

Afterword

Toward a Global Liberal Education, in Asia and With the World

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In my Foreword to this volume, I pointed to three over-arching purposes of liberal education that remain constant across time and place: cultivating broad learning, developing the powers of the mind, and fostering ethical and civic or societal responsibility. My intention in this Afterword is to suggest how fresh engagement with the enduring purposes can help us move toward forms of 21st century liberal learning that are genuinely cross-cultural and comprehensively global—an intentional, pluralistic, and contemporary form of preparation for life in interconnected communities and economies, as well as for individual student advancement and flourishing.

Liberal Education and the Liberal Arts Tradition: Exploring the Connections

At the outset, however, I want to spend a little time on definitions, and especially on helping readers see why I use the term “liberal education” rather than “liberal arts” to envision a global and cross-cultural future for liberal learning.

In the US—to describe the terrain I know most directly—the term “liberal arts” is used to cover such a wide variety of subjects that the phrase has become confounding rather than illuminating. For some, as Chap. 1 of this volume implies, the term “liberal arts” refers inclusively to a full array of liberal arts and sciences disciplines: the humanities, social sciences, arts, mathematics and sciences. For others, “liberal arts” is equated with humanities disciplines only, or, sometimes, to the humanities and such humanities-friendly social sciences as anthropology, political science, or gender and ethnic studies. Still others use the term “liberal arts” interchangeably with what Americans call “general education,” meaning the near-universal requirement in U.S. institutions that students must complement their major field with extended studies across the liberal arts and sciences disciplines. (General education in the US. comprises about one third of the curriculum, on average.) And finally, because of the pre-eminence of the residential liberal arts college in the development of the US conception of educational excellence, many Americans imagine that “liberal arts” is something done only in small colleges—

despite the importance of the liberal arts tradition across such world class universities as Harvard, Yale, Chicago, Stanford, and the Universities of Virginia, Wisconsin, Texas and the University of California system.

In Chap. 11, Professors Yonezawa and Nishimura show that understandings of the liberal arts in East Asian countries are even more complex, because different institutions and societies have emphasized some or all of these US conceptions of the liberal arts, while blending them further with indigenous educational concepts such as “culture,” “refinement” or “development of the whole person.”

Each of these conceptions of liberal arts learning points to something very important in this rich and multivalent tradition. But the net result of this multiplicity of concepts is, unhappily, widespread confusion among policy leaders, the public, and especially, the learners. They don’t know what we mean by “liberal arts education,” and the guesses they make frequently lead them to dismiss rather than embrace it.

Responding to this problem, the association I lead has found it helpful to “move beyond” the reigning confusion. During the founding era for US colleges and universities, and even into the early twentieth century, leading educators commonly spoke of “liberal education” rather than “liberal arts” education. Seizing on the root concept of “liber” or free person, US educators viewed “liberal education” as the preferred approach to preparing leaders for freedom and civic responsibility.

Embracing this history, AAC&U has deliberately retrieved that earlier language of “liberal education” in order to position liberal learning, not as a sub-division of the college curriculum—e.g., specific disciplines, or the general education requirements, or “culture” and “refinement,”—but rather as the guiding compass and framework for the *entirety of post-secondary learning*, encompassing liberal arts and sciences and also professional, technological, and career-related subjects.¹

To put it differently, the goals of liberal education apply to, and should be addressed, across all fields of study, and in all forms of postsecondary learning, including fields considered technical or vocational. Liberal learning and technology in particular go hand in hand, as numerous entrepreneurs have avowed and as Fareed Zakaria explains at length in a recent exploration of liberal education (Zakaria 2015, pp. 80–101).

Conversely, I suggest, liberal education should not define itself primarily in terms of the subjects taught, because the content of a liberal education differs from one institution to another, and changes inevitably, as society changes. Professor Tachikawa’s illuminating historical overview in Chap. 2 makes that point definitively. Hebrew and Greek may have been *sine qua non* degree requirements for all college students at Harvard in 1640. Today, they are specialties chosen only by a few.²

¹We also argue that clearly distinguishing between the educational tradition and the institutional type enables liberal arts colleges to better explain their special approach to helping students fully achieve the goals of a liberal education.

