

Learning for Heads, Hands, and Hearts: Random Rants and Reflections on Liberal Education

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False Starts. Permit me to skip by the usual declarations about change being constant, technology having the potential to transform learning, the problems on the horizon as the nation's 18-24 year old population soars toward 30 million, the risks and opportunities of our global village, and the obvious importance of accountability and responsiveness. In exchange, I'll omit true but trivializing paragraphs about liberal education deriving its value because it fosters reasoning and communication skills that transcend jobs and career paths. If this were all that liberal education had to offer, then we should abandon the enterprise. There are less costly ways to teach those things. No. Liberal education is education for all of life and living.

The only education worth pursuing is how to think wisely and how to live virtuously, harmoniously, and productively with others and the world around.

Reasons for Being. Leaders, in contrast to managers, know that articulating a clear and compelling vision for the institution must come before, and not after, each department, program, and school stakes out their necessarily subordinate, divergent, and inconsistent aspirations. Not sure where to begin? Get a smart, fair-

Asking the right questions is more than half the battle.

minded, and clear-thinking group of opinion-shapers together and start with the assumption that you have the authority and the means to transform the institution. Then ask, whom should you enroll as students and what would they have learned after completing their studies with you? What problems would you use institutional resources to investigate as scholars and teachers

individually and as an institution in the larger context of our public mission? How might you enrich the health and life of the community in which we exist as an institution; in other words, of what real value to the rest of the society should you seek to be? Since your group does not have that authority or those resources within its control, the next step is to expand the conversation to those who do. Educators educate. Why limit the use of your talents to only your students?

Flying West. Every time the 767 lifts off from Dulles headed to SFO I wonder again about that crisis in liberal education that vexes the folks on the Right Coast. It's not that I don't believe them, but that the evidence seems to suggest the opposite. Enrollments are strong. Research continues to affirm that college graduates, regardless of major, get better jobs and earn more in their lifetimes. The arts flourish on many campuses. Academic freedom is prized and protected. Students from undergraduate liberal arts programs go on to be successful in public service careers, corporate management, and in graduate and professional schools, and as entrepreneurs in all fields. Colleges throughout the nation engage in projects of civic value. Loyal alumni and friends gift campuses everywhere. If liberal learning were in crisis, what would the evidence look like?

Hypotheses. The crisis is not about the faculty not working hard. In the past several years I've had the good fortune to be invited to conduct workshops on teaching for thinking and on academic leadership development on scores of college and university campuses and at dozens of national conferences. What I find in most places are hard working faculty and staff, people who want to do their best for their students and work hard at their scholarship. But not just that; they also want to do their best to build the quality and stature of their campuses. Clearly some percentage of the nation's faculty have lost their zest for teaching or the once bright flames of their scholarship are growing dim. And if these folks do not find ways to renew themselves as teaching scholars, then they can drag down the good name of higher education. My own estimate is that 4% or fewer of the nation's full time tenure stream liberal arts and sciences undergraduate faculty would fall into this group, if the data were surveyed objectively. As to the other 96%, my hypothesis is that in addition to working on their teaching 60%-80% publish annually, 10%-20% serve in critical campus leadership roles, and 20%-30% are leaders in the community or in professional organizations. But, that's just my opinion. If you disagree, do the numbers, let's find out.

Five Worries. Don't misunderstand. There are problems. Here are five for starters: Too many campuses bifurcate academic and student affairs, as if the academic coursework represented the most important learning opportunities for their traditional aged students. The campus living environment is every bit as critical, if our students are to attain the learning goals we aspire to achieve with them. Across the nation faculty have failed to collaborate with student life professionals in building a total campus community and culture of learning. Second, too many campuses ignore the community health of their students or the neighborhoods in which the campus is located. We should be doing something sensible about excessive drinking, for example, and all that goes along with the abuse of alcohol, including the violence to others, the pollution of the atmosphere of study that should characterize the residence halls, and the deterioration of the neighborhoods around the university itself. Third, too many campuses have yet to embrace the importance of civic engagement, education for the common good, environmental education, and community-based learning. Working on complex issues of these kinds improves learning, particularly liberal learning, because it demands content knowledge, the connection of disciplinary perspectives, and the consideration of ethical and social questions that take one beyond individual self-interest. Fourth, too many faculty members seek validation on the criteria of their professional organizations only, and campus promotion committees reinforce this error too heavily. Fifth, too many campuses market themselves by the color of their football jerseys and the stony facades of their administration buildings, rather than by the content and character of their learning.

Frequent Flyers. And speaking of flying away, what about those shallow careerists who think that serving three or four years as dean or vice president qualifies them for another administrative post? My advice to any search committee or Board of Trustees that asks would be never to hire a dean, vice-president, or president who has served for less than seven years in their previous job. Leaders worth having do not move on until the changes they have brought about have had the chance to deepen and become more enduring. Maybe the crisis in liberal education is about leadership

Making Learning the Priority. Top level administrators cannot exercise effective and beneficial campus leadership alone. Instead of bickering over institutional scraps, what if we made it our business, as academics, that macro level campus budget decisions be driven by the priorities of student learning, productive research, and service for the good of society? Instead of quarreling among ourselves about which inconsequential committee motion should be voted first, what if we academics began asking with one voice about the changes necessary to nourish in every possible way a total campus culture of learning? What if our own way of working together embodied the spirit of free and rigorous inquiry, the use of creative imagination, and the commitment to making a positive difference for the common good that we want our students to learn? What if we affirmed that while different disciplines offer valid ways of looking at the world, most problems worthy of our time, treasure, and talent are those very complex and messy ones that can neither be defined nor solved by one discipline alone? If there is a crisis of leadership, maybe the crisis is with the academic leadership. Have we become too focused on our petty departmental and school level worries, and failed to see how to make sense for students and for the public of the overall enterprise of liberal learning? I fear that perhaps we have.

