

Remaking, Renewing, Reimagining

The Liberal Arts College Takes Advantage of Change

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The “distinctively American” tradition of residential liberal arts colleges rests on the foundation of an early social charter between American higher education and democratic society.¹ Simply put, the story goes like this: Sixteen years after the Pilgrims landed on the shore of Plymouth Harbor, Harvard was founded. As the frontier of the rapidly expanding United States moved west, new communities organized colleges as soon as they were able. In the 1860s, the great land-grant universities emerged with an even stronger focus on meeting the needs of individuals and communities. With each wave of development, higher education evolved to serve one great mission: educating leaders and citizens to realize their individual potential and build their capacity to serve in a democratic society. These dual goals—supporting the development of the individual and cultivating the common good—are inextricably linked through the belief in and practices of freedom. In the American narrative, freedom combines the pursuit of individual passion or fulfillment with service to the common good. Individuals are free to be themselves, but this freedom, as expressed in a wide variety of ways, is *for*, not *from*, service to the common good. Over time, the main components of this historical narrative became consolidated into three primary principles that form the foundation of what we know as residential liberal arts education: critical thinking, moral and civil character, and using knowledge to improve the world.²

First, *critical thinking*, rather than mastery of technical or codified knowledge, is the heart and soul of a liberal arts education. Our tradition requires that we encourage students to refine their capacity for analytic thinking; ask difficult questions and formulate responses; evaluate, interpret, and synthesize evidence; make clear, well-reasoned arguments; and develop intellectual agility. It is both “art” and “science” in that students are educated not only to master knowledge

but to create new modes of performance, production, or design and find connections and discover new ideas and perspectives. Critical thinking helps students learn how to learn, preparing them for a lifetime of work, service, and well-being, no matter what professions, vocations, and lifestyles they choose. Society is served by the ongoing expansion of intellectual capital that is both self-critical and innovative within personal, cultural, economic, and political realms but that also advances the common good.

Second, residential liberal arts colleges *cultivate a moral and civic character* in students in terms of both their individual choices and their contribution to the common good. Moral character does not mean mastery of a defined code of ethics but rather the cultivation of habits and characteristics that reinforce moral behavior individually as well as communally. Athletics, arts, as well as political, activist, and cultural groups on campus have a powerful impact on students and serve as vehicles for individual and communal development. Many of these colleges offer special leadership development programs, and nearly all would cite a history and goal of educating individuals who contribute to their fields and their communities. The cultivation of character, combined with the development of critical thinking, creates capacities in the individual for what John Dewey liked to call “associative living.”³ An education that cultivates the responsible expression of individual freedoms in the context of nurturing the common good is essential to strengthening democratic communities.

Third, *using knowledge and virtue to improve the world* is the ultimate aim of an education that serves individual and communal freedom. Liberal arts education is renowned for educating people to serve the world in multiple expressions, styles, and practices, whether through theater or the arts, economic analysis, scientific discovery, creative writing, the development of social policy, or historical interpretation. While the area of focus may be very limited and precise, the whole point of critical thinking and of cultivating moral character is to live well and to serve the common good. This twofold “ultimate” mission is the *raison d’être* of liberal arts education that, as William Sullivan has noted, expresses the best of the Western tradition: “The whole classical notion of a common *paideia*, or moral-civic cultivation, rested on the assertion that growth and transformation of the self toward responsible mutual concern is the realistic concern of public life”⁴ (emphasis mine). In this tradition, individual flourishing is defined both as the pursuit of one’s passions and as service to others, and this capacity to fulfill the self by fulfilling one’s obligations to the common good requires intellectual and moral formation in the context of a community. In this tradition public service

includes those who serve directly in fields such as public policy, education, non-profit work, or health care as well as those who contribute to a robust culture through business or the arts, research in basic sciences that one day might benefit others, or volunteer leadership in their communities.

Although new chapters in the history of liberal arts education unfold and the plot thickens, through the centuries the same anchors—of academic quality, community, and using knowledge to improve the world—propel our colleges forward. The great narrators of education have envisioned this social charter time and time again, underscoring the point made so well by Thomas Jefferson: “I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man.”