²Harvard College was founded originally to prepare a learned ministry for the English colony in Massachusetts Bay.

Liberal education has maintained its societal value over time by being constant about its purposes while also being continually inventive in the way it approaches those purposes, including its conception of required disciplines. We need to keep both these strengths—the unifying sense of purpose, the inventive and adaptive mindset—centrally in view as we as educators think anew about how to relate our practices to the needs of this new era of global interconnection.

Enduring Goals, Adaptive Practices: Liberal Education for an Interconnected World

As outlined above, there have been, across time and place, three crucial goals for a liberal education: (1) providing the broad knowledge—about science, culture, history and society—necessary *in one's time*³ to navigate and contribute in the wider world; (2) developing the powers of the mind for reasoning, judgment and communication,—thereby helping students learn to think deeply and adaptively; and (3) fostering a strong commitment to ethical and societal responsibility. For most of history these goals applied only to a select few, but today, as advanced societies invest heavily in the expansion of their higher education systems, we have a new and unprecedented opportunity to provide these horizon-expanding forms of learning to an ever larger portion of our communities.

While these three goals are constants across time and place, the practices we use to advance them vary notably, as we respond to different circumstances and contexts.

In the early twentieth century, the traditional collegiate focus on broad liberal arts and sciences was significantly amended by the emergence of specializations or majors: deep immersion in the concepts and inquiry methods of specific disciplines. In many nations, specialization trumped broad learning, which was pushed back to pre-collegiate studies. Hong Kong, for example, during its time as a British colony, followed the British model in emphasizing a specific field of study as the focal point for university study, in decisive contrast to the US and Scottish preference for combining *both* broad and specialized learning at the postsecondary level. Today, Hong Kong is incorporating general education into this earlier model, complementing specialized studies with broad learning and extending the length of a degree from three years (the most common European model) to four. But across East and West, there remains intense contestation as to which knowledge is most valuable to acquire at the postsecondary level: broad learning, specialized knowledge, or both.

To my mind, the new emphasis on higher learning across many borders, and the current ferment on how best to organize that learning is an opportunity, not a

³As an historian, I do not mean to imply that liberal learning should teach only contemporary topics. But educators do need to help students see how inheritances from the past shed needed light on issues we confront in the present: contemporary issues, enduring issues.

constraint. I believe we should seize this opportunity to connect the enduring goals of liberal education with new creativity about how to educate our students—and ourselves—as world learners and global citizens, people who recognize and act on, our deep need to learn with and from people whose histories and experiences are profoundly different from our own.

I suggest below how each of the larger purposes of a liberal education can be situated—across general and specialized studies—in a deliberately global, cross-cultural and more integrative approach to college learning.

Broad Learning: Organized to Foster Big Picture and Comparative Knowledge Across Global Boundaries and Borderlands

Around the globe, thoughtful leaders are recognizing that, in a shrinking global community, *all* educated people need broad learning about societies, peoples and traditions other than their own. They need this knowledge both as citizens and for their careers since, today, virtually every form of economic endeavor is affected, directly or indirectly, by global developments. Similarly, in a world fueled by science and technological innovation,—whatever one’s intended career—broad learning should include a hands-on exploration of how science works and the impact of the digital revolution on every aspect of contemporary life.

The full array of liberal arts and sciences disciplines has become essential, therefore, for developing sophisticated and comparative knowledge about the wider world. Science, technology, cultures, values, religions, historical inheritances, political economies, regional conflicts, gender, race, ethnicity, class and caste—we need all these liberal arts constructs and many more to make sense of what is happening both in our own societies and in the ongoing world-wide battles to enlarge or restrict humanity’s shared future. Or, to put it differently, the liberal arts and sciences disciplines now provide “must-have knowledge” for global and cross-cultural acumen. While students may major in career, professional and technical fields, they all need broad learning to help them understand the social contexts in which they expect to do their work. And, as many chapters in this volume attest, students also need liberal arts and sciences learning to fulfill their civic responsibilities.

