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A Forum on Helping Students Engage the "Big Questions"

FEATURED TOPIC

EACH GENERATION of students inevitably must confront anew the fundamental questions of meaning and value that have vexed human beings down through the ages. What does it mean to be human? How ought a human being to live? What makes a meaningful and satisfying life? What are my values? What are my obligations to others? How can I understand suffering and death?

As students have struggled with such "Big Questions," individually and collectively, liberal education has traditionally sought to provide them with a variety of cultural and historical perspectives, as well as to foster their analytical ability to confront and explore answers, necessarily provisional and often competing, for themselves. In practice, however, there are significant challenges, from lack of student interest and faculty expertise to the persistence of inadequate professional paradigms and reward structures.

What are the Big Questions that engage today's students? Is exploring those questions a legitimate part of liberal education as we understand it today? If so, how adequately are they being dealt with? How could we do better?

Following are four responses. Readers are strongly encouraged to contribute additional responses online at www.aacu.org/liberaleducation, where they will be published as they are received.

Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin

GIVEN THAT MOST of the great literary and philosophical traditions that constitute the core of a liberal education are grounded in the maxim "know thyself," we believe that the Big Questions are fundamental to the ideals and values of liberal learning. Self-understanding, of course, is a necessary prerequisite to our ability to understand others and to resolve conflicts. This basic truth—which lies at the heart of our difficulty in dealing effectively with problems of violence, poverty, crime, divorce, substance abuse, and religious and ethnic conflict that continue to plague our country and our world—was also dramatically and tragically illustrated by the events of September 11, 2001.

Such considerations led us in 2003 to undertake a six-year national study of students' spiritual development in American higher education. Funded by grants to the University of California–Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institute from the John Templeton Foundation, this longitudinal project has already revealed a high level of interest in spiritual issues and spiritual questions on the part of undergraduates. Our surveys show that two-thirds of the students express a strong interest in spiritual matters, and that similar numbers demonstrate a substantial level of religious commitment and engagement. But their existential search can be rocky at times, and their

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spiritual struggles can distress them psychologically and cause them to have doubts about the self and its worth. As one student told us in a focus group interview, "a question I've been dealing with is…what is the point of college? [What does] the fact that we're paying for this education so that we can make money later in life…have to do with the grand scheme of things?"

How are colleges responding to such challenges? Well over half of the students report that their professors *never* encourage discussions of religious or spiritual matters, and about the same proportion reports that professors never provide opportunities to discuss the purpose or meaning of life. The faculty themselves show a considerable division of opinion when it comes to the role of spiritual issues in higher education. While majorities of faculty believe that enhancing self-understanding, developing moral character, and helping students develop their personal values should be either essential or very important goals of undergraduate education, only about a third say the same for "facilitating students' spiritual development." On the other hand, four in five faculty members consider themselves to be "spiritual persons," and more than two-thirds are "seeking out opportunities to grow spiritually."

By raising public awareness of the important role that spirituality plays in student learning and development, by alerting academic administrators, faculty, and curriculum committees to the importance of spiritual development, and by identifying possible strategies for enhancing that development, it is our hope to encourage institutions to give greater priority to these spiritual aspects of students' educational and personal development. As Wellesley College President Diana Chapman Walsh, a member of the national advisory board for the project, expresses it, "we can create time and space…for faculty, students, and staff to honor their inner lives, when, if, and how they choose….The freedoms we scholars treasure need not be threatened by opening ourselves to the spiritual dimensions of teaching, learning, and knowing, need not deny the possibility of a kind of knowing that comes from heart and soul. These forms of knowing should be sought not instead of the intellect but in partnership with the intellect, in all its beauty and power." □

Rebecca Chopp

EDUCATION, IN ITS MOST BASIC SENSE, prepares students to understand the self and the world.

Traditionally, the college years offer students the time and resources necessary to learn how to understand one's self on the journey into responsible adulthood. As we provide students opportunities to explore the Big Questions in their lives, we should be sure that religion is a part of that exploration. As the Western tradition teaches, we hope for our students a life well lived and a life worth reflecting upon.

Teaching about religion should not be confused with handing out eternal dictates or requiring conversion. The language of theology, the aesthetics of religious experience, the power of community, and the morality of religious performance can all be explored in many ways through different departments and courses. At Colgate, a residential liberal arts institution, our students explore the making of meaning through our core curriculum but

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Colgate University

also through courses in areas such as ethics, religion, the arts, history, literature, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology.

A large and diverse campus ministries program and our Center for Outreach, Volunteerism, and Education help students shape habits of meaning for themselves and their communities. Chapel House, a non-sectarian spiritual center and retreat, offers students and others a place for peaceful contemplation. Our approach in teaching about meaning is not about giving answers, but about providing a variety of approaches to how human beings make meaning and offering a variety of opportunities to create habits of meaning making.

Education teaches one how to understand the world as well as the self. For the last fifty years, higher education has been dominated by a naive belief that the educated world is leaving religion behind and that the secular world will trump all. Wrong on both counts. In the contemporary study of religion in the world and the world of religion, we need to understand that religion can be a powerful force for good and for bad. Religion in its many forms is taught across the curriculum and in special campus-wide programs.

Serious exploration of religion as a force in the world is part of our programs in peace and conflict studies as well as departments such as international relations and political science. Several years ago, our Center for Ethics and World Societies sponsored a campus-wide series of programs on politics and religion. And our religion department today offers courses in Hinduism, Native American religions, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. An active off-campus study program in which 68 percent of our students participate provides opportunities to explore religion in the world in a variety of local contexts.

