

# An Integrated Approach to Liberal Learning

By Jan Czechowski, dean of arts and sciences, the College of St. Catherine

Higher education in the United States today faces the prospect of significant review, restructuring and, dare I use the term, transformation. Who involved in this could be anything but elated by developments focusing on liberal education—spurred on in a major way by AAC&U's seminal report (2002), *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*? Engaging in a fundamental transformation of higher and liberal education is an extremely complex and multi-layered enterprise, and exploring potential strategies for implementation will be a huge challenge. Indeed, the questions already easily outnumber the answers. For starters, do we have a common understanding of what liberal education means? Do institutional outcomes reflect a commitment to that definition and its implied educational mission? Do our curricular, co-curricular, and environmental structures reflect that mission? And perhaps most importantly, can we deliver to our students what we promise?

In what follows, I initially presuppose a certain amount of traditional curricular structure and delivery: discreet courses, a credit structure, majors, minors, general education requirements (or at least expectations), distribution, and so forth, within an additionally structured campus environment. All of these (and many more pieces) contribute to what our students learn and to our success at meeting our outcomes. For most of us, they purport to deliver to our students both a general education and our own specific variation of a liberal education. A strong liberal education must be founded on a carefully, intentionally, and innovatively integrated curriculum—within and across the major, the core, and the co-curriculum. The key word here is integration.

## The Major/Core Balancing Act

One of the most enduring principles of a liberal education curriculum holds that students achieve both breadth and depth in their programs of study—the perceived, and perhaps real, relationship between the major and the core. In most institutions, however, the major and the core are treated as totally separate and unrelated entities, as two individual strands. Especially at those institutions claiming to be dedicated to the liberal arts and liberal education, the proportion of work outside the major can be anywhere from 60 to 75 percent or more of the total credit load. Yet the highest proportion of value decidedly is on the major; all the rest, then, is the stuff students are “required” to take. The worst of “gen ed” practice even suggests these extraneous, “blow-it-off” courses be “gotten out of the way” in the first two years so students can focus on the “important stuff.” Students (and some faculty) tend to approach the higher percentage of course work with some apathy and even, in many cases, with disdain. That the major and the core intentionally should connect is hardly ever acknowledged.

One by-product of this skewed relationship is the tension between professional majors—practical or applied subjects and learning—and “traditional” liberal arts majors. Others have engaged this topic with greater clarity and acumen than I have room for here. Suffice it to say that an integrative model must apply here as well. As Sheldon Rothblatt (2003, 43) writes, “We cannot avoid considering how liberal and professional education intersect. Some sort of accommodation is necessary if liberal education is to be viable as preparation for living, for otherwise, occupational preparation,

driven by market concerns, will continue to influence the structure and purpose of all forms of teaching. Accommodation is also necessary if the career, so encompassing and demanding under modern conditions, is to provide a satisfying way of living.”

To clarify the problem, we must begin by recognizing that most institutions make no cogent and transparent connection between the curriculum and their stated learning outcomes. We also must recognize that most current curricular practices and structures include no intentional internal integration within core requirements. In the core, for the most part, there is no progression, inter-connection, or logical ladder—certainly not as applied to majors. The value of such an integrative approach, of course, lies in the coherence and meaning it gives to the entirety of a student’s course work; most would agree that such coherence already exists in major curricular structures. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, most current practice provides no intentional integration between core requirements and the major. Yet if we are going to educate the whole person, the curriculum had better be organized around some philosophy of holistic learning.

## Integrated and Specialized

So how do we even begin to address these issues? It is not a question of major, future jobs, or professional versus liberal arts programs. Instead, it has to do with the context within which students learn, with how it all fits together; that is, it has to do with integration. It seems to me that we should celebrate the effectiveness of the liberal

arts both as independently credible disciplines *and* as critically and integrally supportive of other, non-liberal arts fields. At the same time, and of equal importance given the strength of professional programs in the current market and across most curricula, innovative institutions should take the lead in creating a reverse relationship by focusing curricular development energy on how non-liberal arts fields also contribute to and support the essence of liberal education.