Each small liberal arts college is a distinct expression of this social compact, and the resulting tapestry of knowledge and social responsibility for the development of the individual and the cultivation of the common good supports, promotes, and expands freedom in its many expressions in this country. Through the willingness to encourage critical and creative thinkers—those who can combine self-reflection, disciplined action, and community building—we advance freedom of thought and expression as well as personal and social responsibility. As historian William Cronon notes, the act of making us free also binds us to the communities that gave us our freedom in the first place and, significantly, makes us responsible to those communities in ways that limit our freedom. In the end, it turns out that liberty is not about thinking or saying or doing whatever we want. It is about exercising our freedom in such a way as to make a difference in the world—and make a difference for more than just ourselves.⁵

Three Critiques of the Liberal Arts

For nearly as long as liberal arts colleges have existed, its critics have announced that this type of education fails to relate to the contemporary world. Today’s critics cite a long list of issues and pressures facing education, including technological innovation, globalism, the traditional structure of academic disciplines, environmental and financial sustainability, and changing demographics. From these pressing issues, some critics have concluded that the very sustainability of the liberal arts is at stake and predict the demise of this type of education is around the next technological, financial, or demographic corner.

These dire warnings tend to fall into three categories. The first asserts that education should be focused on job training, job procurement, and long-term financial security for students. Indeed, since the mid-1980s, most parents and prospec-

tive students indicate that the main purpose of education is to find a high-paying job and enjoy financial stability.⁶ Once the quest for a certain salary becomes the paramount and sometimes the only reason to go to college, education becomes job training in its mission and practices.

The second critique follows from the first and asserts that liberal arts education is a hopelessly romantic endeavor designed to give privileged students cultivated tastes for an outdated, elite life under the guise of leadership. Rather than seeing education in terms of human development that appreciates and sustains human culture as well as supports the common good, education is seen as a leisurely commodity for individuals who, by virtue of family or business connections, are already assured of a high station in life. In this view of what it means to be human, young adults are not cultivated so much as prepped and pampered, and the common good is seen not primarily as the arena of culture in which arts and politics flourish but one in which a social and economic order must be sustained.

The third category weaves through the former two, suggesting that liberal arts education is, plainly speaking, too expensive in terms of both cost and the experience it provides. In evaluating whether college is worth the cost, skeptics conclude that the sticker price is not justified because the relative “returns” do not directly translate into specific training or expertise. In other words, the value of developing the individual and contributing to the common good does not balance the sheer cost of the “product.”

Critics offer this argument routinely despite overwhelming evidence that college graduates attain, on average, higher incomes over the course of their careers and have more rather than fewer career options.⁷ That data, coming from U.S. Treasury Department’s “The Economic Case for Higher Education” (2012), reports on the income level of graduates of all colleges and universities, not just liberal arts colleges. When surveyed, employers indicate that the top skills they want in new employees include critical thinking, the ability to innovate, and the ability to work on teams with members of diverse groups.⁸

Alumni of, admittedly, top liberal arts colleges offer other evidence that contradicts the critics’ claim. A study by Hardwick Day notes that alumni of colleges belonging to the Annapolis Group (130 selective, independent liberal arts colleges in the United States) are more likely than any other group to have graduated in four years or less, giving them a head start on their careers. More than any other group, these alumni are more likely to rate their undergraduate experience as “excellent” and to give higher overall satisfaction ratings. They credit their undergraduate experience with helping them develop a broad range of important life

skills (problem solving, making effective decisions, thinking analytically, writing effectively, speaking effectively, working as part of a team, and leadership abilities). They rate their college as highly effective in helping them obtain their first job or gain admission to graduate school and report that their education continues to help them with career changes or advancement. Crediting the overall quality and breadth of their academic preparation more frequently, they believe they are better prepared than graduates of other institutions they've encountered since college.⁹

Being Proactive about the Liberal Arts

In response to these critiques, defenders of the liberal arts have been increasingly vocal, offering eloquent apologies, or philosophical and historical defenses, against the critics. Andrew Delbanco's book *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* addresses issues and pressures on liberal education but also defends its importance for economic prosperity for the individual and the country and for an inclusive democratic citizenship, as well as to create capacity for what Jefferson called "the pursuit of happiness." In *Cultivating Humanity* and *Not for Profit*, Martha Nussbaum argues for the importance of the tradition of the liberal arts to prepare "world citizens" who think critically, at least in part, through their ability to cultivate the capacity for empathy developed through humanities and the arts.¹⁰

I applaud the eloquent apologies based on our proud tradition, a tradition that is not only alive but also evolving. But to make the case for liberal arts, we need to assert a more proactive claim about our special relevance for linking knowledge, community, and freedom in the future. Although the critics' conclusions may be reductionist, we are not recused from the task of making a case for the liberal arts as a leader of change for education.

