

None of our business: the culturally insular curricula of U.S. undergraduate business programs

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Abstract

Colleges and universities in the USA regard cross-cultural communication skills and an awareness of cultural diversity as important learning outcomes for undergraduate students. Accredited business programs offering baccalaureate degrees at these institutions also identify these outcomes as important. Yet an analysis of the curricula in business, business administration, management, and international business programs at forty-one colleges and universities in the New England region of the USA reveals that students receive little to no academic training in cross-cultural communication, foreign languages, or on subjects related to the Middle East. The vast majority of business students are also not required to engage in semester-long study abroad. These findings hold for both business program curricula and the general education requirements for all students at these colleges and universities.

1. Introduction

The ability to “to operate effectively in other cultures and settings” (American Council of Education 2011, 14) is now regarded as a critical student learning outcome by many U.S. higher educational institutions. These institutions assert that students should develop cross-cultural communication skills and an awareness of cultural diversity so that upon graduation from college they can interact effectively with people whose ethno-cultural, economic, political, and/or geographic backgrounds are very different from their own (American Association of Colleges and Universities n.d.; Eddy et al. 2013; Sales et al. 2013; Sprinks 2013; Carter et al. 2010; Cruz and Patterson 2005). U.S. baccalaureate programs in business make similar pronouncements. The accreditation standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) state that business curricula should include learning experiences that address the skill of being able to work effectively in diverse and multicultural environments (AACSB 2015, 32). According to the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE), business programs should “ensure that students understand and are prepared to deal effectively with critical issues in a changing global business environment” (IACBE 2011, 3).

While colleges and universities in the U.S. often claim to provide students with global perspectives and skills, the reality is frequently very different, for three reasons. First, the percentage of U.S. higher learning institutions requiring undergraduates to take courses that “primarily feature perspectives, issues, or events from countries or areas outside the United States” has declined steadily since 2001 (American Council of Education 2012, 12). Undergraduates in the USA typically acquire “only a passing knowledge of other cultures” (American Council of Education 2011, 14).

Second, cross-cultural awareness or competence is rarely assessed satisfactorily. Sound data on whether curricular initiatives convince students “to become more cosmopolitan [and] to . . . embed intercultural empathy in their learning” (Haigh 2009, 282) are often not collected. For example, research of 17,000 subjects found that undergraduate study abroad was associated with international career experience in the decades after graduation, but changes in students’

career aspirations before and immediately after study abroad were not measured (Norris and Gillespie 2009, 394).

Third, students on many U.S. campuses lack opportunities for encountering individuals who are culturally different. At the university at which the authors are employed, 93 percent of the students in the incoming class of 2018 identified themselves as non-Hispanic Caucasian U.S. citizens on the *Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement*, and only 2 percent identified themselves as international or foreign national students.

2. Methodology

To quantify the condition of U.S. undergraduate education in the area of cross-cultural skills, we have analyzed the curricula for baccalaureate programs in business, business administration, management, and international business at forty-one colleges and universities in the New England region of the USA. Each of these institutions has a total student enrollment of fewer than 10,000 students, and all of their business programs are accredited by the AACSB, the IACBE, or the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). Of particular interest is whether students majoring in business at these institutions are required to take semester-long courses in cross-cultural communication. We have focused our study on business programs because business comprises the most popular area of study for U.S. college students. Of the 1,791,000 baccalaureate degrees conferred in the 2011–2012 academic year in the USA, the greatest numbers were conferred in fields of business—367,000, or twenty percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

In the U.S. model of undergraduate education, in addition to completing the curriculum in their major field of study, students must fulfill a series of general education requirements by taking courses in the humanities and liberal arts. The specific set of general education course requirements varies by college and university. To gauge whether students at the forty-one institutions in this study might be learning cross-cultural communication skills or be exposed to unfamiliar cultural perspectives outside of the business major, we have examined whether:

- a cross-cultural communication course fulfills a general education requirement;
- the general education sequence requires that undergraduate students complete a course on the Middle East;
- a course on the Middle East is offered anywhere in the college or university's core curriculum;
- study of a foreign language is required, and if so, for how many semesters;
- the college or university offers courses in the Arabic language, and if so, for how many semesters;
- Study abroad is required or preferred.