Frank Wong (1996, 73) has addressed the notion of cross-connection in the curriculum from the slightly different direction of over-specialization. “This integrated American approach to liberal education,” he writes, “would need to engage the challenge of academic specialization in a fresh and different way. The problem comes when specialization is so dominant and so narrow that it becomes disconnected from other fields of learning, from the broader issues of human values and the human condition, from the needs of the larger society, from the personal development needs of students, and from students’ honest concern about how their education will help them make a living.” Therefore, “the problem facing any liberal education reform is disconnected specialization.” As Wong notes, “the initial challenge is to envision a practical way to reconnect the academic specializations so that liberal education’s integrating vision is given priority.”

As a first step, we must ensure that our learning outcomes impact the curriculum design in an intentional way. Indeed, should not the outcomes themselves be

stated in an integrated and cohesive way? How is critical thinking related to creative process, problem solving, effective communication, and so forth? How then can we devise new strategies, new curricular structures, for approaching our outcomes and meeting our mission? How can we be more effective in getting our students to learn what we want them to learn?

## Synergy Throughout the Academy

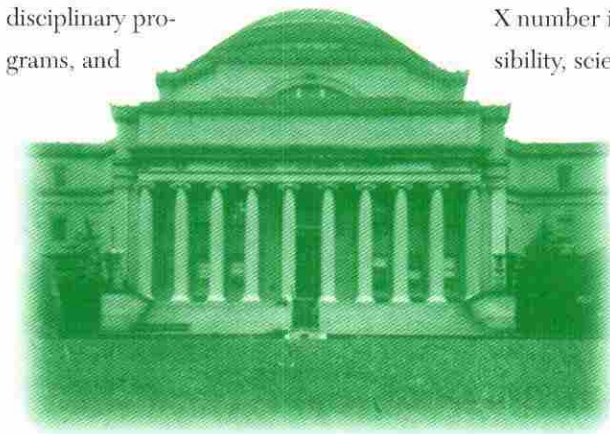
Consider the following model, which breaks down a student’s educational experience into three parts: curriculum, co-curriculum, and environment. Within each of these are separate strands. For example, in the curriculum, we could separate the major and the core. In the co-curriculum, there might be arts, athletics, and service-learning. The environment would include student housing, food service, financial aid, and social programs. Certainly there are many more, and each institution might define co-curriculum and environment differently. For the sake of argument and brevity, I will focus here on the curricular strand only.

As noted above, the curricular strands tend to operate in isolation. If a relationship exists at all, we tend to see the core requirements as accessory to the major; the focus is on the major with core course work in an ancillary role. The question becomes, why can’t this relationship be intentionally synergetic? That is, where is the cross-connection from the major back to those core courses? Why is it perceived that only the core courses, and not the major course work, contribute to liberal education?



At my institution, we have begun to use the double-helix as a metaphor for this relationship. Think of the major and the core as the two spinal lines of the helix, each connecting at a number of points, supportive in both directions. The same exercise can then be done with co-curriculum and environment, or with any other aspects of the student experience. In a fuller sense, then, if each major structural helix (curriculum, co-curriculum, environment) figures as separate spines of a still larger helix, perhaps a triple or quad-helix (with apologies to biologists), then one has a quite exciting and innovative structure for higher education.

Of course, accomplishing transformative integration is not easy. Not everything will smoothly interconnect, and some things may connect only in fairly minor ways. But why not at least attempt to create a system that makes those associations? Good models are beginning to emerge. As part of AAC&U's Forum on Twenty-first Century Liberal Arts Education Practice—



itself a part of the Greater Expectations Initiative, a working group is focusing on "integrative learning," which includes such innovations as learning communities, interdisciplinary programs, and

## Organizing Around Outcomes

Let me propose some possible directions for starting the process. Begin with outcomes. What do we want our students to learn, *and* what does each aspect of their experience contribute to meeting those outcomes? Again just focusing on the curriculum, each course should be organized according to the outcomes it meets—perhaps primary, secondary, and tertiary (along the lines of what Wesleyan is doing). Both major and core requirements then must be structured similarly; that is, they must be structured according to how courses and requirements meet the outcomes of both liberal education and the major. With core requirements, for example, X number of primary credits are required in critical thinking (perhaps some number of secondary and tertiary as well); X number in creative process, civic responsibility, scientific method, quantitative analysis, international understanding, and so forth. Within the major, required courses and outcomes should specifically link with courses that meet core requirements, perhaps to be taken at the same time. In the pre-major advis-

ing process, as they select courses to meet core requirements, students also should recognize the relationship to potential major courses and goals.

