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# MOVING FROM GENERAL EDUCATION TO LIBERAL EDUCATION

BY DAVID L. ARNOLD

**A**cross America, colleges and universities proclaim their commitment to liberal education through general education mission statements touting outcomes such as increased intellectual awareness, breadth of learning, communication skills, and critical thinking. But general education programs are burdened by several fatal flaws that make them the wrong repository of our hopes of liberally educating our students.

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The first is that too often they are merely a menu of courses selected with no attempt at intellectual cohesion. But even if this were not the case, in order to have a general education experience that reflects the intentions of one institution or system, students would need to arrive in college with more or less common starting points and patterns of experience and then take a continuous series of general education courses offered by that institution or system.

Instead, except for at a few highly traditional and selective institutions, students arrive at college at different ages and with different academic preparation and experiences, may move from full-time to part-time attendance and back again, and may transfer one or more times during the first two years of college. Add to that the financial pressures driving the use of large lectures in general education courses—which offer little opportunity for the reflection, exploration, and critical thinking that we claim they foster—and the fact that those courses are almost

always taught by disciplinary specialists who have no connection with the intellectual interests that students bring to their studies, and we cannot assume that any given institution will provide a coherent general education experience that will make students into thinkers.

Yet most of us still want higher education to encourage the broadened perspective, critical thinking, and developed awareness of a liberal education. To do so, we must abandon the idea that liberal education and the major are separate. While still encouraging general *studies* early in the student experience, I suggest that we reposition the heart of our effort to retain concern for liberal *education* in a new and required element of every major that I will call for the moment “Synthesis” and “Context.” The Synthesis and Context component of every bachelor’s degree major should, as a minimum, require the following experiences or their equivalents:

- ***A course in methods of problem formulation and inquiry within the***

**discipline.** It is not useful to talk about critical thinking without teaching students about methods of inquiry appropriate to what they might be expected to think about.

• **An interdisciplinary seminar every semester during the junior and senior years.** Although a part of the major, this seminar should include faculty from outside the major and even from outside the traditional academic setting. It should consider, at a minimum, the relationship of the discipline to other fields, the future of the discipline and of professional development within it, its social and environmental context, and its ethical concerns and practices.

• **A student-maintained major portfolio and senior project that demonstrate the student's growth and capacity to self-assess, as well as his or her ability to make connections among courses.** Each institution must be free to define how these culminating projects are constructed and evaluated, but they should enable richly textured qualitative assessments not just of students but of their programs.

There is already a model for this kind of integration in the allied health sciences such as nursing or medical imaging, which seem to know more than most about how to integrate multiple perspectives and skills into their majors, how to teach analysis and problem-solving, and how to build instruction and assessment around critical thinking. There are probably several reasons for this. There are few arenas where the practice of a discipline comes more face-to-face with the human condition than in the healing professions. The ability to calculate a prescription, see a symptom in its larger context, spot a contradiction, interpolate information, make decisions, cope with aggression, calm a child's fear, contend with both the most advanced and the most basic of technologies, and bring order from chaos are all crucial to the performance of their professional duties.

Further, faculty and students in these programs always keep one foot planted firmly in settings outside the academic classroom. They are always leaving campus for clinical settings and then coming back to theorize before they go out again to test those theories against reality.

Finally, these programs' accrediting agencies seem more likely to examine how analysis, critical thinking, and context-setting are embedded in the major than to dictate a set menu of courses.

There is another model in schools of architecture, design, or studio arts. In these disciplines students must constantly demonstrate their developing abilities in analysis, critical thinking, and problem-solving as well as their increasingly sophisticated technical skills in a directly visible, intensely human fashion. Individually and in groups, they put their work up on the wall for everyone to see. Such programs understand open critique and discussion and the construction and evaluation of student portfolios.

But this kind of approach should not be limited to technical or professional majors—liberal-arts faculty, too, can connect with the outside world in ways that create a flow between the discipline and its larger context. Liberal education was never intended to take place apart from student interests or disciplinary contexts. It was also never intended to be held apart from life. Yet, that is exactly what our current approach to general education does. We try to convince ourselves that by continuously refining course menus and assessment protocols—tinkering at the edges and playing with new yardsticks in our faddish fascination with quantitative accountability—we will create general education programs that work to produce liberal learning. The Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) system is littered with proposals to do just that. I once wrote one myself, and at the time I thought it was pretty good.

But I now distrust the notion that we can liberally educate our students through general education. I no longer believe that if you stack up enough bits and pieces taught by specialists you will produce synthesis. I no longer believe that we can encourage the growth of critical thinkers by separating students' studies into two unrelated parts—a smattering of courses in a smattering of disciplines and technical study divorced from a field's larger intellectual and real-life contexts. Liberal education should not stop at the door of the major—instead, that is where it should truly begin. ☐

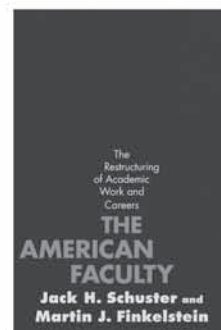
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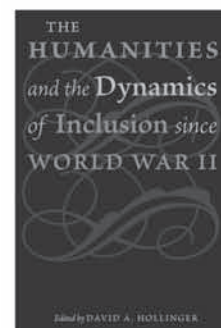
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