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Creating a Common Voice for Liberal Arts Education

CHARLES F. BLAICH AND MAURI A. DITZLER

CENTER OF INQUIRY IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

WABASH COLLEGE

As Sam Schuman so eloquently argues in his lead article, these are challenging times for the liberal arts. A society that owes so much to graduates of liberal arts colleges has come to see them as an education for a simpler time.

Why does a liberal arts education now seem out of place? Perhaps it is that, in times of rapid change, an education that offers the certainty of “textbook solutions” is more comforting than one that promises creative, thoughtful, and flexible “improvisation” in the face of a complex world. It may be that a narrowly focused, carefully applied education seems to provide a solid anchor for our fast-paced lifestyle. Does the quick exchange of information and experiences favor an education that offers certain, immediate, and visible rewards? Certainly it takes an element of faith to pursue the counterintuitive promises of a liberal arts education in a results-oriented society.

The irony of this situation is considerable. The character and outcomes of a liberal arts education are more relevant now than ever before. The timeless nature of the liberal arts is the perfect antidote for the diminishing shelf life of information. An education that transcends specific content and culture is crucial in a time when we must find a way to educate an increasingly diverse student body. An education that promotes understanding of self and others is invaluable as we strive to create a global village. An education that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries remains valuable as we tackle those problems that have resisted the best efforts of our scientists and philosophers.

But in the absence of widespread public support, fewer and fewer colleges are willing to stake their viability on the hidden potential of liberal arts. Even longtime advocates of the liberal arts seem to be losing faith in face of the increasing popularity of professional programs. Colleges that have traditionally focused on the liberal arts are adding programs whose essential end is a well paying job. In too many cases these institutions have become bipolar, holding fast to a shrinking liberal arts core that must be “gotten out of the way” so students can move on to the valued professional courses.

At the same time, we face uncertainty from within. Faculty members in liberal arts colleges observe the success of their students and are tempted to attribute it to the quality of the disciplinary training being provided. This leads some to respond with an even greater emphasis on specialization at the expense of a liberal arts focus. Even some of those institutions that have rigorously maintained their liberal arts tradition shy away from a discussion of this aspect of their character. It is much easier to attribute remarkable outcomes to excellent facilities, gifted faculty, large endowments, supportive

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alumni, ubiquitous technology, and inspiring architecture than to an educational philosophy that defies definition.

Nonetheless, the recognition that the liberal arts philosophy is imperiled is sufficiently widespread that we must move from considering the problem, to creating solutions. What can be done to reestablish the liberal arts as the centerpiece of American higher education? What can be done to promote the value of the liberal arts to prospective students and rebuild the confidence of faculty and administrators in this kind of education?

The search for solutions to these troubling questions led Wabash College, with generous support from the Lilly Endowment, to create the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts. The primary objective of the Center is to establish a strong, common voice for the liberal arts. Except for occasional articles and symposiums, those of us who are dedicated to providing and continually improving liberal arts education are not truly accustomed to thinking of ourselves as belonging to a unified coalition. This stems, in part, from the diversity of institutions that are committed to the liberal arts. There are private liberal arts colleges, public liberal arts colleges, liberal arts colleges with religious affiliations, men's and women's liberal arts colleges, historically black liberal arts colleges, and liberal arts honors programs within larger institutions. No doubt we are leaving out a few varieties. While we are all committed to liberal arts education, for many this defining characteristic has become so familiar that it goes unnoticed and is rarely nourished. Instead, we focus on our unique roles within the liberal arts community.

By focusing more strongly on an educational niche and less on our shared commitment to the liberal arts, we have created an institutional mindset that makes it difficult for our many and varied programs to work effectively together. As a result, we have neglected the rhetoric and evidence that promotes the liberal arts, and we have failed to create a strong national voice that can promote our common enterprise.

As we have worked to launch the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, we have visited with representatives of a wide range of liberal arts colleges. We have been struck by the fact that faculty and administrators from one kind of liberal arts institution do not readily see themselves as sharing in a common endeavor with faculty and administrators at other kinds of liberal arts institutions. For example, faculty and administrators from small, private liberal arts colleges are unlikely to see their colleagues who staff and direct honors programs at comprehensive state universities as sharing in the same good work and commitment to the task of teaching the liberal arts. Faculty at independent liberal arts colleges don't see themselves as sharing common concerns with faculty at faith-based liberal arts colleges.