Building on the premise that core requirements should not be randomly selected but should have some connection, another programmatic variant involves the coordination of core requirements relative to a particular theme. For example, at my institution, we are considering a humanities minor. From an introductory course for the minor, students would select a theme such ethics, creative process, or aging. They then would select identified courses from among the humanities departments that address, at least in some portion, that particular theme. The connection between literature, language, philosophy, history, etc. then would become intentional and integrated, at least around this one theme. We still are working on the details of the program, such as how to include international experience components.

## Conclusion

Certainly, any such undertaking will take time and some institutional investment, especially related to faculty development. How seriously we are committed to transforming liberal education will dictate our course of action. Transformative integration takes a lot of work, and it will take a lot of faculty buy-in to accomplish. With a very transparent communication effort on the part of the institution, however, students will understand what lib-



eral education is, why it is valuable, and why they are engaged in it. “Until higher education for the most ambitious youth in American society is seen as something other than credentialing—providing a certificate that the individual will be able to exchange for something called a job—the joys and necessities of learning will be rendered in a debased coinage. The best of America’s liberal arts colleges recognize that their so-called product is something other than a negotiable instrument designed to guarantee employment” (Graubard 1999, viii).

Those of us devoted to liberal education believe that better structures are not only possible, but are necessary. As stated in *Greater Expectations*, and echoed by Sheldon Rothblatt, “the philosophy of liberal education depends less on particular subject matter than on an approach to teaching and learning.” ■

## References

- Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2002. *Greater expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Graubard, Stephen R. 1999. Distinctively American: The residential liberal arts colleges. *Daedalus* 128:1, viii.
- Rothblatt, Sheldon. 2003. *The living arts: Comparative and historical reflections on liberal education*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Wong, Frank F. 1996. The search for American liberal education. In Nicholas H. Farnham and Adam Yarmolinsky, eds. *Rethinking liberal education*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Selected Institutions Working on Curricular Innovation

### Colby-Sawyer College

Colby-Sawyer College proposes a Pathways program for the liberal education of its students. The goal of this program is to provide students with the intellectual breadth they need as educated people in a coherent manner. Pathways, as defined by colleagues at the University of Oregon, “are a coherent set of courses and activities designed and taught by faculty and staff to help students explore different subjects and understand some of the different disciplines important for a liberal education.” Each Pathway has an interdisciplinary theme that will define the goal of the First Step Seminar, the three courses (Stepping Stones) in the Pathway, and the Sophomore Seminar. Students will choose their Pathway depending on their interests. Pathway professors strive to develop students to their full potential and to help students achieve all of the learning outcomes of the college. The Pathway consists of a First Step Seminar, three Stepping Stone courses, and a Sophomore Seminar.

[www.colby-sawyer.edu](http://www.colby-sawyer.edu)

### Wagner College

Wagner College has developed a curriculum [the Wagner Plan] that unites deep learning and practical application. Beginning in their very first semester at Wagner, students are not only studying issues, learning critical-thinking, writing and problem-solving skills, they are also seeing and putting into practice what they are learning. This “practical” side of liberal education is perhaps best defined in Wagner’s curriculum because of the specific links created by our Learning Communities and Reflective Tutorials and, as importantly, the investment faculty make in connecting students with the world outside the classroom.

[www.wagner.edu](http://www.wagner.edu)

### Wesleyan University

Within the context of liberal education at Wesleyan, advising is a teaching and learning experience, and faculty play a central role in the advising system. Faculty advisors teach students how to explore the curriculum and develop coherent academic plans that expand their intellectual, academic, and artistic perspectives. They also help students select courses that stress capabilities that have been identified as essential for a life of learning. These “key capabilities” are writing, speaking, quantitative reasoning, ethical reasoning, and critical and creative thinking.

Faculty efforts are supported and enhanced by many other resources available at Wesleyan, including class deans, orientation staff, career resources, and staff members in various administrative offices. The advising process is designed to provide opportunities for students to reflect on how to utilize the curriculum and other university resources to achieve their educational and personal goals. Other important elements of the advising system include student use of *WESMaps*, the Electronic Portfolio, and online registration activities.

[www.wesleyan.edu](http://www.wesleyan.edu)

