the traditional liberal arts model in the humanities and social sciences should be seen as a workable template for other countries to emulate. The approach of STEM subjects in the U.S. are portrayed as a compromise between the two extremes that incorporates the advantages of both systems. Just as many countries expanding their higher education systems are considering the liberal arts approach of the American degree, this study demonstrates clear alternatives both within the liberal arts approach and outside of it.

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