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A Liberal Arts Education in the 21st Century
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Thanks, introduce self ...

Before think about liberal arts in the future, must understand with liberal arts in the past and present.

-Most straightforward approach to the liberal arts is the historical one: seven liberal arts (*septem artes liberales*) of antiquity, ancient Rome:

trivium: grammar, rhetoric, logic (or dialectic)

quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

But this is too simple and doesn't really help us to understand what the liberal arts are today, in this country, at this university.

As many ideas about what constitutes or defines a "liberal education" as there are professors and students. Already in the 1920s, if not earlier, a rising tide of voices complained of the number of competing conceptions of the liberal arts and impossibility of ever settling on a single definition. The same criticism can be made today.

But this lament does not preclude identification of broad orientations. Scholars¹ have reconstructed several general visions, ideal types, of which I will discuss the 3 most important:

1. TIMELESS WISDOM IMBIBED BY AMATEURS: Here the liberal arts are defined by their content, encapsulated in the phrase "the best that has been thought and said in the world". Interpreting this statement usually means a healthy dose of the 'Western Canon' (itself a deeply contested concept), chiefly philosophical and literary texts, from the classical era to the present—Plato and Aristotle to Locke and Rousseau to Henry James and Hannah Arendt etc. Such an approach to the liberal arts is unapologetically anti-specialist (or amateur), favoring broad exposure to a range of subjects over narrower specialization upon which most research is predicated.

2. CULTIVATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S INTELLECT. Here the liberal arts are almost anything except what might be denominated "technical" or "vocational" training. They are pursued "without regard for their marketable value" or "utility". Liberal education, in a famous phrase, "expects no complement, refuses to be informed by any end, or absorbed into any art".² Taken to its extreme, only a "useless" education, without immediate application to world beyond the university, can be liberal! The chief focus is on the development of an *individual's* intellect,

¹ Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*.

² Newman, *Idea of the University*.

to habituate her or him to modes of analysis in order to undertake the free pursuit of truth for its own sake, without any terminal end in mind. Liberal arts in this vision are about learning how to think, for oneself.

3. EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP AND LEADERSHIP: Here the meanings of liberal ('of or relating to free people') is at the core of the liberal arts. The focus is on the training necessary to become a good citizen worthy of assuming a leadership role in society.

But these are ideal types. Some aspects of each are pertinent today and relevant for tomorrow. Other parts seem antiquated, nostalgic, or even quaint. But these are the ideas of our ancestors, which they have bequeathed to us. It is now for us to decide what to do with this inheritance as we consider the liberal arts in the 21st century.

Why was the Clark Honors College (and others like it) founded in 1960? John Thelin, in his *A History of American Higher Education*, informs us that at that time (and I quote) "the dominant model of the research university had kindled widespread interest in a countervailing reform ... The small, residential college was associated with commitment to undergraduate education and conceived as an 'antidote' to the impartiality of the sprawling research university". Clark Kerr, Chancellor of University of California System in the 1960s, noted the "cruel paradox" of the research university where "a superior faculty results in inferior concern for undergraduate teaching". This was the context for the founding of honors colleges at large state universities.

In order to determine what a liberal arts education should look like in the 21st century, it behooves us to return to older conceptions and the historical context in which places like Clark Honors College were established. We should be wary of upholding traditions and approaches that have outlived their usefulness. But, by the same token, we should not become so intoxicated by disruption that we seek change for change's sake, determined to tear down structures that have served their purpose reliably and remain relevant to our needs. So, hidebound conservatism and zealous radicalism are probably both wrong-headed approaches.

To figure out the path forward, let's briefly recapitulate the challenges liberal arts education faces today?

Broadly speaking, the greatest challenge is the doubt and skepticism about the value of liberal arts, a skepticism that at times is justified.

More specifically,

- the perceived lack of connection between content of education and post-graduation pathways (i.e. jobs and careers)

- Related to 1: liberal arts slanted unhelpfully toward humanities and social sciences in an age of STEM.

