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Liberal Education and

The Necessary Revolution in Undergraduate Education

FEATURED TOPIC

The effort to connect liberal education with action and practice is at a crossroads

SOMETHING REMARKABLE is happening in programs of liberal education all over the country. The longstanding notion that learning should occur almost exclusively in classrooms is being amended to give a much more prominent place to various forms of experiential education. The belief that liberal education should focus on a narrow range of intellectual qualities is being revised to include an emphasis on connecting ideas with action. These developments constitute a profoundly important, indeed revolutionary, challenge to the version of liberal education that has dominated American higher education since the early years of the twentieth century.

The trend to connect liberal education with practice takes multiple forms at the campus level and reflects a range of interests among students, faculty, and administrators. The various developments that make up this trend do not yet constitute a coherent movement, nor are they united by shared purposes. They remain on the margins of mainstream thought about the proper characteristics of liberal education. Yet they should command the attention of thoughtful academics for one basic reason: they seek to enact the traditional mission of liberal education to nurture engaged, effective, constructive professionals and citizens, and they implicitly question whether learning experiences that cultivate analytic skills in classroom settings constitute the most effective way to achieve this purpose.

Forms of experiential education

The most prominent attempt to introduce practical activity into liberal education is the civic engagement movement, through which students are encouraged to participate in off-campus community service, sometimes in connection with credit-bearing service-learning courses, sometimes outside the formal curriculum. Such programs aim to cultivate habits of "active citizenship" and build problem-solving skills in community settings. Some explicitly promote an appreciation of democracy and sophistication about influencing public policy. Many campuses have created administrative units charged with promoting service. Among the better-developed programs are those offered by the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford, the Harward Center at Bates, the Morgridge Center for Public Service at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and the Nutter Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Effective Practice

Campus Compact is the most prominent national organization promoting community service within higher education.

Though important in its own right, the civic engagement movement is also a specific instance of the broader effort to link liberal education with action and practice. Even more common are programs offering students off-campus work placements, frequently related to their career interests. These programs are organized in many different ways, but all use direct experience to deepen understanding and nurture practical effectiveness. Wellesley College, for example, encourages students to participate in internships and annually cancels classes for a day so that those who do can report on what they have learned. Cooperative education, in which students alternate periods of full-time paid employment and periods of full-time study, is the fullest expression of this idea. At Northeastern University, most liberal arts majors do at least one co-op placement during the course of their studies.

The goal is to enrich liberal learning by connecting it more strongly with the lives students will actually live after college

Internships have, of course, been available at many colleges and universities for many years. But during the final quarter of the twentieth century, these types of programs became far more popular with students and far more pervasive among institutions than previously. At present such programs are nearly universal on American campuses, and most high school students indicate an intention to complete an internship during college. These programs have become so central to the idea of a college education that traditional liberal arts colleges frequently emphasize the availability of off-campus work experiences in their recruiting materials.

Two other widely available forms of experiential education are undergraduate research and study abroad. Like internships, programs that involve undergraduates in faculty research have existed for a long time, but they have become more widely available and have found common ground with the civic engagement movement. Community service often involves

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students working with faculty on community-based research projects intended to help residents address local problems. The Center for Urban Learning and Research at Loyola University Chicago is an outstanding example of this approach. David Hodge of Miami University of Ohio and his collaborators, Marcia Baxter Magolda and Carolyn Haynes, have advanced an even deeper link between discovery-oriented education and effective action.[1] They argue that the developmental capacity for self-authorship, or an internally generated belief system, is an essential ingredient in both scholarly intellectual work and effective action. Study abroad, which also has an extensive history, has become far more widespread in an era preoccupied with globalization and often now includes non-classroom experiences.

The movement to link liberal education more closely to action and practice is not limited to programs that take students out of the classroom. The trend is also reflected in modifications of arts and sciences coursework. Most liberal arts colleges now offer opportunities to study applied and professional subjects, for example, and many universities encourage liberal arts majors to take minors in professional fields. The Carnegie Foundation has sponsored an effort to enrich the "thinking" orientation of liberal education with the "doing" emphasis of professional studies by incorporating practice-oriented pedagogies, such as simulations and case studies, in liberal arts courses. Many colleges offer interdisciplinary, problem-focused minors like urban studies or international relations through which students learn to think about complex, real-world problems. These programs often provide platforms for community-based research projects, internships and service opportunities, and Model UN–type simulations.

All forms of experiential education—community service, internships, cooperative education, undergraduate research, study abroad—and the curricular modifications associated with them have been developing independently and with little interaction among their advocates, who tend to focus on their own specific goals. Yet these movements share a focus on empowering students to be effective actors and problem solvers in organizational, social, and civic settings, and they reflect the perception that direct experience adds significantly to classroom study in promoting student development. These movements are in no way hostile to liberal education; on the contrary, their champions have deep roots in the liberal arts and sciences. The goal is to enrich liberal learning by connecting it more strongly with the lives students will actually live after college. In advancing the link between learning and experience, today's educators are rediscovering ideas articulated by John Dewey in the early 1900s but largely ignored by mainstream higher education for the last century.

