The Status of Public Foundation Courses in Higher Education

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Abstract. Public foundation courses play an important role in higher education. In recent years, some colleges and universities, especially higher vocational colleges, have ignored and even canceled many public foundation courses, which will greatly affect the quality of the talent training in higher education. This is a problem that needs to be urgently solved, for which some suggestions are put forward in this article.

The Role of Public Foundation Courses in Higher Education

In the history of world higher education, there have been many twists and turns in the course setting. Public foundation courses or specialized courses, which are more important? There have been many debates about the issue and the proportion of public foundation courses and specialized courses has been constantly adjusted accordingly. In the 19th century in the West, due to the rapid development of social productivity and technology, especially the continuous refinement of social division of labor, as well as the growing ties between higher education and society, the curriculum of colleges and universities was more closely related to social reality, which made the curriculum more specialized. However, although this way of curriculum settings made the professional education meet the requirements of social production and the development of science and technology, it also caused the fracture of the overall knowledge and human thoughts, thus leading to the utilitarianism of education and lopsided development of human nature. In the 20th century, this phenomenon aroused many concerns of far-sighted personages, who strongly called for the reconstruction of the higher education curriculum scientifically and rationally. So in the West, after a pure professional road, higher education gradually turned to the road of developing both professional education and foundation education.

China started to follow the Soviet pattern of "professional education" in the 1950's. The professional education teaching mode indeed cultivated a lot of much-needed professionals in a short period of time. But as time went on, the disadvantages of this kind of education pattern appeared gradually. By the mid - 1990s, it had been found that the college students we cultivated lacked cultural foundation that was suitable for social reforms and social progress. As a result, the "quality-oriented education" movement was widely launched not only in primary and secondary schools but also in colleges and universities around China.

However, the campaign, which should have been done in earnest, stayed in “thunder heavy but the raindrop little” stage. Especially in recent years, our country's higher education has a tendency of paying more attention to professional courses while downplaying the foundation subjects, which may probably lead to the western failure path of higher education. The reason, I think, lies in the employment-oriented policy. Too much emphasis on employment in higher education will surely ignore the overall quality of college students. According to a study done by Pang Haishao, an education scholar from Beijing Institute of Technology, the top three abilities that college students lack most can be listed as follows: 1) the innovation ability; 2) independent thinking and judging ability; 3) the ability to practice. In the same survey among the current college students, the teachers' answer to the question "what is the shortest quality" is "social responsibility".

Therefore, we should realize that in the long run, our higher education should not give top priority to the students' employment, but attach more importance to training qualified citizens. And the educational function of public foundation courses is to guide students to establish correct
outlook on life and values, to extend the students' knowledge, to cultivate the students' logical thinking ability, to improve the students' communication skills and then to make them be high-quality citizens with good manners, steadfast progress, mental health and a certain level of theory knowledge. A college student, no matter what kind of specific career and work he will go in for in the future, should have a wide range of knowledge, a good accomplishment, the correct way of thinking and strong social responsibility. And these qualities can not be acquired just through professional education.

In modern higher education, any educational concept with neglect of public foundation courses is an eagerness for quick success and instant benefits. This is extremely harmful to the development of college students' mental health, and has a negative effect on building an ideal harmonious society. In the history of higher education, failure examples due to such causes can be found everywhere. For example, the shocking “Ma Jiajue event”, “July 28 trans-provincial robbery-related homicide”, etc. It is because there is not enough attention to the students’ ideological and moral education as well as their mental health education that such tragedies happened.

Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen the public foundation courses and strengthen the students' cultural accomplishment, thus forming a common cultural background of students and correcting the one-sided emphasis on professional utilitarian of higher education, which is also a healthy development road for China's higher education.

In fact, both at home and abroad, successfully developed colleges and universities are always good examples of valuing public foundation courses.

Columbia University, where three Presidents of the United States once studied, including Obama, is the best example of this. In the first two years after the entrance, Columbia undergraduate students must devote all their efforts to the study of public foundation courses, and only in the last two years can they be engaged in professional learning. This means that the hours and credits of the public foundation courses account for about 1/2 of the university's total hours and credits. During the period of basic education and teaching, Columbia attaches great importance to the training of basic knowledge, basic ability and basic values of students. Therefore, there are many courses in reading, calculation, writing, expression and independent thinking. The following is part of the curriculum for the first year of undergraduate studies at the Columbia University: physics, mathematics, anthropology, astronomy, chemistry, literature, computer science, and American studies.

