

Seven Trends in Liberal Learning

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Conrad, Clifton F. and Wyer, Jean C. "Seven Trends in Liberal Learning."
AGB Reports 24 (January/February, 1982), pp. 10-14.

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Their article is excerpted from *Liberal Education in Transition*, AAHE-ERIC/Higher Education Research Report No. 3, 1980, published by the American Association of Higher Education. It is available for \$4.60 (prepaid) from AAHE, Suite 600, One Dupont Circle, Washington, DC 20036.



With issues of liberal education placed high on their agenda, many colleges and universities have begun to make both major and minor changes in their programs of liberal education. At least two major factors have helped to precipitate what is perhaps the most vigorous period of innovation and reform in liberal education in America.

First, the financial woes of many liberal arts institutions are often cited as an obvious catalyst, forcing institutions to redesign their undergraduate programs in order to attract more students. Second, and relatedly, the efforts of the federal government (especially the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities), private foundations, and higher education associations (such as the Association of American Colleges and the Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges) have stimulated innovation in liberal education through generous financial and organizational support for innovative programs. Regardless of the precipitants, a substantial number of postsecondary institutions have begun to initiate or implement changes in their programs of liberal education.

The back-to-the-core movement

One of the most publicized trends of the last two or three years has been the movement back to a required, integrated group of courses or experiences, usually designed to implement the ideals and goals of liberal or general education. Studies conducted shortly before the emergence of this trend indicated a relaxation of formal requirements and a corresponding increase in student elective freedom and coursework within the major area of study. This pattern, combined with the seeming lack of intellectual coherence and mission of the curriculum as a whole, has led to both predictions and explanations of the demise of the liberal arts by a variety of commentators.

The recent surge of interest in liberal



education—whether or not it is regarded as an indication of “revitalization” or as yet another twist in the liberal arts’ hundred-year-long “death struggle”—is historically typical and to be expected.

But a “moral and ethical” core

Interestingly, broad societal trends have been used both to support and critique (rather than explain) the increase in the prescribed component of the curriculum. The dramatic increase in the number and diversity of students, the expansion of knowledge, the pluralistic and democratic structure of American government and society, and the heightened concerns for human rights and ethical behavior are some of the most frequently cited causes. However, the new programs ultimately seek their rationale not solely from modern-day realities but in some vision or ideal of the “educated person” and the “learning community.”

Defining “core curriculum” as that coursework which undergraduates pursue in common, Boyer and Kaplan propose the outlines of a core curriculum in *Educating for Survival* (1976). They argue that there should be a new version of liberal and general education, required of all students, that is organized around the past, present, and the future, and culminates in a concern with the “moral and ethical considerations that guide the lives of each person” (pp. 75-76).

While the Boyer and Kaplan book received significant attention, much of the national debate over prescription (and integration) has evolved around the new Harvard curriculum, approved by the faculty in 1978. Undoubtedly, Harvard’s adoption of a set of 80 to 90 courses emphasizing approaches to knowledge has broadened, if not popularized, the debate on general education and the core curriculum. An unusually diverse array of colleges and universities, however, had already instituted core programs. Perhaps the most well-known is St. John’s College which, like its colonial predecessors, has a totally prescribed curriculum, but, unlike anything else in

the past or present, concentrates exclusively on the great books, the classics of Western (and now Eastern) civilization. This content, in conjunction with open-ended seminars and shared-inquiry tutorials, has been the constant curricular structure at St. John’s for over 40 years. Although certainly not to the same extent as St. John’s, the University of Chicago has also had a core of varying structure and composition since the late 1920s. More recently, many small private liberal arts colleges, including Davis-Elkins, Austin, and Marist, and some community colleges as well (such as Miami-Dade) have adopted core components, courses, or some other form of required structured experience into their curriculum.

Trend No. 2: Focus on outcomes

A second trend in liberal education has been the surge of interest in relating the outcomes of liberal education to curricular programs. In *Investment in Learning* (1977), Howard Bowen offers a broad overview of the individual and social value of higher education. As a major work summarizing the disparate research in these areas, Bowen’s book is a landmark in its pivotal concern for the effects of higher education.

This focus on the outcomes of liberal education is a new and intriguing element in the liberal arts tradition, with no easily identifiable ancestor. If the increasing sophistication of psychological measurement and the development of both behavioral and conceptual analysis have made such a focus possible, falling academic standards, grade inflation, consumerism, and the call for accountability have fostered popular support for the efforts.

The outcomes approach has assumed two basic forms. Several organizations are attempting on a national scale to determine the overall effects of the college experience on the graduates and society at large, and are seeking to verify that colleges do achieve all that is claimed in their catalogues.

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substantial ground in the 1960s and by the middle of the 1970s had become the staple fare of liberal arts programs and institutions. Key proponents have included Chickering (1976), Cross (1976), and Brown (1972), the last of these a leading spokesman of the student personnel movement—a movement and profession that is premised on the notion of "development of the whole person."

These individuals and others have had a concern for the affective realm, emotional development, values awareness, interpersonal skills, as well as physical dexterity and ability to work with "things."

Trend 5: Moral education

A fifth major trend, stemming directly from this expansion of our concept of intellect and the new concern for noncognitive areas of growth, is the focus on values or moral education.

There seems to be a growing consensus among college students, administrators, faculty and the general public that some form of values education should be a component of general education (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1977, pp. 240-241). Recent societal events indicating a dramatic decrease in ethical behavior and standards in this country are often cited both as a primary reason for, and explanation of, the renewed concern for values in the curriculum. There are, however, deeper historically rooted reasons stemming from the heavy emphasis that has been placed on value neutrality and objectivity, the twentieth century trend toward a purely relativistic stance on value issues, and the outright rejection of the value/moral realm as meaningless.