Interchangeable Parts or a Community of Scholars. When did we accept the absurd notion that every full time faculty member has to do the same work in the same proportion? Do you know of any effective research collaboration, musical ensemble, sports team, family, government, or military unit where every person is expected to do exactly the same thing as every other person (aside from the Radio City Rockettes, that is)? Why not have different teaching, scholarship, and service responsibilities, in different proportions of time, for people in different stages of their academic careers? Why not craft faculty responsibilities so that we play to each person's strengths, the same way a good coach coordinates what the athletes do so that the team becomes a winner? Why not think of the department as a team, instead of an aggregate of folks who happened to have studied the same subject in graduate school? If we did, we might realize that teaching effectiveness has to do with how well students finish the whole program; it is not primarily a course by course question. And, why not measure the research productivity of the department, instead of for each individual? In other words, what if we took seriously the "community of scholars" metaphor? How would that change not only the reward structure but the whole feeling of being on the faculty.

Remember the Titans. "Competition among, but collaboration within" works every time. It works in business to increase overall company productivity and to enhance employee satisfaction. It sports and in entertainment it produces stronger leagues and better quality shows, movies, concerts. Pedagogically it

works in the classroom, the lab, and the studio to produce more and better student learning overall. It works in research to produce science of greater quality, scope, and sophistication. On what basis, then could we possibly not try to implement this truism of human nature in organizing and rewarding the faculties and staffs that make our institutions of higher education run?

Unleashing Creativity. Bewildered at the assignment, the new faculty looked to one another for guidance. "Map the geography of the academic disciplines and fields?" one asked. "Yes," came the reply, "each team of three can use whatever they wish to draw the relationships." Moments of puzzlement soon gave way to bursts of excited talk as insights forms and metaphors blossomed. In twenty-five minutes the projects were ready, in another fifteen each group's plan for how to teach the others about their ideas was formed. One group fashioned their paper into a Mobius Loop, fluid infinity, with neither inside nor outside, all human learning and each human life connecting internally and externally each with all. Another drew a colorful complex protein molecule with neither top nor bottom, its atoms bonded, none more than five links from any other, some bonds naturally stronger than others. Translucent paper tapped to the window, backlit by the morning sun, it was like a stained glass statement linking past to future. A third group abandoned cartography for cultural geography to sketch the symbolic university landscape, clustering pods of inquiring seekers of knowledge, students and faculty, practicing their arts and their sciences. A fourth built a three-dimensional world of "what is," illustrating the permeable boundaries of all disciplines and the well-traveled outer highway of language and thinking that encircles and connects them all. The group offered, in addition, a map of "what should be," no boundaries separated the lands of knowledge, and its regions were marked not as nations of content, but as the commons of inquiry, discovery, and learning. The fifth group constructed from their pieces of butcher paper an exploding sphere of learning, the disciplines and fields, some as yet unnamed, radiated in all directions from a vibrant core, privileging none over any other, like the expanding universe itself, bursting from its fruitful historical center. If there is a crisis in liberal learning, it isn't with the new faculty!

Borderlands Bloom. Today the liberal arts curriculum embraces service learning, education for civic engagement, and problem-based instruction that motivates knowledge acquisition by addressing genuine concerns that require multi-disciplinary understandings and information, sophisticated problem framing, rigorous inquiry, thoughtful reflection, and imaginative solution generation. Writing assignments, substantial reading, hands on lab work, term papers, and tough exams remain, as do witty and insightful professors, as eager to challenge as well as to nurture. To these add group projects, web-site design, student-professor collaborative research, and gigabytes of individual e-mails between student and student, and between professor and student. And all the good questions connect within disciplines and across disciplines, and into professional fields. Today chemistry can be about pharmaceuticals, philosophy about urban housing policy, theatre about social justice, biology about genetically engineering food, art about e-media graphics, history about the influences of minority cultures, foreign language about international business, anthropology about the city's older citizens, and physics about designing better computer chips.

Never let schooling
interfere with education.

Head, Hand, and Heart. Liberal education aims not only at the head, but at the hands and at the heart as well. We seek to graduate students who will certainly be more than competent in their knowledge, but also persons with the skills and willingness of mind to use that knowledge. We want to graduate students of conscience, who realize that democracy and mutual respect will flounder unless they become involved in their communities and in fostering the common good. And we want to graduate students of compassion, who remember that in the end only one person out of a hundred in this world will have enjoyed the good fortune to have earned a college degree. And that this fact, if none other, along with the sensitivities and character that can be developed through a liberal education, should challenge them to use that good fortune, that blessing, to seek to make a difference for the good of the other ninety-nine.

Liberating Education. Maybe liberal arts and sciences education is in crisis, maybe not. Then again, so what? What's important is that we provide the kind of education that liberates the mind and heart. It would not bother me if that were to become a feature of all of higher education, including professional school training. In fact, if it did, if liberal education, that is, education that was truly liberating, were to become indistinguishable from graduate and professional education or from K-12 education, then forget talk of crisis, for it would be a cause for joy.