Currently, each society, and the different colleges or universities within each society, determines independently how to foster global acumen, intercultural competence, scientific and technological literacy, and the ability to function successfully in this dynamic and increasingly turbulent global ecology. But the time is right, I believe, as we move deeper into this turbulent global era, for educators to work together, across borders, on richer and fuller approaches to this core goal of fostering broad liberal learning for a complex and interconnected world.

The new Yale-NUS College at the National University of Singapore offers one model for this kind of exploration: a cross-cultural and East/West multi-level core curriculum that draws deeply on Asian cultural legacies as well as Western culture, and guides students through a cross-cultural consideration of their responsibilities to their society, themselves, one another and the professions for which they are preparing. With a highly international student body, the entire Yale-NUS curriculum tries to set a deliberative and integrative context for students' varied cross-cultural explorations, including experiential learning. Faculty and staff provide structured and continuous opportunities for students to reflect with diverse peers on what they are discovering as they come into contact with traditions, experiences, and assumptions very different from what they have previously known. The curriculum is equally intentional and integrative about science study; all students are expected to develop proficiency in the uses of science to explore significant problems.

Obviously, studying in an international university or even in another country is not an option for the majority of students.⁴ But in this era of digital innovation, we can envision many variants on cross-cultural dialogue and experience that would enable multiple institutions to collaborate together to create *ongoing virtual contexts* for cross-cultural liberal learning. In Chap. 13, Professors Jung and Bajiracharya point readers in this direction, showing how digital platforms can support deeper approaches to liberal education outcomes, including dialogue, reflection, and digital literacy itself.

To select just one possibility among many, we might form continuing coalitions of Asian and non-Asian colleges and universities, with faculty and students working together, on-line, in cross-cultural communities, using all the tools and resources of digitally enhanced scholarship, to probe “big questions” across regional and cultural as well as disciplinary perspectives. The questions to be studied might be contemporary—such as health, food, literacy, sustainability, or comparative political economies. The questions might be enduring—such as virtue, community, human dignity, justice, or even “just” pursuits of radical change.

Whatever the questions, the goal for a global and contemporary liberal education would be for many people and traditions to come together, not just to acquire broad knowledge and experience, but to explore the significance of disparate traditions and conceptions of value, for individuals and for societies seeking a fuller future. Such study would bring the liberal arts and sciences together, exploring both the uses of science to solve problems and the humanistic questions that invariably emerge as science and technology advance.

⁴That said, most developed countries provide abundant opportunity for students to explore diverse and often marginalized communities in their own society. The challenge is to find ways of fostering mutual exploration and learning rather than voyeuristic investigations of “the other.”

The Powers of the Mind: Re-conceived as Teaching Students to Think Deeply and Work Collaboratively Across Cultural Boundaries and Differences

Arguably, developing the powers of the mind is one of the most central goals for any educational system, and the particular strength of the liberal education tradition. Moreover, as employers contend with increasing urgency, in a knowledge economy, such capacities as critical thinking, communication, and collaborative problem-solving are critical job skills, and in the long run, even more important than students' content knowledge.

However, as Prof. Yang and other authors in this book rightly point out, the West has no monopoly on cultivating such powers as reasoned analysis, constructive argument, collaborative problem-solving, and the capacity to take difficult difference into account. Other traditions bring their own strengths to this dialogue. Writing in the midst of a particularly pugnacious political season in the US, I confess that I found it appealing to be reminded, in this volume, that Asian cultures often prize respect over rudeness and civil relations over dogmatic assertions of opinion. But to the larger point: in a fast changing world, every society needs to foster high levels of capacity to think critically about new developments, new information, and new possibilities. Every society also needs to cultivate high levels of competence so that people can work together to tackle and solve significant problems, in the face of diverse perspectives, priorities, and power structures.

All these reflections underscore the point that learning to think is a collective, not just a solitary, process of formation. Much as we may prize the value of independent thought, both the workplace and civil society also require us to think and devise courses of action through collaboration with many others.