This concern for values is an area particularly fraught with misunderstanding and potential for great abuse. The confusion over terminology (values, morals, ethics) is only amplified by (a) the rapid proliferation of instructional methods (values clarification, moral reasoning, moral development, applied ethics, and so on) and (b) disagreement over appro-

priate locations for moral development (within the curriculum, student-teacher interaction, community atmosphere, residence-hall programs). Fundamentally the concern for values has assumed two forms in the curriculum. Some programs have concentrated on value postulates and underlying assumptions within the disciplines. Numerous courses and programs, especially those dealing with values in science and technology, have followed from this focus. Other programs have been concerned with the moral growth or education of the individual student. This latter form of values education is often more radical in its departure from the traditional modes of narrowly defined intellectual inquiry. It is interesting to note that the recent Harvard curriculum committee identified moral reasoning as an essential element intended to introduce students to important traditions of thought, make them aware of the intricacies of ethical argument, and to help them come to grips with particular questions of choice and value.



"The curriculum . . . is being stretched beyond the traditional emphasis on reason and intellect"

A third trend: "Process over content"

Competence-based education and the general concern for educational outcomes is directly linked to a third major trend, the redefinition of liberal education in terms of process—and not simply content. In 1828 the authors of the Yale Report laid emphasis on the "discipline" of the mind and the "habits" of thinking. Indeed, the major figures on all sides of the liberal education debate of the twentieth century have looked on liberal education as ultimately concerned with the development of intellectual abilities.

In this century, Dewey is viewed as the major proponent of an education centered around skill development and problem-solving. On the other end of the spectrum, Hutchins and his colleagues in classical essentialism have focused on reason, theoretical and practical, as a uniquely human ability—in need of development as we search for the "good life" (Hearn 1972). Conflicts have arisen through differences in the structures and content utilized to develop human capabilities; with the exception of those associated with the Great Books program at

St. John's, no major twentieth-century figure in higher education has claimed "the accumulation of a fixed body of knowledge" as the primary goal of the colleges and universities.

The major calls for curriculum reform after World War II—Harvard's "Redbook" (Harvard Committee 1945), The President's Commission on Higher Education (1947), Bell's *The Reforming of General Education* (1966), and *Missions of the College Curriculum* (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1977)—have all emphasized the role of higher education in cultivating mental skills. It has not been until this past decade, however, that general education has abandoned heritage and survey courses (necessarily defined by their content) in favor of courses and experiences organized directly around thinking skills. The development of thematic studies, competence programs, and problem-solving courses are examples of this trend.

Trend 4: "The whole person"

"Integration," "outcome," and "process," although intermingled trends, are easily identifiable. The fourth trend in the liberal arts curriculum, however, is difficult to articulate, and it does not easily proffer an identifying label.

The curriculum, especially the general/liberal education component, is being stretched beyond the traditional emphasis on reason and intellect. The old, sectarian liberal arts institutions were concerned with moral character, self-discipline, and a host of other behaviors, values, and attitudes, but their development was either inculcated through the total experience and community of the institution or aided through the rigorous intellectual endeavors within the curriculum.

The first recent group of proposals for change in this area came from those who wished to promote growth both within and outside the traditional cognitive-rational realm. The philosophy of "development of the whole person" gained



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Sixth trend: The new relationship with the professions

The development of new relationships between the liberal arts and the professions is a sixth trend. Historically, the liberal arts have been closely linked to the oldest professions of theology, medicine, and law. Today, however, the balance is an uneasy one with academic specialists, broadly humanistic faculty, and proponents of career education each vying with the other for more influence in the undergraduate curriculum. Jerry Gaff (1980) writes:

A tremendous expansion of professional education has taken place in recent years in colleges and universities and has forced new definitions of relationships between liberal arts and the professions. This ascendancy of career education within the academy has paralleled the trend toward professionalization of work throughout society. One logical result of these shifts is that liberal arts courses are increasingly tailored to the particular interests and concerns of various vocational groups (pp.23-24).

Final trend: new degree forms

A seventh, and final major trend in liberal education has affected all of higher education in the 1970s. This is, for lack of a better term, the "delivery system" of the curriculum: the degrees, credits, administrative structures, and calendar arrangements.

In many institutions, traditional credits and degrees have been retained. But new forms such as the continuing education

unit, the A.A. degree, college level examination placement and advanced placement credits, the external degree, and nondegree programs are often offered on an optional basis. Although there is no standard terminology in the area of curricular support structures, there is general agreement that their overall affect on educational practice is a powerful one that is often left unacknowledged.

Adult education, basic skills

There are several other curricular trends that have had some effect on liberal education. These include the spread of liberal education programs for adults. The emphasis on basic skills is another trend—an emphasis that often has been manifest outside the formal curriculum in learning centers, tutorial programs, and individualized learning experiences. Many core curricula contain requirements in composition and general mathematics, and the tested competencies of an outcomes-based program often include basic skills. A concern for the non-curricular aspect of liberal education has been concurrent with the development of the "whole person" philosophy and with the concern for noncognitive elements of education and individual growth. Experimental learning, one of the most innovative trends in higher education, has often been left aside in discussion of the general-education component of the curriculum.

A conclusion based on the identification of major curricular trends in liberal education is neither possible nor appropriate in this study. However, two tentative implications can be drawn.

First, there is a revitalized concern for liberal education with a concomitant growth in proposals, definitions, and scholarly research.

Second, no single model of general or liberal education has emerged. Moreover, there is no consensus about whether or not a single model should be developed. ■