-the perception that liberal arts are elitist or at least are a luxury that only elites can afford (in all senses), an impression that the liberal arts are not “for everyone”, but solely for small privileged group, whether in society as a whole or on a specific campus.

-there is doubt concerning the purpose of “general education” in an age of the hyper-specialized, research-intensive university.

Some concerns have greater merit than others. Take the idea that liberal arts are slanted toward humanities in an age of STEM. As the composition of the original 7 liberal arts indicates, science and math have never been absent from liberal arts. If they have slipped out and the liberal arts have drifted toward the humanities and social sciences, then what is needed is a restoration of their original prominence, a greater balance, not the repudiation of liberal arts education altogether. My impression is that CHC is engaged in such a recalibration, a most welcome development.

Similarly, a strong argument can be made that the alleged lack of connection between the content of liberal arts education and postgraduate careers is based on a misperception. Several recent books have shown that the industries driving the global economy, such as those clustered in Silicon Valley, prefer broadly trained liberal arts graduates--nimble thinkers familiar with creating and interrogating data of all kinds, and then cogently communicating the results-- over more narrowly trained employees.

But such quarrels frequently end in stalemates, with no definitive conclusion. Rehashing them is tiresome. Fortunately, liberal arts education is sufficiently malleable to meet all of these challenges, quiet lingering doubts, and flourish well into future.

Before conjuring a vision of the future, permit me to state what I believe to be non-negotiable, what cannot change. A liberal arts education is far from inimical to the research enterprise, but it must refuse to be subsumed by or subordinated to it. Former President of Yale University, the late Bart Giamatti, stated what I consider to be a fundamental truth when he noted that “all the research we want to do, all the obligations we must carry out as faculty, are in some sense nurtured by, and versions of, that first calling, which is to teach our students”.

That truth can sometimes be obscured by relentless demands that the contemporary university places on faculty: publication expectations, reliance on grants in an age of scarce resources and so forth. Nevertheless, liberal arts education must keep Giamatti’s vision alive. Liberal arts institutions are uniquely positioned to serve this end by integrating curriculum across fields, instead of reflecting the current structure of the university, divided into knowledge units that all too often become silos. If liberal arts institutions lose that advantage, they are lost.

While justly proud of what liberal arts institutions have accomplished, there can be no complacency and self-congratulation in this time of rapid change. We must embrace change when change can benefit our students.

What, then, does the liberal arts college of 2040 look like?

1. It is a place where we pay less attention to curriculum (content knowledge) and much more attention to teaching methods/instructional design. Courses must be organized around how students learn, supported by insights drawn from the learning sciences and cognitive psychology. I have learned much from Carl Wieman, the Physics Nobel laureate raised in Oregon, who shows how our classrooms must be places where students gain access to, and practice with, “expert thinking”, where the focus is on problem solving, mental organizational frameworks. This is not to say that content is fungible: we still want our students to imbibe the best that world culture has produced, whether its origins are European, African, Asian or North American. But an older tendency to believe that mere exposure to Great Work will happen via osmosis no longer passes muster. I imagine the Honors College as an incubator, or accelerator, for new pedagogies, where successful innovations are adapted in the university as a whole.
2. In 2040, liberal arts institutions will be unable to stand aloof from postgraduate outcomes. Rather, they must intentionally prepare students for the world of non-academic work. An engaged liberal arts must unabashedly focus on competences, habits of mind, dispositions, fluency with numbers and words, forms of cultural literacy. We need to be clear about how syllabi actually contribute to intellectual skill formation, enhance intellectual agility, and pave the way for not only rich interior lives but ones of professional fulfillment. In short, we must align curriculum with intended postgraduate pathways. We must bridge the gap between liberal arts and pre-professional education. What are skills a leader in x or y field needs? Randy Bass of Georgetown calls this reorientation “flipping the curriculum”, ensuring that practice is emphasized at least as early as content. Does the curriculum help students get where they want to go? Many “marketable” skills are taught in the course of a liberal arts education: writing, communication, second language ability, quantitative and qualitative reasoning and so forth. But in general we do a lousy job of showing/explaining how and why such a preparation enables students to reach their goals after leaving the University.

