

Thoughts on a “Liberating” Education

ROBERT A. SCOTT

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF COLLEGE? I believe undergraduate education is and must be as much about character and citizenship as about careers and commerce. In addition to majoring in a particular subject, and in order to fulfill the purpose of a university education, undergraduate students must learn about and consider the natural world we meet upon birth, the world we make, and the means by which we mediate between the world we meet and the world we make.

Further, I do not think of ours as the “information age,” but rather as the “imagination age.” We live in a time that requires creative approaches to solving problems. In this context, the three most important aspects of learning are history, imagination, and compassion.

MY VIEW

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Three key aspects of learning

One way to think about the question of what to study is to reflect on contemporary issues and ask what lessons we have learned. A quick survey of the past several years would show that too many people, even those in sophisticated roles, lacked knowledge of history, lacked context. This was particularly evident in the financial and real estate arenas. History is an essential subject, especially if we are to understand the different ways people come to “know” the truth—by evidence, by epiphany, by emotion—and how they challenge assumptions and validate assertions. Without this background knowledge, one cannot distinguish Kant from Kant, or between and among issues of law, morality, and ethics.

The second area to develop is that of the imagination. The exercise of the imagination permits us to see patterns, to see where they diverge and when they converge. It requires us to listen, to understand, to tolerate the silence, and to comprehend before we respond. As recent and ongoing political and financial crises demonstrate, many high-profile people confront new problems without the ability to see the connections between different variables; they cannot visualize or forecast directions, cannot approach issues creatively. They can look and not perceive, hear and not know, understand a thing and be completely ignorant of it.

The third area to develop is that of compassion—the ability to listen, truly hear, and comprehend another person’s perspective and also to be fair and just. The skills and abilities needed in the world today are not only knowledge of balance sheets and how to analyze them, but also the ability to understand cultural dynamics and how people interact. Too many adults seem to lack self-awareness and any preparation in critical reflection and thinking: they are those for whom answers hide questions, both about themselves and about others. This is why, for example, the study of literature and history is so important. It helps us see the questions and assumptions so often hidden by answers, helps us develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Often, when someone proposes a solution, I will say, “That’s

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an answer, what's the question?" Remember the wise one who asked his child each day not "What did you learn today?" but "What questions did you ask today?"

A liberating education

Many academic programs tied to particular professions focus on *how to do* things—training—rather than on *how to analyze, comprehend, and communicate about* things, which is the purpose of education. They focus on how to engage in a transaction, whether a stock sale or a real estate acquisition, instead of on transformation—that is, turning different pieces and parts into something new by finding a synthesis of existing ideas or by elevating one's thinking beyond the immediate to the more universal. The more universal approach includes preparation for a full, well-rounded life as a professional, citizen, and family member as well as for work that has meaning and provides fulfillment.

What I call a liberating education fosters the ability to distinguish between what is true and what is false, and it involves a number of

different analytical perspectives: the scientific, the artistic, the humanistic, the quantitative, the qualitative. It helps students understand that to measure something indicates it is valued, but that not everything of value can be measured. The liberating curriculum is a program for citizenship. It is liberal in its form of inquiry; it honors not revealed truth but intellectual growth. This curriculum is a preparation for living, for wondering why. It purports not just to teach one how to earn a living, but also how to live. It offers instruction and experience in both technique and vision—the ultimate combination in education.

A liberating education has surprisingly diverse attributes. From it, students gain the confidence needed to take initiative, solve problems, and formulate ideas. They develop skills in language, learning, and leadership. They also learn about domestic and foreign cultures, history, mathematics, science, and technology. This broad approach emphasizes reasoning in different modes; clear and graceful expression in written, oral, and visual communication;



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organizational ability; tolerance and flexibility; creativity; and sensitivity to the concerns of others and to ethical and aesthetic values.

A liberating education aspires to teach students to be cultured people; to develop in students the capacity to check assumptions and to understand the value-laden choices that await them as consumers, decision makers, and arbiters of ethical choices at home, at work, and at the ballot box; to help students understand and build a civilization compatible with the nature and aspirations of human beings and the limitations of the environment. These ideals are not the province of a particular department or school, but rather they inform the entire curriculum.