To be sure, each collegiate institution invariably approaches the project of teaching critical inquiry in ways that make sense given its mission, its students, its context, and its resources. That said, in a world of shrinking borders and expanding interconnections, teaching students how to think together—across often difficult differences—is an essential new frontier for a globally savvy liberal education.

All cultures have something to contribute to the project of teaching students to think deeply and collaboratively. No educational tradition can assume that it has already reached sufficiency on these issues.

Liberal education in the US certainly prizes critical thinking and analytical inquiry, and several of the authors in this volume express a desire to replace rote learning and memorization at the university level with the “liberal arts” emphasis on inquiry, dialogue, analysis and innovation. But even as we agree that critical inquiry is central to liberal education, the reality is that many college graduates in the US

finish their studies with weak rather than strong capacities for critical inquiry, analysis, or collaborative problem solving.⁵

So there is ample room for exploring together, across cultural boundaries, how to teach students the skills of reasoned inquiry and collaborative problem-solving. Moreover, with a digital revolution enveloping all our societies, there is both new opportunity and new urgency to situate the inquiry and deliberative practices that characterize a strong liberal education in this new digital ecology.

While I certainly agree with the authors in this volume that the liberal arts and sciences provide essential contexts for fostering reasoned, analytical and creative thinking, I also want to stress that these and other powers of the mind need to be cultivated across all disciplines, not just in the liberal arts and sciences and certainly not just in general education. The major plays a critical role in helping students develop higher order intellectual and communicative capacities. But the traditional tensions between proponents of broad versus specialized learning have all too often obscured their complementary roles in fostering complex thinking and collaborative capacities.

Thinking is always about something, and students' specializations—whatever the subject—typically provide the fullest opportunity for students to develop advanced competence in applying particular analytical and inquiry strategies to the topics that their chosen field explores. Optimally, as AAC&U has recommended repeatedly for a quarter century, the specialization should also provide guided practice in “connecting” the field’s own interpretations with those of other communities—other disciplinary communities as well as those “real-world” communities in which students expect to take their place (AAC 1991; AAC&U 2008, 2015).

The point is that every specialization can and should be organized as a guided learning pathway that is well designed to help students develop—whatever the subject matter—whatever one’s intended career—deep competence in analytical inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving, including, as emphasized above, problem-solving with diverse partners. Given the rapid advance of globalization, every specialization also should devote time to helping students examine issues, problems or creative work in a cross-cultural and global systems context.

In other words, where specialization has often been seen as the enemy of broad liberal learning, my argument is that broad and specialized learning can and should work together, both to cultivate capacities for reasoned judgments and to ensure that students are learning to connect their particular interests and professions with that larger science and society context that the liberal arts and sciences help illuminate.

⁵The literature on US students’ underachievement on liberal education fundamentals is extensive. AAC&U has recently added to it with the release of new evidence of uneven achievement on critical thinking, communication skills, and quantitative reasoning. See <http://www.aacu.org/whats-new/multi-state-collaboration-releases-initial-findings-student-achievement-key-learning>.

And, in this era of interconnections, global and cross-cultural topics provide natural sites for helping students foster integrative thinking—the capacity to examine an issue from multiple points of view, and to take diverse insights and perspectives fully into account in reaching their own positions.

Ethical and Civic Responsibility Enacted as Purposeful Learning: Across General Education and Major Fields and for a World Shared in Common

The third enduring goal for a strong liberal education is, of course, educating people who will act ethically and keep centrally in mind their responsibilities to others and to the public good. This emphasis is one of the major strengths of liberal education, and a dimension that is sparking new creativity in all kinds of institutions, large and small, two-year and four-year, famous and not. As the world “goes global,” the civic and ethical dimensions of liberal learning may also be the richest frontier for a world-wide Renaissance in global liberal education. Where once civic and ethical learning encompassed one’s own society, and perhaps even just one’s own group or religious community, today we know that the future of every society depends significantly on how well we can learn to work together on critical global challenges—from security to sustainability—that no society can solve alone.