Our response to our critics and to the public in general should be not only about the history and philosophy of the liberal arts but also about its relevance in the twenty-first century for the United States and the world. The case we must make for liberal arts education is that the residential educational setting serves as an incubator for intellectual agility and supports the creation of new models of engagement to help both individuals and communities survive and flourish in this century. These principles stand as fresh reinterpretations of our tradition and enable us to impress upon our students that they have an obligation to use their talents to improve the world. The importance of this type of education rests on its long and unique tradition and on what it can offer in a world in which learning to navigate the new may be far more important than the ability to master the old.

While our current liberal arts residential colleges do live up to the apologies so eloquently offered about them, it is nonetheless the case that colleges also express an incredible degree of evolutionary, and even revolutionary, change in how knowledge is produced, interpreted, transmitted, taught, learned, and lived. Contemporary residential liberal arts colleges not only offer “community” as the environment for learning, but they do so by creating bold cultural experiments, some utopian in nature, of how to live out democracy and educate leaders. Our liberal arts residential communities serve as incubators or pilots of new ways to link knowledge, freedom, and democracy on a global stage. These colleges express the tradition of residential education through the ongoing reinterpretation of critical thinking, community living, and working to improve the world. And it is this current expression of the tradition, as much as the history and the philosophy, that we must use to make our case for the liberal arts.

This story of transformation and paradigm change deserves a powerful voice. If representatives of liberal arts colleges could write a joint case statement, it would emphasize the value of what we have always done well and would continue to guide this evolution through naturally occurring changes in structures, cultures, and practices. I suggest that we begin by reinterpreting the social charter that makes up the twin components of the liberal arts:

- First, we must expand our definition of what critical thinking is and how it is nurtured and learned and redefine how students and faculty engage one another in *knowledge design* through the dynamic interactions of teaching, learning, and scholarship.
- Second, we must extend the distinct role our campuses play as *intentional communities* within the broader public, especially as we focus on educating students in the practical virtues of building inclusive, sustainable, and civil democratic communities and on cultivating the next generation of ethical leaders.

Imagining the Future of Knowledge

As roads once paved the way to great centers of learning that were concentrated in distant corners of the world, so now do new forms of social organization and technology. In Thomas Friedman’s image, technology has flattened the globe, making it possible for anyone with a laptop and a Wi-Fi connection to have access to the world’s most brilliant minds.¹¹ We might summarize the current period as a shift from a bounded bureaucracy in which knowledge was divided into fixed disciplines

to a porous network in which knowledge is fluid and collaborative. A byproduct of this shift is that individuals are finding new ways to organize and form community as well as to teach and learn. We are beginning to call this social learning.

Social learning does not rely on linear knowledge transfer. Rather, it is based on the premise that, as Brown and Adler put it, we “understand content through conversation and grounded interaction around problems or actions.” Twenty-first century social learning goes well beyond traditional modes of participation to include the ways professors show students how to “be” a physicist, for example, as they are learning the content of that field. In the past, students might have spent years accumulating substantive knowledge before they were qualified to join a “community of practice,” but now they are invited in at the outset.¹²

The current generation of students is ready for this form of engagement. They live in a world with few boundaries and compartments, where they multitask and tweet throughout the day and night. Partly because of this open access and wide range of interactions, they want more and better forms of problem-centered, real-world-based, digitally informed learning. Our faculty members want to work with students on projects and programs that welcome new, often interdisciplinary ways to organize knowledge and develop deeper connections between theory and practice. It is exciting to watch the myriad ways that this transformation is taking place in and out of the classroom.

Our students and faculty are not waiting for institutions to act. They are already participating in *knowledge design*, a concept aimed at placing creativity and agility at the heart of learning and scholarship by embracing new learning platforms and recognizing the power of visualization and the remixing of knowledge. Many of our most energized and passionate faculty members and students are involved in knowledge design now, either in small projects or programs or in large-scale institutes or centers. For example, at Swarthmore College a faculty member has used a specific problem faced by a nonprofit group to teach statistics to math-resistant students, and a philosopher and biologist have partnered to teach an introductory environmental course on “nature” in the field rather than in the classroom or lab.

To encourage these exciting possibilities, we will have to develop creative ways to structure old and new forms of faculty work while also making it easier for students to integrate many forms of learning and navigate the curriculum. We will have to reinvent the structures and cultures of education to match the forms of social and participatory learning, teaching, and knowledge creation that will dominate the twenty-first century. We are beginning to support new

models of teaching and learning to help our students innovate, work in teams across many fields, and “design” as well as master ideas, solutions, products, and performances. In short, we are combining the discipline of critical thinking with the more organic processes of creative activity.

One step in this evolving process would be to frame critical thinking as knowledge design. In this reality, students would experience college as an engagement that takes them from the world in which they live, embeds them in communities of practice, and moves them from being consumers of knowledge to being co-creators of knowledge with faculty.