Such a curriculum does not just happen, however; it must be intentionally designed. It is a means, and its ends or purposes must be considered as part of the basic design. Simplicity must be foremost, humane values must transcend technological values, and democratic values must overcome the desire for exclusivity. These are the benefits of an education that liberates students from their provincial origins and from prejudices masquerading as principles, no matter what their nationality, socioeconomic status, age, or religion.

Students should know about other cultures and be competent in communicating with other people. The goal is an education that leads to global understanding and competence. In the twenty-first century, citizens cannot be fully responsible unless they are knowledgeable about and sensitive to cultural differences.

After graduation, our students will work with individual entrepreneurs, small business owners, and corporate executives. Many will be involved in setting up businesses in other countries, selling in foreign markets, importing goods and materials, gaining access to foreign capital, and entering into joint ventures of one kind or another. The imperatives for global education include issues of national security; peaceful, respectful relations between and among peoples and nations; economic competition and cooperation; environmental interdependence; diversity in our midst; international trade and currency. Our graduates will supervise or be supervised by people of different ethnic, national, or racial backgrounds. They will inevitably live in neighborhoods affected by

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international influences, including population, products, petroleum, prices, and peace. For these reasons, cross-cultural, international perspectives must be incorporated into virtually all areas of the curriculum, including the humanities, sciences, social sciences, arts, business, and other professional fields.

Far more than language competency, global education includes cultural awareness, social knowledge, geography, economics, and history.

Moreover, the transformative experience of a truly liberating undergraduate education requires a faculty member and a student engaged in learning together. I call such an approach the “curriculum as covenant.” This commitment does not preclude the use of technology; online learning tools can provide new sources of supplementary expertise. We can gain a “sage on the stage” through technology, but we do not give up our role as the “guide on the side” for instruction and advising.



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An ideal curricular approach

There have been many attempts to define the optimal general education program. After years of experience and consideration, I have formulated my own ideal approach. It consists of three clusters of topics to be addressed in the first year of college study and then extended over the four years as part of the general education curriculum.

The first cluster, called “The World We Meet,” would focus on the natural world and would include study of biology, chemistry, physics, and all else subsumed by these subjects. The second cluster, “The World We Make,” would focus on cultural and creative endeavors and would include study of history, literature, sociology, international relations, business, technology, and economics. This second cluster would also introduce students to the different forms of scholarly endeavor, including discovery or pure basic research, applied research, integrative approaches combining the results of different fields, and pedagogy. Finally, the third cluster would focus on the systems of thought by which we mediate between the world we meet and the world we make. Through this cluster, students would examine the methods by which we make moral choices, reach ethical decisions, form general judgments, and determine compassionate responses. It would include study of philosophy, religion, and psychology.

The cluster related to the natural world would engage faculty in the sciences who are prepared for interdisciplinary teaching. Likewise, the cluster of courses related to culture would provide an interdisciplinary approach such as that developed by programs of international studies or public health. Finally, the

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cluster related to mediation would call upon faculty in philosophy, ethics, and religious studies as well as others who use literary, historical, and philosophical perspectives, depending upon their expertise and interest, to address questions of law, morality, and ethics.

A general education curriculum organized around these three clusters would require extensive reading, writing, listening, and oral presentations as well as the use of technology. Such a program would acknowledge that, while we cannot teach everything, we can prepare students to learn almost anything. Moreover, the three clusters would be complemented by cocurricular experiences—clubs, organizations, teams, internships, volunteer activities, service learning—that provide students with opportunities to apply their learning, learn from additional sources, deepen their knowledge, develop their skills and abilities, and refine a set of values.

This, I believe, is the way we should be preparing students for the world they will enter upon graduation. We want them to study what they are passionate about, as that is most likely to lead to success. But we also have an obligation to organize and support internships, service learning opportunities, and other experiences beyond the campus that foster learning by doing, learning from doing, and encourage a lifetime of engagement with the broader society. After all, our mission is as much about the development of good character and the encouragement of engaged citizenship as it is preparation for careers and commerce. □

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