For both general education and business major curricula, we are considering only courses that are a semester or quarter in length, equivalent to at least three hours of academic credit, and described in the online academic catalogs of the colleges and universities in our sample. Courses not regularly offered, brief workshops, and seminars not equivalent to three credit hours are excluded.

3. Cross-Cultural Education in General and International Business Programs

We examined a total of forty-one accredited baccalaureate programs in business, business administration, and management (referred to as “general business” for the remainder of the paper). Of these programs:

- Only three institutions require that general business students complete a course in cross-cultural communication

- Only nine institutions offer courses on cross-cultural communication in their general education programs.
- No institution requires a course on the Middle East either in its general business or general education programs.
- Eighteen institutions list general education courses on the Middle East. Most of these courses are offered by History or Political Science departments.
- Only thirteen institutions in our sample appear to require courses dedicated to the study of a foreign language. Required semesters vary from one to four.
- Fifteen institutions offer instruction in the Arabic language, but at seven of these institutions only two semesters of Arabic, at the introductory level, are offered. Only one, Brandeis University, offers eight semesters, or four full years, of Arabic courses.
- None of the general business curricula examined requires a semester of study abroad.

In addition, we examined eighteen baccalaureate programs in international business. With the exception of The Massachusetts Maritime Academy which offers a degree in International Maritime Business, seventeen colleges and universities in this study advertise international business as well as general business programs. Of these programs:

- Seven require that students complete a course in cross-cultural communication.
- Six list a course in cross-cultural communication as an option.
- Five programs do not require any foreign language study.
- Five programs do not require a semester of study abroad.

Therefore, it appears that students in baccalaureate business programs at most New England post-secondary educational institutions with an enrollment of less than 10,000 students receive little to no education in cross-cultural communication, in the diversity of cultural perspectives in general, or in the cultures of the Middle East in particular. General education curricula at these institutions do not require that students learn about the Middle East, and in most cases, such courses do not appear as options within general education requirements.

4. Stereotypes from Other Parts of the Curriculum

Some college students may be able to enroll in a course on the Middle East even though it is not a business major or general education requirement because undergraduate curricula in the USA typically include a small number of “free elective” courses that students can select from as part of their studies. Based on this fact, we decided to expand the scope of our investigation. We wondered what vision of the Arab Middle East a U.S. college student might develop if he or she enrolled in a course on Middle Eastern literature in English translation, should such a course exist at the student’s college or university.

We performed Google searches using “syllabus,” “Arab,” “Middle East,” “novel,” and/or “literature” to locate syllabi for undergraduate courses across the USA in which modern Arabic novels in English translation were listed as required reading. Syllabi for courses that had not been taught within the last ten years or in which only graphic novels, short story collections, or anthologies were assigned as required reading were excluded. Of Google’s four hundred highest-ranking search results, only fifteen different syllabi met these parameters. Institutions at which these courses were offered ranged from a community college to an Ivy League university.

The fifteen syllabi listed a total of thirty-four different novels as required reading:

- Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, in five syllabi,
- Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun*, four,
- Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed*, three,
- Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, three,

- Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, three,
- Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, three,
- Alaa al-Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, two,
- Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, two,
- Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar and Arabian Nights and Days*, two syllabi each,
- Nawal al-Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, two.

Of the remaining twenty-two novels, each was listed in one syllabus apiece.

The novels contained in these syllabi are troubling because they serve to reinforce rather than refute common stereotypes about Arabs and the Middle East that U.S. students probably already possess when beginning their baccalaureate studies. These stereotypes derive from students' exposure to film depictions of Arabs as "wealthy and vile oil sheikhs . . . crazed terrorists . . . or camel-riding Bedouins" (Shaheen 2003, 173); arts, such as belly dancing, that have been de-historicized and thus made safe for consumption (Maira 2008); mass media narratives on the practice of Islam (Said 1997); and even English-language fiction, which often presents Arabs as "driven by hatred and a desire for revenge" and Muslims as "prone to the tendencies of extremists—brutal punishments, autocratic and theocratic rule, and medieval thinking and practices—that a great many Muslims themselves oppose" (Christison, 1987: 399).