Several case studies in this volume offer a wealth of insight into the different ways that liberal arts educators around the globe already are working to prepare and inspire a new generation of global and public-spirited citizens. Just as with cultivating the powers of the mind, fostering ethical and societal or civic responsibility needs to be the shared project of both general education, where that is a component of the curriculum, and also of students’ specializations, whatever their specialization may be. General education is an important locus for civic inquiry and cross-cultural explorations, especially where general education includes studies across the multiple years of college. But general education should not be the only part of the curriculum where students explore and prepare for their roles as ethical citizens.

Too often, as students progress in their majors, questions about the public good or ethical dilemmas may be addressed only occasionally or not at all. When general education emphasizes public and ethical questions, but majors ignore them, what is the student likely to conclude from this disconnect?

Or, as one civil engineer said to me about his undergraduate studies: “My university spent a lot of time teaching me how to ensure that a building or bridge would stand the tests of time and use. But it never occurred to the faculty to take me out to meet the citizen boards that get to decide whether they even want that building or bridge. I learned a lot about technology and not nearly enough about how decisions actually get made in the community.”⁶

⁶This is my paraphrase of the graduate’s intended point.

This particular story has much wider application. Every field of endeavor presents practitioners with ethical choices and decisions to make about what will contribute to public well-being or the greater good. In societies still characterized by social stratification, every field of endeavor faces questions about who is included, who is heard, and who has meaningful access to influence and power. Whether students major in biology or business, engineering or literature, every field of study needs to provide graduates with rich, recurring and well-guided opportunities to explore civic, ethical and diversity issues—local and global—that graduates will surely face, as they move into their careers and take their place in their communities.

Preparing graduates to function knowledgeably, thoughtfully, collaboratively, and responsibly in a diverse, complex and turbulent global landscape is the new frontier for liberal education. This should be our goal for every collegiate institution, and for all forms of postsecondary study.

Institutions that teach only the arts and sciences disciplines may indeed be in decline in the US, as the introduction to this volume notes. But there are many powerful ways to address the broad and enduring purposes of a liberal and liberating education across all fields of study, and especially in new connections between general studies in the arts and sciences and students' specific explorations through their chosen specializations. Rich knowledge about science and society; the powers of the mind; and ethical and civic responsibility. These forms of learning can—and must—become our shared priorities for all fields of postsecondary study and for all institutions that pledge to prepare graduates for success in a complex world.

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Index

A

Academic harassment, 169
Academic mobbing, 168
Academic reforms, 169
Academic Travel, 145
Access, 162
Active learning, 66
Advisor Assistants, 69
Amsterdam University College, 115
Annapolis Group, 4
Aptitude Test for Liberal Arts and Science (ATLAS), 55
Aristotelian logic, 14
Artes Liberales, 126
Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), 2, 126

B

The Ballad of East and West, 84
Big data, 120
Bilingualism, 55, 58, 182
Blended learning, 156
Bologna process, 4
British model, 81
Buddy program, 143

C

Capstone courses, 103
Career support, 134
21st century knowledge economy, 113
21st century skills, 114, 119
Challenging ideas, 72
Character building, 42, 49, 185
China, 5, 127
Chinese Confucian classics, 79
Chinese culture, 79
Chinese higher education, 75

Chinese revolution, 132
Christian, 129
Christianity, 53, 184
Citizenship, 49, 54, 134
Civic responsibility, 82
Collaboration, 4
Collaborative research, 188
Collegiality, 176
Colonization, 129
Commodification, 94
Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), 141
Communication, 118, 181
Community-building, 105
Competition, 60
Competitive, 187
Competitiveness, 61
Comprehensive research universities, 134
Conceptual framework, 9
Confucian classics, 182
Confucianism, 30, 75, 125
Confucius Institutes, 80
Consumer, 61
Contemporary Civilization, 20
Core curriculum, 88
Course design, 186
Coursera, 154
Creativity, 181
Credit exchange programs, 141
Critical thinking, 5, 54, 55, 66, 82, 99, 181
Critical thinking Assessment Test (CAT), 69
Critical Thinking Survey, 69
Cross-cultural understanding, 49
Cultural Revolution, 132
Curricular construction, 146
Curricular issues, 186
Curriculum, 184

