

Strategic Planning Comments Received by e-mail or Mail

Comments for Group 2

From an e-mail exchange following the All-Chairs Meeting, Sept. 14:

Dear Colleagues,

In our all-chairs meeting yesterday, I don't think I articulated very well my unwillingness to reduce "liberal education" to a set of measurable skills. Let me try again very briefly.

The aims of liberal education are interdisciplinary in nature, in the sense that they take as an assumption that all human endeavor (whether in the sciences, arts, humanities, or the professions broadly defined) takes place within historical, social, cultural, political, and philosophical/ethical contexts. Thus, the study of a discipline is never really divorced from those contexts; in fact, they are in part the SUBJECT of that study. In this way, a liberal education encourages and teaches an expansiveness of mind, a freeing of the intellect, an exploration across our somewhat artificial disciplinary boundaries. What the student comes away with is not a measurable "skill," but a brand new way of seeing the world.

I don't mean to devalue reading, writing, and critical thinking as skills we can help students obtain while at UWEC. They're crucial. (And, as I said yesterday, I expect we're all addressing them to one degree or another in our courses.) But they don't sufficiently capture what I believe a liberal education can achieve or what it's about. If each of us is "intentional" about working into our courses the contexts and habits of mind I summarized above, then I believe our university's curriculum overall will look quite different from what it does now. I guess that's what I was trying to say. It'll be way bigger than "skills."

Thanks for reading this. I look forward to more conversation about these and other issues as we move forward with our strategic planning.

Jack

Jack Bushnell, Chair
Department of English

To all:

I usually refrain from hitting "Reply to All" on a big list of recipients, but since Jack was responding to my comment at the meeting yesterday I guess I'll jump in. I look forward to more discussion on this topic as we proceed through the strategic planning process.

I agree whole-heartedly with all Jack has stated below. I would not reduce "liberal education" to a set of skills either. That was a phrase Jack introduced to summarize the components of a liberal education I tossed out as examples while making another point. (We had a number of discussions last academic year focused on re-designing the goals

of the baccalaureate degree with attention to the liberal arts, and those were some of the elements that seemed to be universally included.) Certainly as an educator I would not de-value higher learning goals including expansiveness of the mind, freeing of the intellect, etc.

The point I was making yesterday (also possibly not well articulated) is that I believe these goals are highly valued across campus. Having said that, there may be misperceptions about the nature of instruction in departments we are not familiar with.

At one of our earlier strategic planning sessions, a comment was made about maintaining a strong foundation of liberal education on this campus, which I agree with.

At that point, someone commented with the obligatory “yes, but don’t forget about the professional colleges, we also have strong nursing and business programs”. (Obviously I’m paraphrasing at this point.) My point is that I don’t think the latter comment should be necessary, as it implies the goals of liberal education are somehow at odds with teaching nursing and business. I do not believe they are, and I do not believe the ability to teach/instill them is limited to any subset of disciplines taught on campus. Certainly we should all look for opportunities for better curricular integration across disciplines, attention to historical perspective, etc.

I could go on, but in the interest of not cluttering everyone’s email I’ll sign off here. As I said above, I look forward to more discussion. (It just may be that freeing of the intellect starts with the faculty.)

Tim Vaughan, Chair
Management and Marketing

Jack:

I thought you were very articulate on this point, and I am glad that you and others continue to raise it. I too am not willing to “reduce” liberal education to a set of measurable skills. At the same time, I think we need to recognize that thinking and talking about “skills” – especially as we expand that into more complex intellectual capabilities that go far beyond mechanics – is a good starting point for many students, parents, legislators, and members of the public, some of whom may have had no more thoughts about liberal education than to scoff at it. But you are absolutely correct that we have to extend the conversation far beyond talking about skills to influencing the way students view the world.

I received your message as I was preparing to send to A&S faculty and staff an article from a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that relates to this topic. While its title suggests a focus on a “core curriculum,” the article also has broader relevance to our discussions of intentionality, shared learning values, and liberal education. Perhaps one of Lewis’ books would be good fodder for one of our reading and discussion groups.

Don Christian

Dean, College of Arts & Sciences

From the *Chronicle of Higher Education* issue dated September 7, 2007

POINT OF VIEW

A Core Curriculum for Tomorrow's Citizens

By HARRY R. LEWIS

Should the 21st-century university have a core curriculum? The report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education said nothing about general education, the learning that educated Americans should share. Instead the Spellings commission report highlighted broad access and measurable "value added" as the major challenges facing higher education. But limiting educational "leadership" to such criteria loses sight of colleges' larger purpose: to produce an enlightened, self-reliant citizenry, pluralistic and diverse but united by democratic values.

It is fashionable in university circles to say that a core curriculum is unnecessary — impossible, in fact. The contention is that students just don't have that much in common — nothing is "relevant" to all of them — and we should not "privilege" one way of looking at the world over another.

In any case, the argument goes, given what families pay for college, they should be treated like customers. Like patrons of a restaurant, students should be able to choose what learning they want. We don't care if they eat nothing but cheeseburgers; likewise, as long as they consume enough education and pay up, we should give them their diplomas. Who are we to say what is good for them? That was the spirit of a report on general education that Harvard University issued in the fall of 2005, after several years of work. Happily, it never came to a vote.

Others claim that a core curriculum is impossible because the explosion of knowledge over the past half-century has splintered the faculty into a hundred special-interest groups. Experts in diverse fields, we are told, can barely communicate with each other and can't agree on what students should know, other than skills such as speaking, writing, and quantitative reasoning. Those things are important, as the commission report recognized. But there is more to a college education than that.

