

# Practicing Liberal Education:

Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Learning

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# Practicing Liberal Education: Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Learning

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Though liberal education has assumed many forms across different times and places, it has always been concerned with important educational aims: cultivating intellectual and ethical judgment, helping students comprehend and negotiate their relationship to the larger world, and preparing graduates for lives of civic responsibility and leadership. On the merits, then, we might expect that liberal education would be the uncontested preference of virtually everyone who goes to college.

And yet, American society today exhibits a striking ambivalence towards the traditions of “liberal” or “liberal arts” education. Liberal education is at one and the same time prized, despised, revised and disguised.

**PRIZED?** Liberal education is recognizably the philosophy of choice at the nation’s most famous institutions, the campuses where admission is seen as virtually synonymous with the expansion of opportunity. There is, moreover, a persistent identification of liberal education with democratic freedom, scientific progress and excellence that goes back to the revolutionary period when many civic and political leaders both extolled the liberal arts and also challenged them to embrace the scientific and practical needs of the new republic. W.E.B. du Bois reaffirmed the interchangeability of “liberal education” and “excellence” when he argued, a century ago, that future leaders in the

African-American community deserved a college-level liberal education—that is, the best kind of higher education, not just narrow occupational training. Most accredited colleges and universities still espouse this liberal education ideal and typically require that their students take some fraction of their studies in courses and programs aligned with the broader aims of education.

**DESPISED?** Many analysts and policy leaders declare without apology that liberal education is already being consigned to the dustbin of history. Markets, they sniff, are keyed to short-term outcomes and have no patience for forms of learning that pay off over a lifetime. Practical studies will sell; the rest will just wither away. First generation, low-income, and adult learners in particular, such observers contend, need job training rather than intellectual development. Like school leaders in the twentieth century, these higher education realists are content to provide “elite” education to elites and vocational skills to everyone else. Other observers, more critical of the academy itself, believe that liberal education is falling victim to its own rigidity. The liberal arts, these critics suggest, are so ensconced in disciplinary silos and so resistant to the practical needs of the wider society, that they will surely go the way of the classics, moving inexorably from centrality to subsidized marginality.

**REVISED?** At the Association of American Colleges and Universities, we see a much more complex picture—a picture at once both promising and constrained. The truth is that liberal education at the start of the twenty-first century is anything but a moribund tradition. Historically, the practice of liberal education has changed radically over the centuries, and it is in the midst of far-reaching—if largely unreported—change today.

As we work with literally hundreds of colleges and universities, my colleagues and I can see plainly that the nation’s campuses are dotted with a vibrant new generation of innovative programs and pedagogies. The majority of these innovations are indisputably re-inventions of a more traditional liberal education for this new global era and for today’s newly diverse population of students. Indeed, we are starting to see the outlines of an emerging consensus on what this newly reinvigorated liberal education should entail and even on the imperative of ensuring that more students—including first generation and adult students—can gain from its benefits.

### **Three Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Education**

As we survey developments across the spectrum of higher education reform, three major themes emerge as keys to the newly engaged and practical liberal education for the twenty-first century. These themes are intellectual judgment, social responsibility, and integrative learning.

*Inquiry and Intellectual Judgment:* College and universities no longer assume that analytical capability emerges automatically as students take courses. Instead, faculty members are designing new curricula and new teaching strategies—online as well as face-to-face—to help today’s diverse students develop strong analytical and communication skills, honed “across-the-curriculum” and at progressively more sophisticated levels. From intensive first-year seminars on liberal arts topics to writing in the disciplines programs to undergraduate research to senior capstone projects and courses, colleges and universities are pioneering

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new educational practices clearly intended to teach all students how to make sense of complexity, how to find and use evidence, and how to apply their knowledge to new problems and unscripted questions. In doing so, they are bringing new vitality to one of the oldest and most enduring goals of liberal education: the thoughtful and creative use of human reason.

*Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement:* There is also a pervasive new focus on putting social and civic responsibility into the curriculum. From Hawaii to Indianapolis to the Bronx, faculty at every kind of college and university are providing students with real-world experience and rich opportunities to address social problems in cooperation with others. This revival of civic engagement and social responsibility is happening in nearly every field—from science courses taught through the lenses of important contemporary social and ethical questions such as HIV/AIDS to social justice issues addressed in professional fields to internships, service learning and field-based projects where students work with the community to solve important problems.

## Often Confused Terms

### Liberal Education

A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. Characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than specific content, liberal education can occur at all types of colleges and universities.

### Liberal Arts

Specific disciplines (the humanities, social sciences, and sciences).

### Liberal Arts Colleges

A particular institutional type—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, while grounding its curriculum in the liberal arts disciplines.

### Artes Liberales

Historically, the basis for the modern liberal arts; the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) and the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric).

### General Education

The part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual and civic capacities.

—from *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*

Simultaneously, the diversity and global education movements also have developed a wealth of programs—curricular and co-curricular—that help students develop essential intercultural skills and a sophisticated sense of how to collaborate “across boundaries” in a diverse but still highly fractured and violent world. Collaborative, intercultural, and community-based learning are the new civic frontiers for our twenty-first century world of diversity, contestation, and inescapable interdependence.

*Integrative and Culminating Learning:* Educational leaders are rapidly inventing new forms of integrative and culminating studies for their students. From first year “learning communities” to senior year interdisciplinary general education courses to capstone projects and the popularity of field-based learning, today’s students now have multiple, structured opportunities to make connections across disciplines and fields, to connect theories to practice, and even to engage their own lived experiences in the context of what they are learning in general education and in their majors. This commitment to integrative learning helps ensure that students will learn to take context and complexity into account when they apply their analytical skills to challenging problems. The new importance of integrative learning also holds the power to bridge—at last—the long-standing cultural divide in which one set of disciplines, the arts and sciences, has been regarded as intellectual but not practical, while the professional fields are viewed as practical but, for that very reason, inherently illiberal. Analysis and application are starting to come together, where once they were presented as alternative educational pathways.