D

- Decision making, 82
- Deeper learning, 10
- Democracy, 53, 134
- Democratic citizen, 61
- Democratic society, 61
- Democratization, 52, 131
- Dialogue, 55, 160
- Digital literacy, 119, 161
- Digital technologies, 151
- Discipline-based education, 54
- Diversity, 8, 59, 103, 116

E

- East Asia, 27, 165, 179
- Educational excellence, 180
- edX, 154
- Ehwa Womans University, 40
- E-learning, 154
- E-learning readiness, 155
- Elites, 2
- Emphasis on English, 141
- Employee assistance programs, 168
- Employee well-being, 167
- English as a medium of instruction, 135
- English for Liberal Arts, 56
- English language, 133
- English language schools, 130
- E-portfolios, 69
- Equity, 162
- Ethnic-minority students, 167
- Excellence, 8, 60
- Experiential learning, 5
- Experimental College, 20
- Extracurricular activities, 180

F

- Faculty development, 168
- Faculty stress, 169
- Faculty vitality, 168
- Faculty well-being, 11, 165, 168
- Fellowship, 53
- Financial constraints, 57
- First-year seminars, 101
- Five classics, 75
- Five Colleges consortium, 4
- FLE Curricula, 140
- FLE policies, 140
- Flexibility, 146, 181
- Foreign language education (FLE), 137
- Fudan College, 78
- Funding, 71
- Fudan University, 75

G

- Game-based learning, 151
- Gasset, Jose Ortega y, 13
- General Education, 52, 54, 77, 87, 126, 182
- General education center, 91
- General education curriculum, 82
- General education reform, 90
- Generic knowledge, 132
- Global citizenship, 123
- Global education, 105
- Global Engagement and Mobilization (GEM), 46
- Global Entrepreneurship Training (GET), 47
- Globalization, 31, 45, 56, 121, 166, 167, 182
- Global Liberal Arts Alliance (GLAA), 4, 57
- Global perspective, 116
- Global thinking, 49
- Globalized 21st century, 114
- Globalized economy, 132
- Good citizens, 64
- Governance, 184
- Great books, 20
- Great Lakes Colleges Association, 4
- Great learning, 5
- Gymnasium, 129

H

- Handong Honor Code, 43
- Healthy workplace, 167
- Hebrew, 16
- High-context, 156
- High context cultures, 7
- High impact, 188
- High impact practices, 99
- Higher education institutions (HEIs), 166, 181
- Higher schools, 129
- Hong Kong, 75, 126, 132
- Humanities, 2, 126
- Humanizing science, 21

I

- Identity crisis, 58
- Imperial Examination, 182
- Imperial Examination System, 127
- Implications, 122
- Improve the world, 100
- Indigenous knowledge, 27
- Information and communications technology (ICT), 43, 57, 143
- Instructional design, 159
- Interaction, 53
- Intercultural communication, 10
- Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), 137

Intercultural communicative resources, 147
Intercultural competencies, 135
Interculturalism, 123
Interculturality, 138
Interdisciplinary, 5, 81
Interdisciplinary approaches, 187
International citizens, 63, 65
International curriculum, 116
International education, 58, 79
International focus of the curriculum, 117
International internships, 145
International learning experiences, 82
International liberal arts programs, 133
International outlooks, 52
International programs, 144
International Service Learning Programs, 145
International students, 167
Internationality, 60
Internationalization, 7, 64, 165, 182
Internationalization of higher education, 56
Internationally competitive and sustainable, 1
Internships, 102
Issues, 184