I call therefore for an augmentation of the liberal arts curriculum: we can use fractional credit, micro- or short courses, boot camps to bolster professional skills (biostats, Excel, Project Mgt., technical writing); We need to find ways to integrate applied learning and internships into the liberal arts, in a way that blurs the old distinction between undergraduate and graduate education.

Clearly, I hasten to add, a balance must be struck. While remaining cognizant of “Return on Investment” of learning and aware of measurable outcomes, such as job attainment and earnings, we must not forsake core values that defy facile accounting. These include daring to fail, intellectual adventure, and the intrinsic joy of learning.³

3. And for that reason, and here I come to my third main point, the content of the curriculum will still matter. In 2040, however, undergraduates pursuing liberal arts won’t merely take a sequence of courses in different divisions (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences), but faculty will model how to comprehend and address complex problems through

³ Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace*, 184.

interdisciplinary teaching. Whether in the Honors College or the university at large, the future belongs to team-taught, big picture courses grappling directly with existential questions (e.g. freedom, beauty, justice, good and evil) or contemporary challenges (e.g. climate change, inequality), ideally a cluster of such courses, so that students are exposed to the range of interdisciplinary possibilities and wire their brains to undertake this kind of work. We must design a curriculum that reflects our integrated world and prepares students for it. The liberal arts are up for this challenge and I know Clark Honors College is already experimenting with such courses.

4. I said before that liberal arts institutions, like the Clark Honors College, were founded as antidotes to the excesses of the research university. This is an accurate statement, but a liberal arts education in 2040 will have research—whether a senior thesis or another capstone project-- at its core. This is the opportunity to link liberal arts students to the wider university, to bring their extraordinary background to pose and answer questions of fundamental importance. There is no better educational experience than a long-term project mentored by a faculty member, which survey data bears out (Gallup). Not only is such a project a fitting culmination of an honors degree, but prepares students both for further study and for a world of work in which skills gained from research are indispensable. This is where a liberal arts college at the heart of a major research university has major advantage over independent liberal arts college, with its unparalleled opportunities resources.

5. The fifth and final component of my vision for a liberal arts education in 2040 relates to Access. The liberal arts institution of 2040 must make access and inclusion its highest priority. There are differences in ability and ambition, to be sure, but a liberal arts honors college must ensure that all those with ability have access, not just those who have demonstrated aptitude at 17 when they apply. Underserved populations, particularly underrepresented minority populations and first-generation students, often find themselves on the outside looking in. What is designed as merit-based admissions can in practice enshrine the fruits of privilege as signs of merit.

The liberal arts institutions of 2040 (or even 2018) will find new ways to identify students who can thrive, tirelessly reaching out to high schools in those parts of Oregon where scholastic achievement is the lowest, aggressively recruiting the top young minds at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, tracking down students currently at UO who perhaps barely gained entrance to university, but who then excel upon arrival. And we must find ways to ensure students who have made it this far can continue to pursue their studies as their first priority, not burdened by 2 or 3 part-time jobs.

To be clear, I am talking about something more than lateral or transfer admissions, or nontraditional pathways into the Honors College. I am proposing an entirely new approach to conceiving of who is, and who might be, an honors student. Through summer residential bridge programs to rapidly close disparities of preparation, other academic development programs, combined with sustained mentorship, the honors college can be more accessible in 2040 than it is today, contributing to the improvement of the state, the nation, and the world.

FINAL WORDS: we can do all of this and at the same time produce rigorous thinkers with a quiver full of analytical capabilities, graduates steeped in and shaped by wisdom drawn from sources both ancient and modern, and oriented to making contributions, whether incremental or fundamental, to betterment of society, both in Oregon and the world.