When the faculty failed to strengthen core requirements at the State University of New York, the board itself mandated a core framework—with courses to be developed by the faculty themselves, of course. The faculty senate and the faculty union unanimously objected, but some professors, particularly National Association of Scholars members, had in fact helped trustees develop the framework. Once the board acted, a number of professors, such as those interested in teaching a broad-based American history course, stepped forward to offer the new courses. In fact, the new requirements specifically empowered those professors who want to teach mainstream core courses instead of the narrow “boutique” courses now so commonplace.

The George Mason University board held a series of public discussions on the issue of the core curriculum and made it clear to the president that it would like to see core requirements strengthened. The president talked to the deans and the deans talked to the faculty and, within a year or so, the faculty did propose a more comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent set of requirements. The board accepted the requirements with two changes. It added a course in American history and one in Western civilization. (The university already had a non-Western requirement.)

Spurred by board chairman Herman Badillo, who was the first member of congress born in Puerto Rico, the City University of New York adopted an American history requirement as part of the system-wide core. In this case, as in the fight to eliminate remediation from the four-year colleges, Badillo was assisted by members of the faculty—particularly NAS members.

Other efforts are now taking place at universities across the nation where trustees are working with the American Council of Trustees and Alumni to raise academic standards and strengthen the curriculum. The most successful approach is what ACTA calls an “inside-outside” strategy. Professors and administrators who care about academic standards and intellectual freedom are, alas, too few to win by themselves. And trustees are loath to intervene without some faculty support and guidance. To use an analogy, trustees provide crucial air support for the forces on the ground. And in the battle for the university’s future, professors who are on the front lines need all the help they can get.
Narrowness and Liberality

John Agresto

I have spent the better part of this past year working with higher education in Iraq. Everyday I see, firsthand, a system of education totally imbued with the idea of specialization. The movement begins in high school, where the better students are shunted into science and technology, the weaker students encouraged to pursue something in the arts or humanities.

This continues through university, where you begin your specialty in earnest. You soon become an expert, an expert in one thing. For a doctor to know much history, or an historian to know anything about mathematics, is rare. The idea, the ideal, of a liberally educated person, a person conversant across a broad scope of fields and disciplines, a person who sees the inter-connectedness of things and the multidimensionality of the world and events, hardly exists here, where fanatics are just as likely to be Ph.D.s in engineering as to be illiterate slum dwellers. Besides, why would anyone want to be anything other than an “expert”?

Given this, it might seem churlish to complain about specialization in America, where the ideal of liberally educated professionals is at least paid lip service, no matter what the reality of their training might actually be. But at least let us acknowledge that reality: No matter how we talk, undergraduate education in America is rarely “liberal.” Often the first thing we ask our students is what their “major” will be. We encourage focus from the beginning. We pretend that we are liberally educating our students when we have a few “general education” courses they have to sit through, or give them an array of boutique courses to pick from to let them fulfill their “distribution requirements.” The thought of truly having an integrated and wide ranging program of liberal studies, of giving our students the opportunity “to see the world and see it whole” (in Eudora Welty’s felicitous phrase), is, more and more, simply foreign to us. That a mathematician might be conversant with a wide range of imaginative literature or an English major understand much about the full sweep of human history and the nature of the scientific endeavor is almost unheard of.

Oddly, we often find students who, despite our attempt to funnel their interests into our own particular disciplines, look to their education for some semblance of breadth and wholeness. How many students do we meet who

John Agresto was the Coalition Provisional Authority’s senior adviser to the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education, and president emeritus of St. John’s College, in Santa Fe, N.M.