The convergence of student, faculty, and administrative interests

Many forces are driving the movement to connect liberal education with practice. Some of the energy comes from students. In recent years, undergraduates have sensed that a traditional liberal education may not, by itself, be a sufficient preparation for the adult world. They have been pressuring colleges to offer internships, work placements, and volunteer activities through which they can gain experience and competence. Two impulses appear to be involved here. The first is anticipating the workplace. Many students want to explore

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career possibilities even as they pursue a liberal arts degree, and they know a successful internship can help them land a first job. The second is contributing to the community. The interest of young people in community service and social entrepreneurship is one of the most exciting and hopeful developments within contemporary youth culture.

Faculty are drawn to including practice-oriented experiences in liberal arts programs for reasons of their own. Some are impressed by research indicating that "engaged leaning"—that is, learning through activities that require active participation—is more pedagogically powerful than learning based on traditional, frequently passive, classroom study. Other faculty, concerned by reports of diminished student interest in political and social issues, see the civic engagement movement as a way to counteract this trend. Still other faculty focus more on the practical challenges that students will face after graduation and are sympathetic with student desires to equip themselves for the world of work.

Institutional leaders are also attracted to a version of the liberal arts actively engaged with the nonacademic world. Individuals in these roles are mindful of the criticism of governmental, political, and business leaders that higher education does not contribute enough to the community, the state, and the nation—a longstanding complaint that has gained force from current worries about the global competitiveness of the United States. Presidents of urban campuses, faced with concerns among civic officials and neighbors about the adverse impacts of their institutions, love to highlight the contributions their students make through community service. Many current academic leaders, moreover, began their careers imbued with the idealistic sprit of the 1960s and 1970s. For these leaders, the impulse to expand the concerns of liberal education beyond the walls of the campus reflects a personal commitment to social progress and a resistance to the historical association of the liberal arts with withdrawal from the nonacademic world. Administrators also know that offering off-campus experiences or adding practice-oriented coursework to a liberal arts curriculum can help maintain strong enrollments.

Viewed from a historical perspective, the convergence of student, faculty, and administrative interests in amending liberal education to include an emphasis on practice represents the flowering of ideas that emerged from the wave of curricular experimentation of the early 1970s. A response to the student protests of the 1960s, that movement was inspired by the belief that the expanded enrollments and more diverse student bodies that characterized higher education after World War II required a wider array of learning experiences than had been appropriate when access to higher education was more restricted. Off-campus learning opportunities and interdisciplinary, problem-focused studies were two of the most widely advocated innovations emanating from those years.

Two recent enrollment trends have reinforced interest in these curricular ideas. One involves the accelerating diversification of the student body as more and more young people from

disadvantaged and minority backgrounds enter college. This phenomenon has heightened the focus on creating dynamic learning experiences appropriate for a wide variety of learning styles that highlight the diverse perspectives all students bring to the learning environment. An additional factor has been the shift in higher education's center of gravity from country to city, with the majority of the nation's students now attending urban institutions. Urban campuses tend naturally to be more involved with their surrounding communities than are campuses in more isolated settings, and they have often taken the lead in creating off-campus service and work opportunities for their students.

Sources of resistance

The idea that liberal education should help students become effective actors and problem solvers as well as disciplined thinkers has inspired initiatives at most colleges and universities, and it is being championed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Nonetheless, the movement's most important innovations remain controversial within academia. Undergraduate research and study abroad can be easily accepted, since they involve essentially academic activities. But because they imply the educational value of practical experience, community service and off-campus employment are more challenging. Stanley Fish (2008) speaks for many when he argues that the proper end of college is the mastery of intellectual and scholarly skills because that is what academics know how to teach. Translating ideas into action is unfamiliar territory. Including practice-oriented material within the liberal arts

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curriculum also inspires traditionalist objections. When leaders of the Carnegie project on bridging the gap between liberal and professional education convened faculty from both traditions, they found deep skepticism among both groups about each other's work.

There are sources of resistance to moving liberal education toward effective practice at the institutional level as well. Academia's prestige hierarchy is dominated by the major research universities and exclusive liberal arts colleges, and these institutions tend to be deeply committed to the intellectually focused version of the liberal arts that Fish articulates. Although many high-status institutions have made room for internships and service-learning courses—among New England's leading liberal arts colleges, for example, Amherst, Bowdoin, Clark, Smith, and Williams have all done so—none, as yet, has made these types of experiences a central part of the learning experience or explicitly embraced the linking of liberal education with practice. Some upwardly mobile institutions like Northeastern University, Wagner College, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute have placed greater emphasis on these innovations, but most institutions will follow the lead of the top-ranked schools.