These novels reinforce negative stereotypes for a number of reasons. First, they are largely outdated. With the exception of *The Yacoubian Building* (first published in Arabic in 2002), they were all published between the 1960s and the 1980s. The most frequently used novel in our search results, *Season of Migration to the North*, was first published in Arabic in 1961 and in English in 1966. This novel's surface structure is a series of contrasts that are readily identifiable by students; it is frequently compared to the well-known *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad; and it lends itself to explorations of psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, which are familiar conceptual tools among literature instructors. Although the novel was provocative at the time it was published (and was banned in Sudan), it now provides a comfortable space for U.S. students to ponder an ahistorical Middle East because it depicts what is, in their minds, an ancient and foreign history—British colonialism and its aftermath rather than neocolonialism and American foreign policy.

Second, the novels make it easy for students to define Arab men as sexist, angry, and fanatic. For example, *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany, published in Arabic in 2002 and in English in 2004, draws a realistic picture of Egyptian society in the 1990s. The novel presents two of its main characters, Busayna and Taha, as victims of corruption, injustice, and social decay. They are high school sweethearts, and both have no resources other than their own ingenuity and resilience. Arguably, their story is one of seduction. Busayna is seduced by a decrepit old man forty-five years her senior, whom she eventually marries. Taha is denied admission to the police force because of his low socioeconomic status, and he is welcomed into an Islamist organization where for the first time he is valued and treated with respect.

Taha's new-found zealotry only masks his desire for revenge, just as his love for Busayna masks his attempts to control her. In our experience of teaching this novel, students quickly identify this sexist dynamic. But they fail to understand how the rhetoric of self-identified "Islamist" groups coopt vulnerable youths like Taha into serving their political ends. They conclude that Taha's self-annihilation through a suicide bombing is the inevitable culmination of his anger toward Busayna and toward society at large, even though it is not presented as such in the novel.

Third, the novels present the Middle East as an unchanging landscape of war. The second, third, and fourth most frequently-assigned novels in these courses describe different

aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1960s and 1970s: *Men in the Sun* (Arabic, 1963; English, 1999), *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (Arabic, 1972; English, 1989), and *Wild Thorns* (Arabic, 1976; English, 1989). While these novels were controversial in content at the time of their publication, Palestinian life in and beyond the West Bank and Gaza has obviously evolved since then. For example, the main characters of *Men in the Sun* are three Palestinian refugees who agree to hide in a water tank to travel from Lebanon to Kuwait without proper documents. Students reading these novels today are not forced to confront the murky realm of current Israeli-Palestinian relations or the role played by the US in shaping these relations. Therefore, even though the Arab-Israeli conflict might dominate students' perceptions of the region, these perceptions can remain outdated, outmoded, and emotionally one-sided.

Students obtain a similar impression of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) from *The Story of Zahra* (Arabic, 1980; English, 1994). They interpret the life of Zahra, the novel's main character, as one long misogynistic experience that becomes increasingly entwined with Lebanon's national trauma because of the way the war deepens her subjection to male authority. The author's use of the Lebanese Civil War as a backdrop for exploring gender roles, sectarianism, violence, and international conflict in general is lost on students.

Students may feel sorry for the characters of Zahra in *The Story of Zahra* or Taha in *The Yacoubian Building*, but these feelings are not the foundation of a rigorous intellectual analysis. Unless more current and complex novels are taught in Middle Eastern literature courses at U.S. colleges and universities, students will not acquire a nuanced, balanced view of the region.

5. Conclusion

Given the results of our research, it appears that U.S. undergraduate curricula in general and baccalaureate business programs in particular do not provide students with adequate opportunities to learn cross-cultural communication skills or to learn about cultural perspectives different from their own. Typically, neither business nor general education curricula require that students take courses about the Middle East. Literature courses, as an example of possible electives that hypothetically supplement required courses in business and general education, likely reinforce rather than challenge students' pre-existing negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. Given the design of undergraduate curricula at U.S. colleges and universities, most undergraduate students will perceive the Middle East solely as a place of problems and conflicts, if at all. As a result, the vision students may have about how to do business with people in or from the Middle East is likely to fall far short of reality.

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