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Designing a Liberal Arts Curriculum that Develops the Capacity for Effective Practice

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Abstract

A new agenda has been coalescing for residential liberal arts education in the United States. At its core are various forms of experiential learning that had long been relegated to the margins of institutions in which pure intellectual achievement was largely separated from, and prized above, practical application of knowledge. Recent years have brought growing student interest in opportunities to engage in experiential learning, including community service, internships, student-faculty research partnerships, study abroad, or co-operative education. All types of colleges and universities have been investing in these programs and in curricular modifications intended to begin integrating them into a coherent educational program. With support from several major associations, foundations, and research collaborations, this twenty-first century reframing of the aims of education has included a persistent call for better evaluative data to gauge the extent to which college students are actually meeting learning goals that faculty are being encouraged to specify more fully.

Keywords

Liberal Arts, Effective Practice, Education

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Designing a Liberal Arts Curriculum that Develops the Capacity for Effective Practice

Diana Chapman Walsh and Lee Cuba

A new agenda has been coalescing for residential liberal arts education in the United States. At its core are various forms of experiential learning that had long been relegated to the margins of institutions in which pure intellectual achievement was largely separated from, and prized above, practical application of knowledge. Recent years have brought growing student interest in opportunities to engage in experiential learning, including community service, internships, student-faculty research partnerships, study abroad, or co-operative education. All types of colleges and universities have been investing in these programs and in curricular modifications intended to begin integrating them into a coherent educational program. With support from several major associations, foundations, and research collaborations, this twenty-first century reframing of the aims of education has included a persistent call for better evaluative data to gauge the extent to which college students are actually meeting learning goals that faculty are being encouraged to specify more fully.

If the new agenda is to take root in this era of accountability, then it will have to establish its efficacy. From our own efforts to move Wellesley College toward a more action-oriented liberal education, we are convinced that faculty, in particular, will have to be persuaded that these experiential learning initiatives will enhance their students' learning. While there is no single ideal model for integrating experiential learning into a residential liberal arts college program, there are several questions that faculty will be asking. For example:

Why is it important to offer students these experiences as part of their college education? What institutional goals are being addressed? What coherence, if any, is there among the varieties of experiential opportunities students are being offered? What is the relationship between traditional classroom learning and these experiential learning opportunities? How should the various experiences be sequenced in relation to the student's college "career"? At what points might students most benefit from specific experiential opportunities (such as study abroad)? How do students understand the place of these experiential learning offerings in their college education? Do they share the institution's goals or do they seek them for other reasons?

Thoughtful, sustained assessment of how and what students are learning will be necessary to address questions like these, and to engage faculty seriously in the project. Some faculty will have to be convinced that experiential education "matters," but many already have a sense that it does, just as they "sense" that their own teaching is effective. Assessment efforts that provide faculty a window into their student's lives – into what students are making of their education as a whole – will be of special interest to them. Faculty and students have been absent from most discussions of assessment of student learning, even though they have the greatest stake in the outcome.

This paper will draw from our efforts at Wellesley College to add to a traditional liberal education specific dimensions intended to enable students to translate critical thinking skills into effective action. As social scientists who played activist roles in moving our own institution in these new directions, we will examine what we learned about the challenges of leading such a process, and will extract lessons and questions about some of what it takes to begin moving an institution in this new direction.

In addition, we will review examples in the published literature of colleges and universities that have advanced farther than we were able. We will seek to understand what they have accomplished, and how. We are particularly interested in schools that are making a concerted effort to study the impact of their experiential learning initiatives. How do these innovators make sense of their students' learning trajectories? What evidence do they gather and assess, and from whose perspective? How do they frame their questions? Who gathers what data? With whom do they collaborate to generate comparative information?

We will look for institutions that are making a commitment to think deeply and systematically over a number of years about student learning and student success. This goes beyond the good-faith efforts many are making to assess the quality of courses, curricula and initiatives, to strengthen institutional research capabilities, to collect in-house data and make good use of the increasingly rich comparative survey data available through various consortia. We want to learn from institutions that are ready to make a commitment to create a highly-intentional learning culture, a more robust evidence-based culture of learning, with explicit cycles of improvement in place throughout the organization, starting with disciplines and departments and working up from there. Where, when and how are the results discussed? How do they influence practice? Are there mechanisms in place to re-allocate resources to activities that are demonstrably advancing student learning in its broadest sense?

We are interested, ultimately, in the question of whether institutions of higher learning can be contributing to the development not only of a new "science of learning," but also of a new "science of improvement," with specific building blocks we will endeavor to identify. We will conclude the paper with a discussion of implications for research, and for practice.

Selected Readings

From the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, see www.carnegiefoundation.org and three monographs: William M. Sullivan, Matthew S. Rosin. *A New Agenda for Higher Education: Shaping a Life of the Mind for Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, Josh Corngold. *Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007); and Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens. *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility* (San Francisco:

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From the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Project. See: www.aacu.org/leap and George D. Kuh. *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (AAC&U, 2008); and *College Learning for the New Global Century* (AAC&U, 2007).

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