J

Japan, 5, 126
Japanese MEXT, 169

K

Knowledge economy, 61
Knowledge society, 31, 132
Korea, 5, 132

L

Language immersion houses, 143
Language residents, 143
Language tables, 142
Language teaching consortia, 146
Language tutoring, 142
Leadership, 72, 100
Learner support, 147
Learning Management Systems (LMSs), 152
Learning objectives, 68
Liberal arts, 113
Liberal arts and science, 116
Liberal arts colleges, 1, 19, 99
Liberal arts colleges and programs, 179
Liberal Arts Consortium for Online Learning (LACOL), 153
Liberal arts core curriculum, 79
Liberal arts curriculum, 68
Liberal arts education, 1, 27, 41, 75, 96, 99, 125, 165, 179
Liberal arts institutions, 1, 180

Liberal Arts Learning Aptitude (LALA), 55
Lifelong learning, 152, 190
Lingnan University, 75
Linguistic imperialism, 148
Living and learning, 53
Living together, 53

M

Mainland China, 75
Market incentives, 134
Massive open online courses (MOOCs), 95, 153
Mathematical natural philosophy, 15
Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 64
M-learning, 154
Mobile learning, 151
Model of scholarship, 189
Moodle LMS, 57
Moral and civil character, 6, 100
Multichannel learning, 147
Multicultural, 56

N

National Taiwan University, 87
Needs-Based, 70
Network, 72

O

Off-campus studies, 141
Office of service learning, 82
Online courses, 153
Online foreign learning tools, 144
Online learning, 151
Open CourseWare (OCW), 57, 95, 157
Open educational resources (OER), 157

P

Participation, 53
Partnerships, 49, 82
Pax Americana, 126
Pedagogy, 7
Physical well-being, 166
Pluriculturalism, 138
Practicality, 70
Problem-based learning, 54
Problem solving, 55, 82, 188
Professional development, 187
Psychological, 166

Q

Quadrivium, 2
Quality, 162

R

- Reflection, 160
- Reforms, 182
- Renaissance, 2
- Research performance, 58
- Research universities, 3, 183
- Residential campus, 182
- Residential experiences, 6
- Residential life, 82, 184
- Returnees, 70
- The Revival of the Humanities, 18
- Rubric-based, 68

S

- 工-shaped, 42
- Scientific Revolution, 15
- Scientific scholarship, 17
- Self-instructional language acquisition, 143
- Self-instructional language programs, 141
- Self-learning in languages, 144
- Senior thesis, 68
- Sense of community, 6, 169
- Service learning, 82
- Service to the world, 6
- Services, 188
- Seven liberal arts, 13
- Seven liberal arts studies, 2
- Singapore, 132
- Skills, 51
- Skype, 109
- Small-scale, 64
- Social capital, 170
- Social media, 151, 157
- Social networking, 154
- Social presence, 157
- Social support, 176
- South Korea, 127
- Soviet model, 78, 132, 182
- Specialized education, 54, 126, 131
- Specialized knowledge, 51
- Student-centered, 66
- Student-run international events, 144
- Students with disabilities, 167
- Study abroad, 10
- Study-Abroad Programs, 102, 144
- Sungkyunkwan, 39
- Sustainable, 187

T

- Taiwan, 5, 129, 132

- Targeted MOOCs (TOOCs), 161
- Teacher certification, 70
- Teaching and learning, 186
- Teaching loads, 58
- Team-teaching, 66
- Technology, 109
- Technology integration, 11
- Trivium, 2
- Tunghai University, 88
- Tutoring, 121

U

- UN Academic Impact (UNAI), 45
- Undergraduate Education, 78
- Undergraduate Research, 102
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 53
- Universalization, 61, 167
- University colleges, 114
- University evaluation, 184
- University Grants Committee, 81
- University rankings, 3, 65
- University Twinning and Networking (UNITWIN), 46
- US model, 181

V

- Videoconferencing, 109, 152
- Vietnam, 128
- Vocational education, 181

W

- Well-being, 58, 135, 165, 187
- Wellness programs, 168
- Well-rounded education, 5
- Western civilization education, 128
- Western models, 27
- Whole person, 39, 190
- Whole person development, 49, 181
- Wiki-based, 151
- William, S. Clark, 129
- Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 4
- World Class Universities, 94
- World Trade Organization (WTO), 56
- World university ranking systems, 60
- World War (WW) II, 51

Y

- Yukichi, Fukuzawa, 64