How do we frame and claim the expansion of knowledge design that is already in our midst? An experience at my institution made me keenly aware of these possibilities. Recently, Swarthmore finished a fifteen-month strategic-planning process, an experience that included an audit of globalization activities across the campus. We found, to our surprise, that we have lots of global connections that had never been gathered together, seen, or appreciated as a whole. As we explored what we should be doing globally, we discovered that we were already doing it! In other areas, Swarthmore has enjoyed an incredible expansion of practices in teaching, research, and learning among our faculty, students, staff, and alumni. We found many dots to connect and many emerging trends to support among both old and new ways of creating knowledge and using knowledge to improve the world.

During this process, I shifted my own framework from simply thinking that we are honing the skill of critical thinking to realizing that we are, at least in part, expanding how we understand critical thinking as it relates to the process of designing knowledge. Can we imagine our institutions as design studios—places where knowledge is invented, remixed, and performed? Places where critical and innovative thinking are constantly colliding and blending? Would recognizing our institutions as incubators of knowledge shift the way we think about departments and programs, about requirements and majors? Can we excite the public with the news that although liberal arts schools are few in number, we serve a critical function in a democracy as places that sustain and strengthen knowledge? There is no logical or practical need to assert that we provide the only type of education that does this. Indeed, all types of education, including the type provided by community colleges and research universities, must contribute to this goal. Our claim is not that we are the only ones capable of designing knowledge, but that we do so in a distinct fashion and with great effectiveness.

Even as the design of knowledge changes, we need to maintain key traditions in scholarship, teaching, and learning. Faculty members help students pick fo-

cused areas of study that shape their progress through structured semesters and well-defined academic years. Students attend classes face to face with their fellow students and teachers. They drop by their professors' offices to discuss complex problems. We need to support transformative changes even as we encourage traditional practices. We need to talk about knowledge in ways that are anchored in tradition even as we fuel emerging change.

Cultivating the Moral Individual and the Common Good

The second component of any compelling narrative needs to include a strong claim about residential community. The liberal arts derive uniqueness and strength from the intense coexistence, collision, and even comingling of curricula and extracurricular aspects to create an experience that is about the formation of individuals within community. We who live in these institutions understand that this form of education transforms students through their engagement in the academic enterprise and also in an intense and stimulating life outside the classroom 24/7.

This reality offers an immense opportunity for our students, faculty, and staff—one that very few other institutions can meet. Our country is in desperate need of what the liberal arts can offer. A serious crisis deeply linked to the failure of individuals in democratic communities to find common ground is leading many citizens to lose faith in their leaders, in their democratic institutions, in their communities that are increasingly polarized, and in a long-held sense of the common good. Current practices of democratic community such as tolerance, respect for others, and open debate are becoming anemic and are unable to provide the robust support that a thriving society needs. Just as knowledge must be free to shift to a participatory model, freedom in the social and moral sphere must shift from the unintentional consumer to the intentional community.

As liberal arts colleges become more agile, we must also imagine new models of community life, build their prototypes, and train students to convey them into the future. By offering what I call *intentional community*, we can frame our liberal arts narrative to create new models of engagement for the twenty-first century. Institutions that support intentional community would teach and promote civil discourse, civic virtues, inclusiveness, and a sustainable life together as well as the development of a fuller life for each individual. One outcome for colleges and universities would be to supplant the overarching focus on a consumer model that is so prevalent on campuses today.

At Swarthmore College we have identified three arenas in which to model our own intentional community: expanding our concept of diversity to become a

more inclusive community; shaping our culture as a space of civility and civil discourse across and beyond our own various interest groups and ideologies; and living, as much as possible, as a community that promotes sustainable living both environmentally and fiscally. If the new narrative of education is to find a home in the evolving structures of knowledge design, we have to recognize that our unique opportunity to design a residential experience is critical to our *entire* educational program. In fact, our residential communities are nothing less than a way to offer new models of community for the twenty-first century. Why does this particular kind of residential incubator work so well? How might we claim its full value and go on to imagine it working even more effectively in order to model it in communities around the country and world?

Despite the challenges we all experience, especially in the economic realm, there are emerging trends and creative practices on which to build. Many liberal arts colleges are renewing efforts to engage students in practices of civility. Efforts at diversity are expanding from an exclusive focus only on minority students and are calling upon all students, staff, and faculty to build upon a more diverse population and experiment with inclusive community models. And sustainability is becoming more widely interpreted to include not only environmental protection but also economic efficiency and the cultural practices of new generations of students and staff who support a variety of sustainable practices.

