

The Chronicle of Higher Education
From the issue dated January 23, 2004

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v50/i20/20b00601.htm>

The Tyranny of Choice

By Barry Schwartz

The modern university has become a kind of intellectual shopping mall. Universities offer a wide array of different “goods” and allow, even encourage, students—the “customers”—to shop around until they find what they like. Individual customers are free to “purchase” whatever bundles of knowledge they want, and the university provides whatever its customers demand. In some rather prestigious institutions, this shopping-mall view has been carried to an extreme. In the first few weeks of classes, students sample the merchandise. They go to a class, stay 10 minutes to see what the professor is like, then walk out, often in the middle of the professor’s sentence, to try another class. Students come and go in and out of classes just as browsers go in and out of stores in a mall.

This explosion of choice in the university is a reflection of a pervasive social trend. Americans are awash in choice, not only in the courses they take, but also in the products they buy (300 kinds of cereal, 50 different cellphones, thousands of mutual funds) and in virtually all aspects of life. Increasingly, people are free to choose when and how they will work, how they will worship, where they will live, what they will look like (thanks to liposuction, Botox, and cosmetic surgery of every description), and what kind of romantic relationships they will have. Further, freedom of choice is greatly enhanced by increased affluence. In the last 40 years, the inflation-adjusted, per capita income of Americans has more than doubled. The proportion of homes with dishwashers has increased from 9 to 50 percent, with clothes dryers from 20 to 70 percent, and with air-conditioning from 15 to 73 percent. And of course, no one had cable TV, home computers, or the Internet in 1964. This increased affluence contributes to freedom of choice by giving people the means to act on their various goals and desires, whatever they may be.

Does increased affluence and increased choice mean we have more happy people? Not at all. Three recently published books—by the psychologist David Myers, the political scientist Robert E. Lane, and the journalist Gregg Easterbrook—point out how the growth of material affluence has not brought with it an increase in subjective well-being. Indeed, they argue that we

are actually experiencing a decrease in well-being. In the last 30 years, the number of Americans describing themselves as “very happy” declined by 5 percent, which means that about 14 million fewer people report being very happy today than in 1974. And, as a recent study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* indicates, the rate of serious clinical depression has more than tripled over the last two generations, and increased by perhaps a factor of 10 from 1900 to 2000. Suicide rates are also up, not only in the United States, but in almost every developed country. And both serious depression and suicide are occurring among people younger than ever before. Deans at virtually every college and university in the United States can testify to this malaise, as they witness a demand for psychological services that they are unable to meet.

Why are people increasingly unhappy even as they experience greater material abundance and freedom of choice? Recent psychological research suggests that increased choice may itself be part of the problem.

It may seem implausible that there can be too much choice. As a matter of logic, it would appear that adding options will make no one worse off and is bound to make someone better off. If you’re content choosing among three different kinds of breakfast cereal, or six television stations, you can simply ignore the dozens or hundreds that get added to your supermarket shelves or cable provider’s menu. Meanwhile, one of those new cereals or TV stations may be just what some other person was hoping for. Given the indisputable fact that choice is good for human well-being, it seems only logical that if some choice is good, more choice is better.

Logically true, yes. Psychologically true, no. My colleagues and I, along with other researchers, have begun amassing evidence—both in the laboratory and in the field—that increased choice can lead to decreased well-being. This is especially true for people we have termed “maximizers,” people whose goal is to get the best possible result when they make decisions. Choice overload is also a problem for people we call “satisficers,” people who seek only “good enough” results from their choices, but the problem is greatly magnified for maximizers. Much of the relevant research is summarized in my book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. Here are some examples:

* Shoppers who confront a display of 30 jams or varieties of gourmet chocolate are less likely to purchase any than when they encounter a display of six.

* Students given 30 topics from which to choose to write an extra-credit essay are less likely to write one than those given six. And if they do write one, it tends to be of lower quality.

* The majority of medical patients do not want the decision authority that the canons of medical ethics have thrust upon them. Responsibility for medical decisions looks better to people in prospect than in actuality: Sixty-five percent of respondents say that if they were to get cancer, they would want to be in charge of treatment decisions, but among those who actually have cancer, only 12 percent want that control and responsibility.

* The more funds employers offer their employees in 401(k) retirement plans, the less likely the employees are to invest in any, even though in many cases, failing to do so costs them employer-matching funds of up to several thousand dollars a year.

* When maximizers, as opposed to satisficers, go shopping for big items or small ones, they spend more time looking, have a harder time deciding, look around more at what others are buying, and are less satisfied with their purchases.

* Maximizing college seniors send out more résumés, investigate more different fields, go on more job interviews, and get better, higher-paying jobs than satisficers. But they are less satisfied with the jobs, and are much more stressed, anxious, frustrated, and unhappy with the process.

