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Making the Case for Liberal Education

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We are seeing what I believe to be precursors of a renaissance for broad education and deepened understanding about civic responsibility and international justice, about human capacity and world cultures.

September 11 has become the bellwether for all Americans to see and feel our inescapable connection with peoples, histories, places, and ideologies heretofore poorly understood. Across the nation, Americans feel more poignantly and personally than ever the plight of peoples far away. Their suffering is ours, too; their peace and well-being will be ours as well. We want to better understand them and be wisely engaged with them, with all communities of the world. Yet we are challenged to overcome counterproductive instincts of paranoia.

Americans yearn to resolve other troublesome paradoxes of American life: Being the wealthiest nation on the planet and yet unsure how we will protect Social Security for the baby boomers about to retire; being the most powerful nation in the world and yet having a self-centered, "pre-Copernicus view of the universe"; having large and influential corporations while seeing the scope of the pain when one loses its moral compass; commanding great technologies while suffering persistent illiteracy; experiencing high levels of community volunteerism alongside a deplorable turnout at the polls.

The apparent disconnect between what we care about and our attitudes toward "the System" sets the stage for renewal of principled leadership and broader public engagement in shaping the future of our society, our democracy. Colleges and universities are uniquely poised to engage this disconnect, and, through our research, our teaching, and our service to the community, to help our society inaugurate a new era of civic responsibility and human progress. The imperative for renewal of basic values in quality education is palpable.

Our case for liberal learning

For too long, too many students and too many of those who influence their thinking have regarded the liberal arts and sciences as a luxury--important sources of knowledge, yes, but not the right preparation for those who seek employment after graduation. But change is in the wind, bringing with it a renaissance for liberal education--although in the twenty-first century, it will be taught and applied differently than in its earlier manifestations. It will recognize the practicality of liberal education, moving away from being satisfied to learn just for the sake of knowing. It will be available for all students, not only the self-selected and the privileged.

Our case for liberal arts colleges in the public sector

The United States has achieved nearly universal participation in higher learning; yet, many students of all ages, and especially those from less privileged backgrounds, do not readily seek the kind of education that will build the nation of learners and educated citizens we now must be.

Such education must be at once grounded in knowledge of many pasts, in experience with the present seen differently, and in the quest for wisdom about our shared futures. As we celebrate our successes in the era of access, we must commit our new century to a higher level of expectation for access to quality liberal education by, for, and about all of us.

Southern Oregon University is a prime resource for this high-quality and practical liberal arts experience, and as such, it must move forward with creative and bold plans to renew the character of public liberal arts education in our new era.

Our case for balance and a new design

Alongside the need to increase access to the liberal arts college experience in the public sector, we are challenged to rebalance and better relate our principal aims for universal education in America. Public policy and public opinion have emphasized work preparation as higher education's most important aim. Preparing students for work and careers is very important. But twenty-first century education for all students must entail more than technical knowledge and on-the-job skills if we are to achieve high ideals for corporate responsibility and just governments. This is a call for renewed balance and a new design.

The aims of a strong liberal education include: developing the intellect and the capacity for lifelong learning; shaping ethical judgment and the capacity for insight and concern for others, our habitats, and the future; increasing understanding of cultures, languages, and societies, and the connections among them; comprehending relationships between landscapes and built environments, institutional systems and conditions of populations; expanding scientific horizons and mastering common scientific literacy and technological competence; nurturing democratic and global knowledge and engagement--and, yes, even reaching out to try to understand adversaries.

Liberal arts majors must acquire practical skills, such as managing and leading change, while professional majors must gain a wider knowledge of cultural, global, and ethical issues. As we bring these two aims even closer together in classrooms, residence life, and community practice, students across majors will help to educate one another and thereby command much higher levels of active, reflective, and collaborative learning.

The case is made especially well by Lee S. Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Advocating a "hybrid" of the Hutchins orientation to the great books as liberal education for its own sake, and the Dewey view of liberal education for the professional educator, he argues, "If we are to preserve and sustain liberal education, we must make it more professional; we must learn to profess the liberal arts." So he looks to professional education for ideas.

Teaching a profession, explains Shulman, is challenged by the inevitable gap between theory and practice, as any medical student or teacher education student can attest. Theories are powerful and valuable for narrowing or simplifying the field of study, but they rarely explain fully the circumstances of practice. Hence, these students need live experience. The study of cases captures experience for analysis and review and creates a teaching method of theoretically grounded experience that prepares students for the unpredictability of practice.

Teaching a liberal art, on the other hand is challenged by the inevitable sense of remoteness or irrelevance, as an early student of the Socratic dialogues may complain. The new "service-learning" pedagogy, according to Shulman, makes liberal education more professional and gives liberal arts and science fields a clinical component or the equivalent to an internship. The study of cases brings to liberal arts instruction the most perplexing problems in contemporary life and work. Cases create a bridge between the rigorous study of theory and the exciting work of hands-on service-learning and internships. In Voltaire's terms, this is the play between the read and the dance.

Shulman explains the benefits of these methods for "professing the liberal arts." Learning is more active, hence more meaningful and memorable. The student learns by reflection, heeding John Dewey's lesson that we don't learn by doing alone, but by thinking about what we are doing and why. And educators employ collaboration so that students "scaffold" on one another's learning. In the process, this hybrid helps students acquire knowledge and skills that are more lasting, reliable, and useful--for them, their careers, and their communities.

Contemporary liberal education must look beyond the classroom to the challenges of the community, the complexities of the workplace, and the major issues in the world. It must seek informed and passionate public service. It must ask students to apply their developing analytical and communication skills to progressively complex problems. It must link theory and practice, real problems and real solutions. It must celebrate cooperative as well as individual performance, flexibility as well as commitment, creation of ideas as well as seizing of opportunities. And it must use the best of traditional liberal arts methods in professional study and the best methods for professional study in liberal learning.

Over the years Southern has crafted a contemporary design for liberal education where classical disciplines meet the professions, where classroom learning meets the community and workplace, where students meet the world, where living and learning blend in the residential experience on campus and in town, where teaching and learning merge in strong mentorship. It teaches through research, and researches through teaching.

We are "remaking" the history of education and our university by redefining and advancing our battle to overcome ignorance and its resulting tragedies, by creating avenues to richer lives in all honorable meanings of the term rich. We remake that history by being among the very best public liberal arts universities and by interpreting the juxtaposition of liberal education and professional study with new levels of insight and judgment in our times.

It is a struggle on behalf of our local communities and state. And it is a struggle for democracy and freedom that is worldwide and civilization-long--this great toiling for sustainable human society.

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