

Curriculum Reform

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In 1943, at ASCD's birth, more than a decade of attempts to recover from the Great Depression had clearly left its mark; and World War II was the overriding concern in a world political context that few had felt as powerfully in earlier eras. An historical perspective on curriculum reform must consider the context of the past fifty years, including the cultural and social spheres (Cawelti 1985). Here, however, I maintain a more limited focus. Therefore, in examining fifty years of curriculum reform, I first consider the meaning of curriculum and reform; second, sketch the historical baggage of ideas and practices brought by earlier generations; third, examine factors that contribute to reform (society, learners, subject matter, and technology); and fourth, review key events and players that shaped curriculum reform. Finally, noting that questions are forged by our sense of history, I raise some questions that may help us consider, plan for, and create the next fifty years of curriculum reform.

Definitions of Curriculum and Reform

Reform is easier to define than curriculum. *Reform* merely means to reshape, to reconfigure, to make different. But mere change does not mean improvement. So, too, with reform; thus, the saga of *re-form* that we review here is not intended to imply an evolutionary development. Reformers themselves generally hope that their brand of reform will bring improvement; it is their inspiration to pursue their cause. Therefore, as we think about the past fifty years of curriculum reform, we need to ask whether the re-forming carried out was improvement or not.

The term *curriculum* is shrouded in definitional controversy, so much so that it would require a book-length treatment to begin to deal with it (Schubert 1986). For our discussion, curriculum means what-

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Curriculum reform that changes the shape and nature of postsecondary degrees must reflect generally acknowledged academic standards of excellence; skills, knowledge, and understanding to help students prepare for the future; and the goals and mission of the institution. No effort at reform can succeed without adequate support for the faculty who have primary responsibility for the curriculum, nor can it succeed unless it addresses the needs of a diverse student population.

The goals of higher education curricula should include mastery of basic skills, active participation in the learning process, in-depth study, critical thinking, understanding of a discipline's characteristic methods, and a coherent and relevant course of study. The goals should also be consistent with NEA principles such as faculty control, equal access to quality education for all students, and multicultural understanding.

Any effort at curriculum revision should be designed to prepare all students for effective citizenship and participation in an increasingly diverse society. A common body of intellectual reference must be inclusive of multicultural and multinational perspectives. A diverse student population enriches the knowledge base of all students.

NEA recommends the following:

- Curricula must express the goals and mission of individual institutions and address the needs of students.
- In designing the college's curriculum and schedule, the faculty should take the responsibility to ensure that it is suited to the needs of a diverse society, and that it is flexible enough to allow access for different kinds of students (adult learners, students who work, part-time students, transfers, and nontraditional students).
- Curricula must be flexible enough to allow for the incorporation of new technologies and modes of delivery while maintaining a constant focus on quality.
- Faculty should be responsible for periodic review of curricula within their disciplines or related disciplines.
- Comments generated and materials compiled in the context of a faculty-driven curriculum review should be used solely for that purpose and should not be used for discontinuance of programs or courses.
- Teaching and curriculum development are major parts of the faculty's role. Those faculty involved should be adequately compensated for these activities.
- General education courses are an important part of the core curriculum, and as such, institutions should provide the necessary staff and resources to ensure student success.
- Major curriculum revisions and articulation agreements at colleges and universities should involve consultation with faculty members at other educational institutions affected by the changes.