Though Baptist in origin, Colgate is now a non-sectarian community in which humanists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and agnostics live together—quite parallel to the twenty-first-century world in which our students will live and lead. No questions can be "off-bounds" in the critical thinking of the liberal arts. All questions of self and world most certainly belong in the liberal arts curriculum of the twenty-first century. □

Andrew Delbanco

"WHY ARE WE HERE, GENTLEMEN?" was the rhetorical question with which Samuel Eliot Morison liked to begin his American history seminar at Harvard in the 1950s. I've been told by a witness that on one occasion a mischievous student asked him to clarify whether he was asking about their place in the university or in the cosmos. "Professor Morison," he said, with a glance around the room, "do you mean, why are we here"—and then, with a papal gesture of upturned palms and a heavenward roll of his eyes—"*or*, why are we *here*?"

As this student well knew, in the modern academy this latter kind of Big Question tends, as we would say today, to be "checked at the door." It is a question unanswerable by objective inquiry; it throws us back on traditions or intuitions or articles of faith, all of which have a place in the secular university as objects of study but not as sources of knowledge.

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Yet students are still asking such questions, and always will. What does that mean for people trying to be responsible educators?

One approach is to leave the students to their own devices—to dorm-room colloquies with one another, or, perhaps, to organizations sponsored by the campus ministry. That is pretty much what most institutions have chosen to do—a choice based on a sound awareness, confirmed over centuries, of how quick adults can be to indoctrinate young people if given half a chance. The *laissez-faire* norm of the modern university is a great achievement and should not be lightly discarded or even slightly modified.

So what to do for our students while defending their freedom to answer such questions on their own? It's actually pretty simple, I think. Put in front of them some sample of great texts (we can argue forever over exactly which ones—so we should put aside that temptation and get on with it) that place the Big Questions front and center, and let the discussion begin. In small groups. Led by sympathetic but rigorous teachers who know something about the texts and their genealogies and applications. An occasional lecture from someone who knows a lot about the texts can be helpful too.

A college may require such engagement from every student and encourage participation by a sufficient number of faculty to serve all students every year. Or it may make such a curriculum optional, thereby at least serving those who are inclined to take advantage of it. I prefer the former because students who think they already know the answers, or that the answers are unknowable and therefore not worth pursuing, might change their minds.

The specialized professionalism of the faculty and the cost of small-group education make mounting such a curriculum very difficult today. Still, it may be worth trying harder than most institutions have done over the last fifty years or so. For one thing, this kind of teaching has benefits for faculty too, since it can save them from creeping anxiety about the value of writing books that other faculty will have to read in order to write their own books.

Of course, research and writing have their own rewards, but nothing like having a student come to you and say, "I feel I'm starting to figure out what to do with my life, and your class made a difference." □

Vassar College

Samuel Speers

THE BIG QUESTIONS I see students asking have to do with the integrative work of the liberal arts: how are students to link their learning and their evolving sense of what matters to them? As director of an office of religious and spiritual life, I've come to see unexamined secular assumptions as an unexpected site for engaging such questions. Secular traditions freed us from privileging any single worldview (religious or otherwise) in pursuing a just and open society, even as the secular privileging of neutral reason is lurking in the background of our present difficulty seeing wonder as integral to the intellectual life. In this brief response, I want to suggest that the secular ethos at a number of our campuses provides a way of seeing some of the obstacles to engaging students' Big Questions.

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While defining the secular in its multiple and changing forms could itself qualify as a Big Question, secularity in my context generally refers to the understanding that religious commitments are private matters of personal choice and that most public campus discussions (in the classroom and beyond it) are best run without reference to particular religious commitments or visions of ultimate reality. Yet now leading scholars wonder if our commitments to secularity really guarantee more critical thought, more democratic institutions, more flourishing community life; do the liberating intentions of Western secularity strip some students and faculty of fundamental aspects of their identity? Is secularity truly neutral?

These questions are important to our renewed attention to engaging students' Big Questions—and not only because they point at our limited understanding of the transformations of the religious in modernity. Even more, these questions reveal the need to look critically at whether our secular frameworks are ample enough. Writing about U.S. civic life more generally, political scientist (and atheist) William Connolly (1999, 6) turns to visceral language to describe our dilemma, arguing that our "secular models of thinking, discourse, and ethics are too constipated to sustain the diversity they seek to admire." For Connolly and others, our notions of the secular pay insufficient attention to how important the affective dimensions of our experience are to critical thought and the wonder that nourishes it. Yet it's the integration of these elements—the affective and the analytical—that is so crucial for the development of sustaining commitments to the urgent questions our students are asking. Too often, these aspects of students' identity and formation are uncoupled from our campus' intellectual life and made largely private in student life.

Thanks to a grant from the Teagle Foundation's "Fresh Thinking" initiatives, I'm part of a consortium of campuses that seeks to bring these developing discussions about secularisms and the public sphere to bear upon the mission of the liberal arts college. We believe that one way students' Big Questions can be more effectively engaged is by addressing the separations constructed by secularity's organizing force. Students struggle to integrate their own commitments with their learning in part because of secularism's legacies—including the professionalization and specialization of academic disciplines, and the emergence of student life programming and services as its own non-curricular field. By bringing together faculty and chaplains, we are trying to address the separation faculty and student-life administrators themselves feel between their personal and professional lives (or aspects of them), and between their campus specialty and the rest of college life. Through a range of initiatives, including qualitative research, curricular development, seminars and discussions, and a public conference, we hope to open up wider conversation nationally about whether and how the secular container for the liberal arts compartmentalizes the experiences our students are trying to integrate. □

REFERENCE

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