These examples paint a common picture: Increasing options does not increase well-being, especially for maximizers, even when it enables choosers to do better by some objective standard. We have identified several processes that help explain why increased choice decreases satisfaction. Greater choice:

* Increases the burden of gathering information to make a wise decision.

* Increases the likelihood that people will regret the decisions they make.

* Increases the likelihood that people will anticipate regretting the decision they make, with the result that they can't make a decision at all.

* Increases the feeling of missed opportunities, as people encounter the attractive features of one option after another that they are rejecting.

* Increases expectations about how good the chosen option should be. Since assessments of the quality of a choice are almost always made relative to one's expectations, as expectations rise, actual choices have a rising standard to meet if they are to produce satisfaction.

* Increases the chances that people will blame themselves when their choices fail to live up to expectations. After all, with so many options out there, there is really no excuse for a disappointing choice.

To illustrate these last two points, I recall buying a bottle of wine to accompany dinner when I was vacationing with my family in a seaside cottage in a small town in Oregon. The tiny general store had about five options from which to choose. The wine I chose wasn't very good, but I didn't expect it to be, and I knew that I couldn't really have done much better. Contrast that with how it would feel to bring home a disappointing bottle of wine from a store that offered thousands of bottles from which to choose.

What are the implications of an abundance of choice for higher education today? College students don't have to worry about choosing 401(k) plans, and most of them don't have major health issues to make decisions about. Nonetheless, the world of the modern college student is so laden with choice, much of it extremely consequential, that for many, it has become overwhelming, perhaps contributing to the rush of students to university counseling services.

When I went to college, 35 years ago, there were almost two years' worth of general-education requirements that all students had to complete. We had some choices among courses that met those requirements, but they were rather narrow. Almost every department had a single, introductory course that prepared the student for more advanced work in the field. You could be fairly certain, if you ran into a fellow student you didn't know, that the two of you would have at least a year's worth of courses in common to discuss. In the shopping mall that is the modern university, the chances that any two students have significant intellectual experiences in common are much reduced.

About 30 years ago, somewhat dismayed that their students no longer shared enough common intellectual experiences, the Harvard faculty revised its general-education requirements to form a "core curriculum." With this new curriculum (which is currently undergoing another revision), students take at least one course in each of 11 different broad areas of inquiry. But among those areas, there are dozens and dozens of courses from which to choose. What are the odds that two random students will have courses in common to discuss?

At the advanced end of the curriculum, Harvard offers about 40 majors. For students with interdisciplinary interests, these can be combined into an almost endless array of joint majors. If that doesn't do the trick, students can create their own degree plan. And within majors, at least

many of them, internal structure has largely disappeared. Students can begin almost anywhere in the curriculum and end almost anywhere.

Harvard is not unusual. Princeton offers its students a choice of several hundred courses from which to satisfy its general-education requirements. Stanford, which has a larger student body, offers even more. Even at my small college, Swarthmore, with only 1,350 students, we offer about 120 courses to meet our version of the general-education requirement, from which students must select nine. And don't think that this range of choices is peculiar to elite, private institutions. At Pennsylvania State University, for example, liberal-arts students can choose from more than 40 majors and from hundreds of courses intended to meet basic requirements.

Within classes, the digital revolution has made access to information unbelievably easy. The Internet and the "digital library" can be a term-paper writer's blessing. But they can also be a curse. With so much information so readily available, when do you stop looking? There is no excuse for failing to examine all of it.

And outside the classroom, the range of recreational and extracurricular activities afforded to students has become mind-boggling. As elite universities compete with one another for elite students (an example of social waste that I think rivals the SUV), the institutions engage in an arms race of amenity provision—fitness centers, indoor rock-climbing walls, hot tubs that accommodate dozens of people at once, espresso bars—in their effort to attract every student they want. The result is a set of choices of things to do outside of class that makes one's head spin.

There are many benefits to expanded educational opportunities. The traditional bodies of knowledge transmitted from teachers to students in the past were constraining and often myopic. The tastes and interests of the idiosyncratic students often were stifled and frustrated. In the modern university, each individual student is free to pursue almost any interest, without having to be harnessed to what his intellectual ancestors thought was worth knowing. Moreover, the advent of the digital age has opened up the intellectual world to all students, even those at resource-poor institutions.

But this freedom comes at a price. Now, students are required to make many choices about education that will affect them for the rest of their lives, and they are forced to make them at a point in their intellectual development when many students lack the wisdom to choose intelligently. In my own experience I see this manifested in several ways. Advisees ask me to

approve course selections that have no rhyme or reason behind them and that the advisees themselves can't justify. Students are eager to have double or triple majors, partly, I know, to pad their résumés, but also because they can't figure out which discipline they really want to commit to. And I learned some time ago that "What are you doing when you graduate?" is not a friendly question to ask many college seniors.