Harvard University is another good model for universities with a strong emphasis on public foundation courses. The school regulates that at least 8 to 10 public foundation courses, such as: literature and art, history, language, mathematics, foreign culture, sociology and ethics, must be completed before the undergraduate students continue to learn other courses.

One of the ideas that Mr. Cai Yuanpei, a former president of Beijing University, strongly advocated, is that great importance should be attached to public foundation courses. As Mr. Cai once put it, basic courses are the basis of becoming adults. According to the statistics, more than 90% of the basic courses in Peking University are taught by professors, which apparently shows that Beijing University pays much attention to the basic curriculum.

The Current Teaching Dilemma of Public Foundation Courses and Related Suggestions

For various reasons, many universities in China, especially higher vocational colleges, have serious deviations in understanding the role and status of public foundation courses. They think that college students can achieve the purpose of education as long as they learn the specialized courses well in school, and that the public foundation courses are not essential. This wrong concept is not for a long-term goal of training high-quality citizens, but an attitude towards extreme success and instant benefits. So when planning public foundation courses, they have a very representative principle--just enough. In fact, the so-called "enough" is actually just "enough for the present".

Under the influence of this erroneous trend of thought, some colleges and universities, especially higher vocational colleges, cut down public foundation courses when they are doing the teaching plan. Many vocational colleges even think that math, Chinese and foreign languages are useless. At
present, in some vocational colleges, the better cases are that the teaching periods for Chinese, math and foreign languages have been reduced by about half, while in worse cases, they are even chopped down.

There is no doubt that the serious adverse consequences caused by these wrong behaviors will surely be highlighted in the future. Therefore, how to promptly correct the above misconceptions and practices is an urgent task for the higher education workers. In this regard, I suggest that the following measures should be taken to correct them.

First of all, the state education administration department should, from the most commanding height and with the greatest vision, despise the mistaken ideas of ignoring public basic curriculum and define the importance of public foundation courses in higher education (especially vocational education), aimed at cultivating high-quality citizens and ensuring the national long period of stability. Universities and colleges should fully realize the following facts: the teaching quality of public foundation courses has a great influence on the quality of talent cultivation; the teaching quality of public foundation courses decides the teaching quality of the whole university; the teaching quality of public foundation courses determines the university's sustainable development process. To train high quality citizens should be the educational philosophy of colleges and universities.

Secondly, we should establish a regulations guarantee system for scientific public foundation courses, that is, the teaching arrangement of basic courses should be institutionalized, so as to curb the utilitarian trend of thoughts and practices in some colleges and universities. Of course, this system can also have some of its own characteristics, instead of allowing no flexibility. In the guarantee system, the public foundation courses cover as many fields of human knowledge and culture as possible, in order to prevent the culture default of college students. In the meanwhile, public foundation courses should have a large proportion in the teaching arrangements, in order to ensure the teaching quality of public foundation courses.

Thirdly, more teachers with rich teaching experience should stand on the platform of public foundation courses, that is, more famous teachers should teach public foundation courses. Most of the public foundation courses are the main courses in the first one or two years of college life. The learning experience in this period has a profound impact on the thinking ways of the students. Therefore, the teaching quality of the courses as well as the personal qualities of the teachers will have a great influence on the students' success. So universities and colleges should try their best to attract the best teachers to teach public foundation courses.

Fourthly, public foundation courses in higher education should focus on the cultivation education of the students' basic qualities, particularly on human history, culture, moral understanding and mastery. Besides, they should pay special attention to cultivating the students' expressive ability, innovation ability and practice ability.

Conclusion

From many instances we can safely draw the conclusion that if universities and colleges ignore public foundation courses and highlight the concept and practice of professional education, the comprehensive quality of the students will probably not be very high. From the viewpoint of talent development, those students lack the ability of sustainable development. What's more, they don’t have a wide range of knowledge and lack innovation ability and spirit, so they can’t adapt to the changes in their work. It is certainly not the original intention or goal of higher education to train such graduates. And this shows that our current concepts and practices of higher education have a deviation.

References