Using Knowledge to Improve the World

It is the unique combination of developing the individual and cultivating the common good that allows residential liberal arts colleges to incubate the future, to show us what is possible, to create trajectories of new ways of being and doing in the world. Yet, as already stated, while these colleges have a special role within higher education, they are certainly not the ultimate or only type of higher education needed. Certain students, given their talents and passion, will flourish in this environment, and others will not.

My argument is that residential liberal arts colleges—as bold experiments in knowledge design and intentional community—have much to contribute to making the world a better place. By developing models of intentional community around some of our most difficult issues, for example, they will advance the common good. Other types of institutions will contribute to individual flourishing and further the common good in other ways.

My argument includes, inevitably, a type of meritocratic stance, since these schools are small and, despite the generous amounts of financial aid provided by

many of them, not always affordable. Over the years, liberal arts colleges have worked hard, and largely succeeded, at becoming more diverse and inclusive not only to extend opportunities to those once excluded but also to provide the most robust residential community for all students. But given the relatively small populations that attend—3 to 6 percent of all students, depending on how one counts—we are limited to graduating a small, diverse group of students despite the great resources invested. These students, of course, have an obligation to use their talents to flourish as individuals and in serving the common good, just as educators have a responsibility to infuse them with a moral understanding of freedom and democracy.

Some might wonder why one would choose this type of education. Does one really wish to rely on a type of incubator for common good as the starting point of a lifelong educational process? Students who will benefit most from this type of education are those who embrace the boundless nature of acquiring and creating knowledge and welcome the challenge of living intentionally. So if this type of education is a fit for a particular student's talents, desires, and character, then it is more than worthwhile. Indeed, for some students it is the *most* fruitful environment for education.

Renewing the Mission of the Residential Liberal Arts College

The task of renewing our devotion to the common good and teaching the art and science of community building is, in my judgment, one of the most critical goals for higher education and one of the hardest to achieve in the years ahead. To achieve this goal, we need to understand that our mission is to support both the development of the self and the development of community. We must invent or reinvent educational practices that embrace virtue and practical wisdom as well as intellect and aesthetics; we must affirm the right of education to set standards for behavior, expectations of values, and commitment to the common good.

We also need to encourage individuals to exercise their freedom to enhance current models of values and community, a charge that will simultaneously foster community and innovation. To become an intentional community, one that portrays a new vision of the beloved community for the United States as well as for the world, we need to demand more of our students, faculty, and staff to make a commitment to life together, and we must set high standards for behavior inside and outside of the classroom.

Ultimately, the future of the residential liberal arts college rests on both its traditions and its relevance to the twenty-first century. Simply put, the relevance

rests on the bold experiment that continually underpins the design of knowledge and life together in intentional community. Liberal arts colleges, in this way, provide a hopeful future, developing the leaders who will aspire to bring all that they have learned about how to think, create, and live into practice throughout their personal, professional, and civic lives.

NOTES

1. The term “distinctively American” is borrowed from the title of the volume *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts College*, ed. Steven Koblik and Stephen R. Graubard (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000). Interestingly, the residential liberal arts college is now being emulated in countries such as Ghana, France, England, and China.

2. Women, slaves, and certain groups of immigrants were not counted as individual citizens at the founding of the country. The principles identified as the foundation of the social charter—critical thinking, the formation of moral and civic character, and using knowledge to improve the world—allowed the ongoing redefinition of freedom, democracy, and the common good. This work continues today.

3. John Dewey, “Creative Democracy: The Task before Us,” in *John Dewey: The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ina Shapiro (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993).

4. William M. Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 168.

5. William Cronon, “Only Connect: The Goals of a Liberal Education,” *American Scholar* 67, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 73–80.

6. See, for instance, Kate Zernike, “Making College ‘Relevant,’” *New York Times*, Jan. 3, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/education/edlife/03/careerism-t.html?pagewanted=1&em.

7. Victor E. Ferrall Jr., *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Debra Humphrey and Anthony Carvavale, “The Economic Value of Liberal Education,” www.aacu.org/leap/documents/LEAP_MakingtheCase_Final.pdf.

8. See, e.g., the study by Peter D. Hart & Associates commissioned by AAC&U, www.aacu.org/leap/businessleaders.cfm.

9. See the Hardwick Day study prepared for the Annapolis Group: <http://collegenews.org/news/2011/liberal-arts-college-graduates-feel-better-prepared-for-lifes-challenges-study-finds.html>.

10. Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), and *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

11. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

12. John Seely Brown and Richard Adler, “Open Education, the Long Trail and Learning,” *Educause*, January/February 2009, 16–32.