Each of these new designs for undergraduate learning is intended to help today’s diverse students achieve the traditional benefits of liberal education: intellectual acuity and judgment, civic and social leadership, expanded horizons. Taken together, these new designs for what we might call the “liberal arts of practice” have the potential to make college learning more engaged, better connected with communities beyond the campus, more “hands-on,” and, in the long run, more educationally powerful.

**DISGUISED?** Even as specific practices within liberal education are being reinvented and reinvigorated, the tradition itself is largely disguised from public notice. The educational innovations described above are heavily promoted by the academy but rarely described in campus promotional materials as “liberal” or “liberal arts” education. Students who participate in them may never even be told that they are engaged in contemporary forms of liberal education. Graduate students preparing to teach spend virtually no time considering their own role either in these innovations or in the larger traditions of liberal learning.

Given this conspiracy of voluntary silence, there is very little public understanding or even awareness of liberal education, despite its enduring influence on both established and innovative curricula. Studies show that the public does not value it as named, even though the same public places high value on the outcomes—such as analytical judgment, social responsibility, and economic opportunity—to which liberal education leads. Campus leaders report that students also don’t know what liberal or liberal arts education is and that many faculty are uncertain.

The nation is thus in danger of squandering an extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity. With millions of students of all ages and backgrounds both aspiring to higher learning and actually enrolling, a new majority of Americans could, in principle, now achieve the kind of capacious and public-spirited liberal education once reserved for a tiny elite. But it is hard to insist on the best when you don’t even know that the best is an option. And without public support and student demand, these new educational practices are likely to remain both underdeveloped and vulnerable.

AAC&U’s 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, recommends that every college student deserves a liberal education, one redefined to embrace and address the way knowledge is actually used in the world, including the world of work and civil society. Strongly endorsing the trends described above, the report calls for a new synthesis between liberal and practical education throughout the educational experience: “Liberal education,” the report asserts, “must . . . become consciously, intentionally pragmatic, while it remains conceptually rigorous; its test will be in the effectiveness of graduates to use knowledge thoughtfully in the wider world.”

### **Sounding the Call**

In this context of opportunity and opposition, the challenges confronting today’s educational leaders are two.

The first is summoning the vision, the will, and the long-term commitment to coalesce innovations already flowering around us into more intentional, connected, and cumulatively powerful frameworks for *all students’* learning.

And the second is the willingness to call these innovations what they are: a twenty-first century vision for an inclusive liberal education.

The future of liberal education and the future of our core educational missions are one and the same.

## Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Education With a Mapping of Contemporary Reforms

### 1. Cultivating Inquiry Skills and Intellectual Judgment - “Across-the-Curriculum”

*Student Learning Outcomes:* goals for learning articulated across the **entire curriculum**, guiding liberal arts and sciences disciplines and professional studies alike;

*First Year Experiences:* first year programs and seminars that help students learn what is expected of them educationally and work proactively to develop better **analytical, research** and **communication**—including technological literacies—skills;

*Skill-Intensive Content Courses:* designs for practicing important skills recurrently “across-the-curriculum” in courses explicitly tagged for their emphasis on intensive writing, technology, quantitative reasoning, second language, and, sometimes, ethical reasoning;

*Undergraduate Research:* involving students in inquiry and hands-on research.

### 2. Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement

*Big Questions:* imaginative ways of teaching the arts and sciences that connect the content of these courses to important questions in the larger world;

*Field-Based Learning:* a new emphasis on internships, service learning and other forms of practice that help students connect their academic learning with “real-world” experience;

*Diversity, Global, and Civic Engagement:* a wealth of programs, both curricular and co-curricular, intended to foster civic engagement, diversity and global learning, and social responsibility;

*Community-Based Research:* a growing emphasis on community-based research, often done collaboratively.

### 3. Integrative and Culminating Studies, including

*Liberal/Professional:* new connections between liberal and professional education (see #1 above);

*Learning Communities:* thematically linked courses in different disciplines that students take as a “set” with the expectation that they will examine important human, scientific, or societal questions from multiple points of view;

*Advanced Interdisciplinary General Education:* courses that invite comparison and connection;

*Portfolios and E-Portfolios:* documenting and assessing students’ intellectual progress over time;

*Capstones:* capstone courses and/or experiences that help students integrate their learning both in the major and in general education arenas;

*Culminating Projects and Assessments:* required for completion of the degree.

# Practicing Liberal Education: Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Learning

*We invite your response to this analysis. Feel free to respond below or send your response to any or all of the following questions via e-mail to: [humphreys@aacu.org](mailto:humphreys@aacu.org).*

How important are these formative themes and contemporary reforms (see previous page) on your campus? In your view, which hold the most promise?

Are there important aspects of liberal education that you wish were more prominently discussed in the national debates about the future of undergraduate education?

Does your campus use the language of liberal education in its promotional or curricular materials?

Have you engaged key constituents (e.g., trustees, donors, community, business and school leaders) in discussions about the importance of liberal education in today's society? If so, how?

How can AAC&U work with you to further amplify and expand the national dialogue on liberal education on campus and with the public?

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*Please return your responses to the AAC&U Information Desk at this meeting or send your response via e-mail to: [humphreys@aacu.org](mailto:humphreys@aacu.org).*

AAC&U is the leading national association devoted to advancing and strengthening liberal learning for all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Since its founding in 1915, AAC&U's membership has grown to more than 900 accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).