The result is that, rather than seeing ourselves as allies, faculty and administrators at liberal arts institutions often see themselves as competing with different kinds of liberal arts institutions. The competition is not only about different visions of the liberal arts, but for the shrinking population of prospective students who are attracted to liberal arts education. We, therefore, find ourselves in a precarious position. As our challenges continue to grow, we find ourselves, more and more, pitted against one another to grab our piece of the shrinking pie.

Despite this state of affairs, we believe that the liberal arts are in a far better position than we realize. While institutional diversity is a barrier to common work, it could become our greatest strength as we work together to again make liberal arts the centerpiece of our

educational system. There are associations that are bringing liberal arts colleges together for common work. The liberal arts institutions of the Great Lakes Colleges Association, the Annapolis Group, the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges, and the Council of Independent Colleges, to name just a few, manage to work together despite the fact that institutions within these consortia may compete against one another for students.

We believe that the Center of Inquiry can form an even broader coalition that celebrates and promotes the many ways that the liberal arts are practiced in this country. We believe this is possible because, regardless of the particular liberal arts institution we are devoted to, we are all committed to providing an education that transforms our students' lives and improves the world in which we live. This shared labor of love should bind us together.

This is not to say that we should form an unwieldy coalition that diminishes the unique character of our institutions. Rather, we believe that liberal arts colleges should come together to work on common problems that will enhance the success of all of our institutions. At the Center of Inquiry we hope to catalyze the good work of many by bringing together individuals from disparate institutions and consortia. We are organizing our work, or "inquiries," around shared problems and concerns. We are bringing admissions staffs from different liberal arts colleges together to explore ways to expand the number of students who are interested in pursuing a liberal arts education. We have begun to investigate more deeply how the residential environment that is often characteristic of small private liberal arts colleges impacts the educational success of these institutions. We study this not only to make residential liberal arts colleges more successful, but also to determine how we may enhance the residential experience at larger institutions, or improve the experience of more diverse part-time students that many of us are beginning to enroll. We will consider ways of restructuring extra- and co-curricular activities, from athletics to theater, to maximize their positive impact on the different student populations that we serve and wish to serve.

These inquiries only scratch the surface, but we hope that each will help bring elements of the liberal arts community together to once again reassert leadership in higher education. Liberal arts colleges have a tradition as laboratories and think tanks for innovative practices in undergraduate education. We are uniquely qualified to assume this role. We are often small places with a deeply embedded understanding of our students. We are positioned to quickly and flexibly create experiments that create and test the innovative practices that will benefit all forms of education.

If we don't recognize the strengths of our innovations, others do. In 1998, the Boyer Commission issued a report, "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities," which took larger research universities to task for ignoring undergraduate education. A recent follow-up study¹ found that these large institutions had made significant progress in overcoming many of the criticisms of the initial report. How did they do so? By involving more students in undergraduate research, by creating first-year seminars, by increasing writing requirements in courses, and by asking faculty to place a greater emphasis on teaching undergraduates. In essence, they improved

1 Wilson, R. (2002). Boyer commission says colleges have been making improvements. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 8, 2002.

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the quality and effectiveness of their education by adopting the stock and trade of liberal arts institutions everywhere.

Despite the concerns that we raised in the beginning of this article, the Center of Inquiry was built on the optimistic premise that liberal arts institutions, in all of their diversity, remain an enormously potent positive force in higher education. In the last chapter of the *Origin of Species*,² Charles Darwin reflected on how his theory of evolution by natural selection made sense of the enormous diversity of plants and animals. He wrote, “It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us...” While we could never be as eloquent as Darwin, we do believe it is interesting to contemplate the many kinds of institutions that are deeply committed to providing a liberal arts education. Women’s colleges and men’s colleges, small private colleges and larger public liberal arts universities, historically black liberal arts colleges and church-affiliated liberal arts colleges, honors programs and the Clemente course in the Humanities—all are so different, yet so dependent on one another in a complex manner, and sharing in a commitment to a uniquely American form of higher education. May we come together and regain our rightful place in the leadership of higher education.

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² Darwin, C. (1859). *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. <http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-origin-of-species/chapter-14.html>