In addition, students are faced with all this curricular choice while also trying to figure out what kinds of people they are going to be. Matters of ethnic, religious, and sexual identity are up for grabs. So are issues of romantic intimacy (to marry or not to marry; to have kids or not to have kids; to have kids early or to wait until careers are established). Students can live and work anywhere after they graduate, and in a wired world, they can work at any time, from any place. Of course it is true that students have always had to make these kinds of life decisions. College is an unsettled, and often unsettling, time. But in the past, in virtually each of these areas of life, there was a "default" option that was so powerful that many decisions didn't feel like decisions, because alternatives to the default weren't seriously considered. Nowadays, almost nothing is decided by default.

The result is a generation of students who use university counseling services and antidepressants in record numbers, and who provide places like Starbucks with the most highly educated minimum-wage work force in the world, as they bide their time hoping that the answer to the "what should I be when I grow up" question will eventually emerge. Choice overload is certainly not the only reason for the anxiety and uncertainty experienced by modern college students, but I believe it is an important one. I believe that by offering our students this much freedom of choice, we are doing them no favor. Indeed, I think that this obsession with choice constitutes an abdication of responsibility by university faculty members and administrators to provide college students with the guidance they badly need.

In an important respect, the "liberation" of the university experience mirrors the embrace of choice in American society at large. The dominant political trend in the last 25 years, influenced by the principles and assumptions of neoclassical economics, has been to stop trying to have the government provide services that serve the welfare of citizens and instead offer citizens choices so that each of us can pursue our own welfare. The push to privatize Social Security, to offer senior citizens choice among prescription-drug plans, and to offer parents choice in the public education their children receive—these are all instances of the view that

choice cannot help but make people better off. And so it is with the modern university. What I have tried to indicate is that though all this choice no doubt makes some people better off, it makes many people worse off, even when their choices work out well.

If enhanced freedom of choice and increased affluence don't enhance well-being, what does? The most important factor seems to be close social relations. People who are married, who have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who are not. People who participate in religious communities are happier than those who do not. Being connected to others seems to be more important to well-being than being rich or "keeping your options open."

In the context of this discussion of choice, it is important to note that, in many ways, social ties actually decrease freedom of choice. Marriage, for example, is a commitment to a particular other person that curtails freedom of choice of sexual or emotional partners. Serious friendship also entails weighty responsibilities and obligations that at times may limit one's own freedom. The same is true, obviously, of family. And most religious institutions call on their members to live their lives in a certain way, and to take responsibility for the well-being of their fellow congregants. So, counterintuitive as it may appear, what seems to contribute most to happiness binds us rather than liberates us.

Yet more than a quarter of Americans report being lonely, and loneliness seems to come not from being alone, but from lack of intimacy. We spend less time visiting with neighbors. We spend less time visiting with our parents, and much less time visiting with other relatives. Partly this is because we have less time, since we are busy trying to determine what choices to make in other areas of life. But partly this is because close social relations have themselves become matters of choice. As Robert Lane writes: "What was once given by neighborhood and work now must be achieved; people have had to make their own friends ... and actively cultivate their own family connections." In other words, our social fabric is no longer a birthright but has become a series of deliberate and demanding choices.

Universities should acknowledge the role they have played in creating a world of choice overload and move from being part of the problem to being a part of the solution. The "culture wars" over the canon that rocked college campuses for years have subsided, and most of us were not sorry to see them go. It is deeply troubling to face up to the fact that you and your colleagues can't agree on something as basic as what a college curriculum should consist of. There were no winners in these wars; they subsided, I think, because people got tired of fighting them. And they

subsided because giving students choice seemed like a benign resolution of what were sometimes virulent conflicts. Some choice is good, we thought, so more choice is better. Let students choose and we never have to figure out what to choose for them.

But offering more choice is not benign. It is a major source of stress, uncertainty, anxiety—even misery. It is not serving our students well. They would be better served by a faculty and an institution that offered choice within limits, freedom within constraints. The poet and essayist Katha Pollitt observed some years ago that the real reason why battles over the curriculum were so intense—the reason that the stakes seemed so high—is that faculty members knew that for the vast majority of students, the last serious book they would ever read would be the last book they read in their college careers. I think we are less likely to turn our students off to the life of the mind if we offer them curricular options that are well structured and coherent than if we simply let them choose whatever they want on their own.

There is a New Yorker cartoon that depicts a parent goldfish and an offspring in a small goldfish bowl. “You can be anything you want to be—no limits,” says the myopic parent, not realizing how limited an existence the fishbowl allows. I’d like to suggest that perhaps the parent is not so myopic. Freedom within limits, choice within constraints, is indeed liberating. But if the fishbowl gets shattered—if the constraints disappear—freedom of choice can turn into a tyranny of choice.

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Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 50, Issue 20, Page B6

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