

RICHARD M. FREELAND

The Clark/AAC&U Conference on Liberal Education &

FEATURED TOPIC

ON MARCH 12 AND 13, 2009, thirty-two educators and leaders from the corporate and nonprofit sectors gathered at Clark University for an extended seminar cosponsored by Clark and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Our focus was a question of fundamental importance for liberal education: how well do the learning experiences we offer—predominantly academic exercises in traditional classroom settings—align with our professed goals of preparing engaged citizens, effective professionals, and, more broadly, adults equipped to make significant contributions to society? A central goal of the conference was dialogue between educators and successful professionals who had experienced a traditional liberal education as undergraduates, which was the case for all but one of our participating practitioners.

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The conference was structured around five questions related to the link between liberal education and “effective practice,” the term Clark uses to suggest a range of capacities needed to translate ideas and values into action—qualities such as imagination, resilience, and persistence and the ability to work collaboratively and to manage complexity and uncertainty. Each of the five questions was explored in a paper commissioned for the occasion:

1. What is the relationship between the intellectual qualities fostered by liberal education and the capacity for effective practice? (Paper: “Academic Intelligence is Not Enough”; Author: Robert Sternberg)
2. What is the relationship between the intellectual independence necessary to do creative scholarly work and the capacity for effective practice? (Paper: “Engaged Learning: Enabling Self-Authorship and Effective Practice”; Authors: David Hodge, Marcia Baxter Magolda, and Carolyn Haynes)
3. What role can experiential education play in fostering the capacity for effective practice? (Paper: “Effective Practice and Experiential Education”; Author: Janet Eyler)
4. How might we adapt programs of liberal education to integrate experiential education and other nontraditional learning experiences known to promote the capacity for effective practice? What challenges do campus leaders face in pursuing such changes? (Paper: “Designing a Liberal Arts Curriculum that Develops the Capacity for Effective Practice”; Authors: Diana Chapman Walsh and Lee Cuba)

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Conference on Liberal Education and Effective Practice

Effective Practice



5. How might a restructuring of liberal education to promote effective practice impact efforts to foster academic success among students from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds? (Paper: “Race-Conscious Student Engagement Practices and the Equitable Distribution of Enriching Educational Experiences”; Author: Shaun Harper)

Summary versions of the commissioned papers are published in this issue of *Liberal Education*. The complete essays can be found on the Web site Clark has created as a resource for those interested in the link between liberal education and effective practice (www.clarku.edu/leep).

Points of consensus

Two days of intense discussion produced a remarkable level of agreement among both academics and practitioners. In particular, conference participants came together around four fundamental points. First, as Tufts University’s Bob Sternberg argued in our first session, there is a less than ideal alignment between the professed goals of liberal education and both the learning experiences we typically offer within the arts and sciences and the concept of intelligence that underlies such programs. If we are



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serious about preparing our students to engage competently and constructively in adult organizational, social, economic, and civic contexts, it is imperative that we focus attention on the relationship among our purposes, our curricula, and our pedagogies.

Second, a traditional liberal education is very successful in developing some of the skills and modes of inquiry needed for effective practice, including mastery of complex intellectual material and the capacity for analytic reasoning. At the same time, conventional educational practices are less effective in fostering other essential qualities, such as applying ideas in authentic settings, integrating materials from diverse disciplines to solve unforeseen problems or to construct new knowledge, and working with others in problem-solving situations.

Third, complementing conventional educational practices with nontraditional learning opportunities can significantly enhance the capacity of undergraduates to translate ideas and values into effective action. These opportunities include various forms of experiential education—internships, co-ops, service learning, undergraduate research, and community-based research—that conference participant George Kuh calls “high-impact” practices.

Fourth, while some forms of experiential education, such as study abroad and undergraduate research, fit easily into conventional programmatic structures, internships, co-op placements, and service-learning opportunities have proved more difficult to integrate fully into undergraduate education. We have much work to do within the liberal arts and sciences to find ways to link these powerful learning experiences to established curricular patterns.

When, at the end of the conference, we asked ourselves if we were persuaded that pursuing the kinds of changes we had been discussing made sense for programs of liberal education, one of our practitioner-participants, venture capitalist and one-time Harvard history major Rick Burnes, commented that this was a “no-brainer.” Wellesley College President Emerita Diana Chapman Walsh and her coauthor and former dean, Lee Cuba, offered a similar conclusion. After thinking carefully about the educational potential of these changes, Walsh and Cuba wrote that “one scratches one’s head and wonders why everyone doesn’t just do it.” The answer, they suggested, takes the form of a classic double bind: “faculty support

is a sine qua non for significant progress, and widespread faculty support is elusive at best.”

The conference devoted much attention to matters of great potential interest to faculty. Vanderbilt University Professor Janet Eyler presented a wealth of research supporting the proposition that experiential education not only fosters the capacity for effective practice but also enhances cognitive development in traditional academic terms. Miami University President David Hodge and his collaborators, Marcia Baxter Magolda and Carolyn Haynes, showed how restructuring Miami University’s honors program around experiences that develop intellectual maturity, a secure sense of identity, and the capacity for successful social relationships greatly increased the engagement of undergraduates in their education. George Kuh, along with Connecticut College’s Armando Bengochea and Wesleyan University’s Steven Stemler, offered both data and anecdotes demonstrating that “high-impact” learning experiences can enhance the success of undergraduate programs in successfully engaging students of color.

Ongoing challenges

Despite the availability of persuasive evidence regarding the educational value of experiential learning, our discussions returned again and again to the widespread lack of professorial interest in pedagogical matters. Given this reality, several participants suggested that the most constructive way forward for leaders wishing to foster links between liberal education and effective practice is to avoid direct challenges to existing programmatic structures, while engaging faculty in discussions about the educational outcomes they consider important and in assessing the effectiveness of current programs in achieving those outcomes. Carefully constructed self-study experiences—what William Sullivan of the Carnegie Foundation called “learning communities”—can lead academic professionals, who are, after all, serious educators, to conclusions they might resist if presented as starting points.

Conference discussions also drew attention to sources of resistance to change beyond faculty attitudes and priorities. Several participants with administrative experience noted

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that integrating “high-impact” practices into undergraduate programs can be hard, time-consuming work. It can also be costly. If administrative leaders want faculty members to devote energy to this effort, they need to create space and offer re-

wards for doing so, while also committing the necessary resources. As former Purdue University President Martin Jischke pointed out, educational questions cannot be considered separately from other aspects of institutional life, including priorities attached to scholarly productivity and community service. Academic institutions are social, cultural, and economic systems and the behavior of faculty and staff will reflect the values and priorities of those systems. Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, added an important cautionary note: colleges and universities must not permit an emphasis on effective practice to lead to perceptions of diminished academic depth and rigor among prospective students and their parents.

In the end, our conference did not find ready solutions to the challenges of linking liberal education with a concern for effective practice. Nonetheless, we were impressed and encouraged by examples of institutions that have done impressive work in this arena, and we came away from our time together with a heightened commitment to advancing this cause in the institutional and professional settings to which each of us is connected. We were also energized by encountering a rich body of research, thought, and experience that provides a compelling case for doing so—and by the urgings of our practitioner colleagues to take this matter seriously. In sharing our ideas with the broader academic community through the papers that follow and the additional materials available on the Clark Web site, we hope to lend support to colleagues who share our belief in the value of this cause and to enlist others to join the movement. □

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