Advocacy for a stronger and more direct focus on practice in no way repudiates either the traditional goals of liberal learning or the educational practices associated with them

Against this background, the basic pattern at the campus level with respect to all of these ideas has been to make room for them to accommodate interested students and faculty while leaving the overall program untouched. There are exceptions. Tulane University has made completion of a community service project and related coursework a graduation requirement. But in most instances, service learning and internship opportunities exist as "one-off" experiences tied to particular courses and individual faculty members but not integrated into the overall structure of general education or the major. Indeed, in many cases, off-campus experience is offered as an extracurricular activity, valued and encouraged but not incorporated into the formal program of instruction. A recent assessment of the service-learning movement by some of its strongest advocates expressed frustration that the effort had achieved little success in becoming institutionalized.

The movement at a crossroads

The effort to connect liberal education with action and practice is at a crossroads. The question is this: Since advocates of various themes within this movement—the importance of civic engagement, the pedagogical power of "active learning," the legitimacy of attention to practical skills, the advantages of undergraduate research and study abroad—have gained a measure of acceptance around the edges of the curriculum for their particular purposes, should these different advocacy groups come together to advance the broader idea that the ability to translate careful thought into effective action should be a central element of what it means to be liberally educated? This is, after all, the implicit educational idea that unites all these developments.

The case for moving in this direction is clear. Champions of liberal learning have historically insisted that their primary mission is to educate the next generation of national leaders and to prepare young people to be effective participants in society. I have yet to read a college catalog that identifies the nurturing of

Conference on Liberal Education and Effective Practice

In March 2009, Clark University and the Association of American Colleges and Universities will cosponsor a conference on liberal education and effective practice. Intended to explore in greater depth the issues raised in this essay, the conference will bring together educational leaders, administrators, and practitioners from around the country. The goal is to advance the national discussion of these matters. Materials related to the conference, including papers commissioned by Clark University for consideration by the participants, will be available online at www.aacu.org and www.clarku.edu.

intellectuals as the institution's primary mission. The qualities of mind historically associated with the arts and sciences are typically described as essential for enlightened participation in social and organizational settings, which includes but is not limited to membership on a university faculty. Top liberal arts programs take as much or more pride in the corporate and governmental leaders they have produced as in the scholars they have graduated. Yet there has been little actual analysis showing that cultivating certain intellectual qualities in classroom settings is the optimum way to prepare young people to engage the adult world. The movement to connect liberal education with practice contends that there can be a more effective way to achieve this time-honored goal.

Advocacy for a stronger and more direct focus on practice in no way repudiates either the traditional goals of liberal learning or the educational practices associated with them. On the contrary, research indicates that the ability to master complex material, to analyze difficult problems, and to communicate effectively is critical for success in many areas of life. The point is that these qualities are only part of the equipment we need to be effective in our careers and our civic activities. Psychologist Robert Sternberg of Tufts (1999), who has studied the characteristics of successful people, argues for a "triarchic" concept of mind that includes not only "academic (or analytic) intelligence," but the capacity to respond creatively and independently to unforeseen, multidimensional problems (creative intelligence) and the ability to use ideas to solve practical problems (practical intelligence). He stresses the importance of a balanced deployment of these capacities while also urging colleges and universities, in cultivating these capacities, to emphasize the importance of using them for the common good, a characteristic that he calls "wisdom." Most programs of liberal education focus almost exclusively on only the first of these qualities.

There is room for debate about Sternberg's particular formulations. Other scholars have developed other ways to characterize the multiple intelligences that contribute to effective action in various realms of activity. But the basic point that success in institutional, professional, and social contexts requires qualities of character, personality, and mind that go far beyond "academic intelligence" is widely accepted as a matter of folk wisdom (even among professors) and is also supported by scholarly research. If this is true, and if the most important mission of liberal education is to nurture individuals who will make important contributions to society, then shouldn't we take account of these realities in designing undergraduate programs in the liberal arts and sciences?

There is much at stake in seeking wider appreciation of the value of linking liberal education and effective practice as well as greater understanding of the role experiential education can play in establishing that link. The pedagogical claims advanced by advocates of community service and internships are too important merely to be tolerated at the margins of our thinking about liberal learning. We need to take a hard, fresh look at the qualities needed for effectiveness as professionals and as citizens, to compare those qualities to the outcomes we cultivate through the arts and sciences, and to design educational formats that will empower our graduates to translate the values and skills we nurture into constructive social action. As Carol Geary Schneider has argued in championing a heightened emphasis on practice, the challenges our country faces in the twenty-first century are too great for us to rest comfortably with any lesser educational goal. □

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NOTE

1. See David Hodge, "The Engaged University and Student Success," as well as other relevant reports and speeches available at www.miami.muohio.edu/president/reports_and_speeches/index.cfm.