Within academe it is hard to inspire support for a core for a simple reason. We have not come to agreement — indeed we have had little discussion — about the purpose of higher education. In the absence of any big concept about what college is supposed to do for students, both students and faculty members prefer the freedom of choice that comes with the elective curriculum. We would each rather do our own thing than embrace our collective responsibility for the common good. But the argument that students have nothing in common is false, and the conclusion that a college education should have no core is wrong.

It is true that students are less homogeneous than they used to be in ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. But, in all their diversity, they are the same in at least one important way: They all will be citizens. Most will be U.S. citizens. They will be voters and the political candidates for whom we vote. Moreover, foreign students inevitably learn something about our republic — from *The Colbert Report*, if not the classroom. Whether they return home or remain in this country, it is in our interest that what they learn be accurate.

By the time they graduate, students should understand how the American republic works and how it evolved. That came home to me when I voted in the last Massachusetts gubernatorial election. Three of the four candidates had graduated from my own college during the years I have been a professor and have watched the curriculum become ever more diffuse. What, if anything, did those candidates — one of whom was elected — learn about the core principles of our country?

We know that today many college graduates are ignorant of basic principles on which the U.S. government runs. Two reports, "The Coming Crisis in Citizenship," by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and "Losing America's Memory," commissioned by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, have documented the problem. Fewer than half the seniors surveyed knew that the Bill of Rights prohibits Congress from establishing an official national religion. Fewer than a third knew what "Reconstruction" was, and fewer than a third knew that the Voting Rights Act was part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program. Only 60 percent could identify the Constitution as the document dividing powers between the states and the federal government. Happily the news was not all bad: 99 percent correctly identified Beavis and Butt-Head as cartoon characters.

Of course students *entering* college should understand basic American institutions. Secondary schools haven't done the job either. But colleges can't say that civic ignorance is just the problem of high schools. Honoring the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy is part of the moral obligation universities assume in exchange for the vast freedoms, and tax exemptions, they enjoy.

I stoutly oppose federal interference in the content of college curricula. But institutions of higher education have a social contract with America, and we are not holding up our end of the deal. We owe it to the country to teach our students how democracy works. More is at issue here than the dates in American history. Students need to develop a feeling for the preciousness of human freedom and self-determination, and the responsibility of citizens to act for the good of their country and not only in their personal self-interest. In college, they should learn how America's foundational ideas, of liberty and equality under the law, apply to the difficult problems with which it is struggling today. They need to learn that as citizens we have no one but ourselves to blame for our elected officials and their actions.

The basic point is made eloquently in Harvard's classic curricular report, *General Education in a Free Society*, written just after World War II, when civilization itself seemed nearly to have perished. Education, the report says, had to create "the common ground of training and outlook on which any society depends." The report states elsewhere, "a successful democracy (successful, that is, not merely as a system of government but, as democracy must be, in part as a spiritual ideal) demands that these traits and outlooks be shared so far as possible among all the people."

Of all forms of government, democracy most demands an educated, thoughtful citizenry. Our country is based on a concept, not on kinship. Poles will continue to be Polish as long as there is a Poland, but nothing holds America together except our intellectual legacy of democratic principles. If universities don't honor that legacy, our children will not inherit our nationhood genetically. They can receive it only through learning.

The Spellings commission properly emphasized access problems — *who* does or doesn't go to college. But broader access has educational consequences, so we should focus equally on *what* colleges teach. Many high schools don't offer Advanced Placement courses. As preparation levels become more varied, colleges can't teach students as though they were all the same, however bright and ambitious they are. We learned that at Harvard when we mistakenly consolidated our introductory life-sciences offerings into a single course while enrolling many more low-income students. A heterogeneous student body requires teaching designed for the flesh-and-blood students we actually have, not for idealized students prepared in imaginary high schools. Ironically, students are much more interested in taking courses on the American republic than professors are in teaching them. At research universities especially, where the rewards come for creativity and novelty, the subject is not trendy enough for most professors. Because "bold" and "radical" are the highest forms of praise for academic

thought, teaching what citizens should know brings little respect. Yet students hunger for enlightenment about their country. Enrollment in Harvard's course on the American presidency has averaged 165 over the past eight years — even though it satisfies none of Harvard's core requirements.

Harvard's recently voted curriculum expects all students to study American institutions to prepare them for "civic engagement." It is too soon to know what courses will fulfill that requirement. But I cautiously hope that we are stepping back from our relentless relativism and indifference to civic responsibility.

Idealism about the United States is not the same as blind patriotism. American institutions should not be propagandized uncritically in the academy, nor taught without reference to the rest of the world. The Constitution is not a partisan political document, and adherents of all political persuasions should join the call for the study of American institutions. Yet the plain truth is this: The spiritual ideal of American democracy will not survive if universities fail to preserve it.

Harvard's 2006 report on general education, from which the new curriculum emerged, was a striking effort to define a core. The professors who produced the proposal labored under difficult and thankless conditions. They had to start from scratch in an atmosphere of administrative instability. With the faculty under interim leadership, their idealism fell victim to turf battles in a series of redrafts and amendments. In dubbing one required area of study "The United States and the World," they were accused of implying that the world was merely America's "backyard." (The rubric was split into its two parts, "Societies of the World," and "The United States in the World.") So I certainly understand why the Spellings commissioners avoided the subject of curricular content and focused instead on access and accountability.

But a college education is more than a set of assessable skills and measurable outcomes. Our society depends on a view of humanity that universities should take a role in transmitting. The job of recalling higher education's public purpose now falls to the institutions themselves — to faculties, governing boards, and all who support their work. A thoughtful 21st-century curriculum can and should renew higher education's moral compact with America.

Harry R. Lewis is a professor of computer science at Harvard University and the author of Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future? (PublicAffairs, 2007). This essay is based on remarks at a conference sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute.