

# An Education for the Stewardship of the Global Commons

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P E R S P E C T I V E S

IN THIS BRIEF PROPOSAL, we are trying to envision a foundational higher education for the twenty-first century, an education that has some claim to adequacy for the possibilities of human beings today on this earth. We are writing this to provide more depth to the idea of “global education,” a term that has become commonplace but that, too often, is put forward without adequate substance. We call this “An Education for the Twenty-First Century: Stewardship of the Global Commons.” We take on this task as members of the Global Liberal Arts Alliance, a consortium of

twenty-five colleges and universities co-

operating to advance the theory and practice of undergraduate education designed to prepare graduates for citizenship and leadership in the highly globalized twenty-first century.

We believe it is important to imagine an education fit for global possibilities because ours has become a world in which connections and consequences reach across borders and leap oceans. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it may have been appropriate to frame education in national terms, but no more. The challenges of the twenty-first century—the possibilities of prosperity, of peace, of health, of fulfillment—all unfold on a global stage. What a few people do in Boston or Bangkok, in Riyadh or Rome or Rio de Janeiro can affect others at a considerable distance. The earth has become a place of global cultures, in all of their valued particularity, and increasingly a global commons, in all of its necessary interdependence.

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An appropriate university education for everyone, not just a privileged elite, must prepare women and men for participation in these cultures and this commons.

Ours is world being transformed by transnational flows of goods and capital, peoples and practices; by the unraveling of the nation state; and by the rapid rise of new forms of instantaneous electronic communication. There is an urgent need to prepare young people to negotiate such complexity, and to enter into thoughtful stewardship of initiatives, resources, languages, and cultures.

We know that there are many approaches to higher education across the world, some more narrowly focused on preparation for vocation, some aiming to educate the whole person. We do not intend our conception of global education as a singular conception of education to be implemented everywhere in the same way. We want, rather, to articulate the main features of any education that can be truly adequate to global challenges. In relation to current educational systems around the world, this is an approach that is generally more interdisciplinary, more collaborative, and more attuned to stewardship than to instrumental effort or narrow self-interest. It is also an education that compels students, and those who teach them, to come to know not just that which is familiar and already “one’s own,” but to seek understanding of others and to welcome the opportunity to learn what those who are different from them have discovered about our common humanity and our common habitation of this planet.

We conceive of this education as having three kinds of elements, which may well be best learned together. It requires the acquisition of some *literacies*: scientific, cultural, and global—understandings that are both substantive and, because necessarily unfinished, include the capabilities to continue learning. It requires the learning of some *skills* that are

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# Twenty-First Century



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essential to effective action. And it requires acquisition of some *dispositions* that promote constructive rather than destructive engagement with others.

We share this proposal to invite others into the conversation. We encourage others to comment on and add to our work in envisioning a foundational education for the twenty-first century—a global education that prepares students for effective stewardship of the global commons.

### Literacies for global stewardship

The following areas of knowledge are important for effective agency. What do our graduates need to know to be able to exercise stewardship?

#### *Scientific understanding:*

- The capacity to use scientific knowledge and methods to identify questions and to draw evidence-based conclusions in order to make decisions about the natural world and the changes made to it through human activity<sup>1</sup>

#### *Cultural understanding:*

- A comparative and historical grasp of world religious traditions and practices of faith
- A comparative and historical understanding of the variety of human cultures as expressed in music, the arts, and literature
- A sense of world history focused more on the movement of peoples across the globe, intercultural encounters, and cultural creolization than on nations, dynasties, empires, and hegemonic regimes; mastery of world geography supporting such an approach
- A sophisticated understanding of the social construction of identities and the dynamics of positionality—race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and nationality—involved in the distribution of power

#### *Understanding of global issues:*

- A critical understanding of the workings of global capitalism, global patterns of production and consumption, and the global flows of people, commodities, and money
- A grasp of the dynamics of globalization as a complex, disjunctive, and overlapping set of “scapes,” as described by Arjun Appadurai<sup>2</sup> to include ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technoscapescapes, finanscapescapes, and ideoscapescapes; we would add envirosapescapes and culturscapescapes



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- A grasp of the transdisciplinary and transnational nature of global problems and the sciences that illuminate them—problems related to health, food, poverty, security, climate change, and the environment
- An understanding of the philosophy and history, the possibilities and limitations of human rights

### Skills for global engagement

- Communicating meaningfully using expert writing, speaking, listening, and negotiating skills; deploying electronic communication technologies with rhetorical sensitivity to the potentials and limitations of their various modes
- Developing the capacity to see, appreciate, and draw novel insight from cultural differences and the ability to work, negotiate, socialize, and play with people of different cultural backgrounds
- Mastering a foreign language, learning to translate from one language to another, and, by means of both experiences, gaining access to another culture
- Using mathematics and statistics, and building and using models of complex systems
- Cultivating discernment by searching and sorting through information from multiple sources, assessing the validity of truth claims, and interrogating one's own most basic assumptions

- Producing original research and new knowledge in the service of problem solving
- Praxis: taking theory to practice and thought to action
- Mastering “scalar thinking”: a method of Google Earth–style reasoning that permits us to zoom in and zoom out on issues in ways that reveal the interconnections between the local and the global; at each scale of analysis, different features and relationships emerge
- Triangulating differences using global positioning: a GPS is only reliable if it is coordinating information from a variety of differently situated sources; this skill entails taking into account disparate points of view—disciplinary, cultural, ideological—and being able to discern where they can be reconciled into a more complex and complete understanding and also the limits of that reconciliation

#### **Dispositions for global engagement**

- *Respect*: a recognition of the dignity inherent in humanity, of human rights, and of our responsibilities to others
- *Vulnerability*: a disposition not to recoil at difference, but to see encounters with difference as opportunities for growth and learning, for innovation, and for joyful interaction with others
- *Hospitality*: a disposition to feel at home in the world and to make others feel welcome and valued
- *Compassion*: a disposition undergirded by the awareness that suffering is an essential dimension of the human condition and that suffering can be ameliorated by the comfort of empathy
- *Agency*: the resolve to transform commitment into action by promoting change, by resisting the unacceptable, and by championing justice
- *Agility*: the capacity to continually revise one’s notion of one’s own identity and that of others in constellation with new cultures, persons, and experiences
- *Fairness*: a disposition toward egalitarian distribution of power and privilege, and a commitment to democratic processes
- *Service*: a commitment to support the well-being of others and the global commons more broadly
- *Leadership*: the proclivity to stand up

among others so as to take initiative constructively, generously, and persistently

The purpose of a twenty-first-century education is to produce graduates who recognize themselves to be *of* the world and who also assume responsibility *for* the world. Such graduates respect the specificities of particular cultures as well as the need for a global commons. As stewards of such cultures and commons, they draw upon multiple disciplines and viewpoints to address the world’s problems, and they work collaboratively with others to solve them. □

#### **Education for Stewardship of the Global Commons**

*Commentary by Celeste Schenck*

As we gathered in Paris, four presidents from vastly different liberal arts institutions around the globe—the first private, nonprofit women’s university in Saudi Arabia; an American university in Paris with one hundred nationalities represented in the student body; two prestigious members of the Great Lakes Colleges Association, one having a religious mission, the other not—we were surprised to find such common ground in our thinking about the future of liberal learning. In these commentaries, however, we have decided to foreground our differences, and with them the flexibility with which such a model can be adapted to very different educational projects. In fact, one of the discoveries of our meeting was the alliance felt by the two presidents of Earlham College and Effat University, albeit Quaker and Muslim, and that comfortably established by the two presidents of secular institutions based in Paris, France, and Wooster, Ohio. To arrive at consensus on the proposal printed above, we had to negotiate past fundamental differences in our missions. It may be that in defining a transnational practice of the liberal arts, purpose and context are ultimately much more important than content. The common denominator we are seeking has something to do with providing learning experiences for our students that enable them to value, to examine, to struggle with, to negotiate, and ultimately to take joy in the fact of human differences.

In my view, “An Education for the Twenty-First Century: Stewardship of the Global Commons” builds upon the tradition of the

liberal arts—with which it shares investment in students' deep learning, development of critical judgment, and forging of personal values and civic engagement. But this new mode of global learning also represents a significant paradigm shift, one that is worth pausing to note. Whereas liberal learning has traditionally centered upon the individual student, focusing on his growth, intellectual productions, and moral commitments (the quintessential evaluative instrument of which was a term paper produced by a single author), education for stewardship of the global commons requires that a student situate herself amongst others, produce knowledge and make decisions in collaboration with others, situate her own ideas against and amongst those of people coming from very different traditions and value systems, and understand her own belonging to this world held in common.

The fundamental difference is that, at its Western roots, liberal learning is aimed at the transmission of a single cultural heritage and a canon. Education for stewardship of the global commons makes no attempt at “coverage,” recognizing instead that becoming a student of the world will necessarily require the acquisition of discontinuous yet integrated forms of knowledge, much like the “scapes” theorized by Appadurai. An image for the former kind of educational experience might be that of Plato sitting at the knee of his mentor Socrates, where, in reverent interaction, the student masters a tradition and makes it his own. An image of the latter might be that of a group of students, open to both the impact and the influence of the world, surveying its immensity and variety and mapping for themselves, aided by teachers/guides, the vast, shifting landscapes of global history, politics, economics, arts, religions, technologies, media, communications, and even climate.

In a world changed utterly by the decline of the nation state; transnational flows of capital, objects, peoples, languages, and labor; and the rise of undreamt-of forms of instantaneous communication, the urgency of preparing students to negotiate such complexity and to engage in its stewardship cannot be overestimated. Although those of us who have learned

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in, taught in, and led institutions in which the values of traditional liberal learning obtained may find it difficult to admit, the limitations of liberal learning—even that which incorporates a global awareness requirement—in the face of such changed epistemologies must be addressed. The add-on model of “internationalizing the curriculum” or study abroad is insufficient. We must invent new pedagogies that lead to new learning outcomes and new assessments more appropriate to full engagement in the global commons—all of these forged by means of new partnerships among academic institutions located across a planet that has need of them. Such a learning experience will look very different in Bishkek and Vilnius, Amherst and Paris, Yola and Beirut; but we will all recognize, if not its specific content, its purpose. Student-centered, faculty-intensive, powerfully transformative, this kind of learning experience is both familiar to us all, despite our differing contexts, and an imperative for global leadership and change. □

**Is Global Education a Kind of Liberal Education, or an Alternative?**

*Commentary by Douglas C. Bennett*

Are we writing a revision of a liberal arts education? Or are we envisioning an alternative to a liberal arts education? These were recurrent questions as the four of us worked on “An Education for the Twenty-First Century: Stewardship of the Global Commons.” Because what we propose is an education of considerable breadth, the answer may appear to be an affirmation that this is a liberal arts education reframed for a new era. Certainly it is not a narrow education that only prepares one for a vocation. But that is hardly enough: surely more than “breadth” is required to make an education truly a liberal arts education.

I came to the project thinking that our task was to conceive of a liberal arts education that was honestly and fully global. On more than one occasion in recent years, I had argued that the high-minded idea of a “global liberal arts” meant simply a liberal arts education thoroughly expunged of its prejudices favoring

the United States and Western Europe. I imagined those prejudices to run deep, so I imagined this extirpation of Western bias would be difficult. But as I thought about our task in advance of our gathering in Paris, my doubts grew. Might we be taking a thoroughly Western conception of education, adding to it some few perspectives from Asia or Africa, and calling this new confection “global liberal arts”? Would such a conception have any integrity?

The idea of a liberal arts education is one that grew up unabashedly in the Western world. It began as a Roman conception drawing deeply on Greek ideas, was challenged by the rise of Christianity, then evolved into a synthesis of Christian and Greco-Roman ideas, only (down the dominant line of evolution) to emancipate itself from Christianity into a largely secular conception of education. Its understandings of knowledge, inquiry, reason, and goodness were all shaped (complexly to be sure) by the cultural contexts in which it arose and was revised. What ideas it had incorporated from outside the Western tradition it had appropriated on its own terms. So could such a thoroughly Western conception of education be sufficiently rid of its biases to be considered “global”?

Each having our own reasons, the four of us decided early in our discussions to lay aside this question of whether we were working within the liberal arts tradition. We agreed we could come back to that question at the end. And in the end, I think we would give four different answers, none of them an unequivocal yes or no.

A liberal arts education is one that makes a claim for universality: it seeks to address what it means to be human, weighing answers to that question from many different perspectives and disciplines. Our conception certainly falls within that conception, seeking to embrace a yet wider set of perspectives. A liberal arts education is also one that prepares a person for a life of freedom, rather than a life of necessity; it is an education that prepares a person to make choices, not to be driven blindly by compulsions neither seen nor understood. Our conception is compatible with that lofty aim.

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But our conception adds to the central liberal arts concern with preparation for freedom a parallel concern with preparation for stewardship of the global commons. A well-educated person, we believe, needs not only to be fit for freedom, but needs also to be prepared to take a full measure of responsibility for what happens to and among

human beings in this world.

Or was that concern for stewardship always latent in the idea of a liberal arts education? If so, it has been a latent concern now needing fuller voice. □

**Stewardship as a Global Ethic**

*Commentary by Haifa Jamal al-Lail*

An educational model inspired by the concept of man as God’s steward (*Khalifa*) and trustee on earth (universal stewardship), and the principles it advocates to be relevant and meaningful to differing traditions and cultures of the world, is a most attractive proposition. Thus, higher education in the twenty-first century must aim at promoting and adopting these principles.

In proposing a globally acceptable foundation for twenty-first-century education—for the development of individuals, organizations, and communities that share mutually beneficial goals—we must consider how people from different parts of the world will accept, adopt, develop, and react to this concept. Being part of both Muslim and Middle Eastern communities allows me to foresee how this model is relevant and meaningful to this region, but also internationally. Addressing both issues will qualify this foresight, and help others understand the holistic approach we followed in constructing our model.

With regard to universal relevance, the design of the model addresses the fundamental needs and aspirations of all cultures in seeking to prepare every human being to become a responsible global citizen, and also a key player in universal stewardship. The aim is not merely to develop young people for the job market as technically competent in their chosen fields, but to ensure that they are fully aware of their role in their communities

### THE GLOBAL LIBERAL ARTS ALLIANCE

The Global Liberal Arts Alliance is a partnership of colleges that seeks to strengthen education in the liberal arts and sciences by sharing expertise and experience, and by emphasizing the challenges and opportunities facing institutions that educate students for citizenship and leadership in the highly globalized twenty-first century. The Alliance forges links among participating colleges through programs that

- allow institutional leaders—particularly presidents—to address common issues that all liberal arts institutions, irrespective of location, confront in their quest to operate effectively and to prepare students to be engaged and contributing citizens;
- develop the expertise of faculty members and administrators, augment academic and nonacademic programs, improve the manner in which colleges operate, and enhance the success of Alliance institutions;
- promote international understanding and enhance discussion concerning the economic, political, social, intercultural, and other challenges facing societies where Alliance colleges are located.

The Global Liberal Arts Alliance was founded and is administered by the Great Lakes Colleges Association, a consortium of thirteen private liberal arts colleges located in Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. More information about the alliance can be found online at [www.liberalartsalliance.org](http://www.liberalartsalliance.org).

#### Alliance Members

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane  
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 Kalamazoo College  
 Kenyon College  
 Oberlin College  
 Ohio Wesleyan University  
 Wabash College  
 The College of Wooster

from the very beginning and fully prepared to meet challenges of positive engagement in a wider context with confidence, energy, understanding, and initiative.

Our model places responsibility for change and development on everyone, not just a select few, and stresses the need to analyze correctly, taking others into account, while responding to human aspirations. In my own religious tradition, the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) said, “Each of you is a steward, and each of you is responsible for his or her stewardship.” This concept of individual accountability and responsibility is common to all major faiths, and is a major tool for positive change. In the light of current events in the Middle East, which includes the rise of youth voices, I believe this model will equip youths with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to bring about positive transformation from within the systems, communities, and institutions to which they belong—all while seeking harmonious, responsible change for society, rather than disruption for its own sake.

Relevance and meaning demand balance in educational curricula. Scientific understanding must be balanced by wide cultural understanding of global and communal social issues. Equally, liberal studies, which appeal to the inner self, must include an understanding of key scientific principles. And communication skills are essential for all. This approach is vital to students in higher education, and it is equally vital in the vocational sphere. An understanding of the long-term purpose and context of study and the role one should play in society are fundamentally important to the holistic development of individuals and to the benefit of society as a whole.

In my opinion, the combination of these elements is what makes the model truly holistic, special, and viable. □

### Yes, but Is a Global Education Practical?

*Commentary by Grant H. Cornwell*

I can imagine a fair question posed by trustees, students, their parents, and the public to which we are accountable: is this education practical? That is, if we imagine a graduate going forth in the world with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we describe, what are they equipped to do? How will they fare? How

will this education serve them in the world of work, and in pursuing a life of aspirations and obligations?

First, it is easy to notice that the education we describe is not vocational training. And while I will argue that it develops job skills in the most profound sense of that term, it is not an education designed to prepare students for particular careers. However, if you imagine the qualities and capabilities of graduates of this kind of education, and test them against the research into what employers most eagerly seek when hiring, graduates of this global education will not merely fare well, but will far excel in their readiness to be effective in contemporary careers.

According to the extensive study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn*,<sup>3</sup> employers seek to hire people with knowledge of human cultures and of the physical and natural world. More specifically, the study found that employers seek to hire graduates with knowledge of concepts and new developments in science and technology; the ability to understand the global context of situations and decisions as well as global issues and developments, and their implications for the future; and an understanding of the role of the United States in the world and of cultural diversity, both in America and in other countries. With regard to intellectual and practical skills, employers seek to hire those who have the ability to communicate effectively, orally and in writing; critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills; the ability to analyze and solve complex problems; teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings; the ability to innovate and be creative; the ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources; and the ability to work with numbers and understand statistics. Finally, with regard to decision making and responsibility, employers seek those who have the ability to connect choices and actions to ethical decisions, who have a commitment to civic participation and community engagement, and who can apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings and problems. Against these benchmarks, the education we propose is more intentionally tuned to develop in graduates

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the qualities sought by employers than are most curricula in place today.

With all this said, we dramatically undershoot the mark if we reduce the idea

of a practical education to career readiness. The kind of education we propose is practical in a much deeper sense; it is preparation for effective and responsible adult agency throughout a life engaged with the global realities we describe. Practical wisdom is the moral and intellectual wherewithal to live well, to prosper and thrive oneself, and, in so doing, to contribute to the prosperity and well-being of others. In this sense, a global education of the kind we describe is the most practical education possible in and for the world today. □

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the authors' names on the subject line.

NOTES

1. This definition of "scientific literacy" was developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment. The full text of the program's "Definition and Selection of Competencies" can be found online at <http://www.deseco.admin.ch>.
2. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization; Public Worlds, Volume 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), especially chapter 3.
3. Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010), 1–2.



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