

From Cloistered to Connected: The Practical Turn in American Liberal Education

By Carol Geary Schneider

Liberal education has been, since the creation of the republic, America's "signature" higher learning curriculum. The founding fathers tied liberal education directly to the future of freedom and the young republic's capacity to sustain a self-governing democracy. In our own time, pundit Thomas Friedman has called liberal learning America's "secret sauce," a key ingredient in Americans' capacity for innovation and creativity (Friedman, 2007).

If we look back across the pre-American roots of this tradition, we can see that there have been three enduring purposes for a liberal education: 1) developing the powers of the mind; 2) cultivating an examined sense of responsibility to self and others; and 3) acquiring empowering knowledge—the kind of knowledge needed for influence and agency in one's own time.

The practices used to achieve these purposes inexorably change, of course. No one today would insist, as the colonial colleges once did, that all students must learn Greek, Hebrew, Logic, Rhetoric, and Metaphysics. But those overarching purposes—powers of the mind, responsibilities to self and others, and empowering knowledge—remain important in every era even as educators' approaches to those purposes are constantly in flux and constantly, often fiercely, debated.

In the *Change Magazine* era, approaches to each of these goals have evolved once again, in ways designed to prepare *all* students for a world of diversity, interconnection, and fast-accelerating economic and social change. I summarize below what I see as the most important transformations in the reach and intended learning outcomes of a contemporary liberal education. Taken together, these new developments reflect an effort to make the most powerful forms of U.S. learning inclusive rather than exclusive.



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BUT FIRST, LET'S CUT THROUGH THE CONFUSION OF "LIBERAL ARTS" VS "LIBERAL EDUCATION"

Before diving into the new directions in liberal education, however, we need to set some clarifying context. When you, the reader, saw the title of this article, you may have assumed that it addresses changes in the liberal arts and sciences disciplines and curricula exclusively. Or you may have translated "liberal education" as "general education." Or as yet another review of the perennial worries about "liberal arts colleges."

To the contrary, the analysis set forth below applies to all fields of college study and all degree-granting postsecondary institutions, including technical schools and community colleges. The core idea is that all students, not just some students, need and deserve the advantages of a horizon-expanding liberal education and therefore, the goals of liberal learning can and should be fostered across the entire educational experience and not just in a subset of college disciplines called "liberal arts" or "general education."

Notably, the new directions in liberal education described below draw directly from the strengths of career and preprofessional fields, blending "hands-on" and applied learning experiences into the "liberal arts" and career fields alike. Where advocates once urged students to embrace college as an opportunity for disinterested immersion in the "world of ideas," now proponents (including this author) are working vigorously to teach students how to *apply* their liberal learning—in their careers, in civic life, and in their own lives.

The "practical turn" headlined in this article can be found at every kind of institution, from a research flagship, like the University of Georgia, where "experiential learning" is now a graduation requirement; to the entire SUNY system, which is currently working to provide "applied learning" to students in all fields of study, at two- and four-year institutions alike; to my own alma mater, Mount Holyoke College, where every student receives support to complete at least one internship or a mentored research project.

The result, as I propose below, is the emergence of a "can-do" mindset for liberal education. In that new mindset, "big picture thinking" and inquiry learning are fundamentals—for all fields of study, not just selected disciplines. But so too is "learning by doing," whether the "doing" is undergraduate research, some version of experiential learning, and/or students' rich learning from their paid work.

SO WHY DO WE PERSIST IN (MENTALLY) RESTRICTING LIBERAL LEARNING TO THE "LIBERAL ARTS" ONLY?

Since its founding in 1915, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has positioned itself as the "voice" for liberal learning. (Until 1995, the organization was called the Association of American Colleges, or AAC.) So, it was a significant development when *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, AAC's 1985 landmark "call to action" on educational reform, declared that the aims of a quality liberal education could and should be fostered across all fields of study. The AAC&U Board of Directors made the

Integrity argument an official position in 1998, stating firmly and succinctly that "Liberal learning is not confined to particular fields of study" (Statement on Liberal Learning).

The entire point of AAC&U's influential initiative on Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)—launched in 2005 and still going strong under AAC&U's current president, Lynn Pasquerella—is to "make liberal education inclusive," meaning that the goals for liberal learning apply to all students, all college majors, and all institutions, two-year and four-year alike.

But if you, as a reader, nonetheless automatically translated the term "liberal education" into a restricted set of selected disciplines—the humanities, arts, social sciences, sciences, mathematics—you had the weight of more than a century of earlier liberal arts proponents on your side. Harvard's Charles Eliot, in particular, during his forty years as one of the nation's most influential presidents, helped drive the notion that undergraduate study should focus on the liberal arts and sciences disciplines *exclusively*. Professional or applied study, if needed, should be deferred to the graduate level (Menand, 2010). Others (including AAC, until the mid-1970s) followed in Eliot's footsteps, and to this day, many proponents of liberal learning equate it only with the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and the arts.

Over time, of course, career-related majors became an increasingly important part of college learning. Eliot's dicta notwithstanding, today seventy percent of all bachelors' degrees are awarded in fields *other* than the liberal arts and sciences. In this context, most institutions (and all the regional accreditors) have actively promoted the establishment of "general education" requirements—a "distribution" of studies in the humanities, arts, social sciences, sciences and mathematics—intended to provide broad learning or "breadth" to complement the "depth" identified with concentration in a major. "Depth" via study in a major was increasingly related to students' career trajectories. Conversely, the broad liberal arts component of college learning was routinely described—for much of the twentieth century—as non-vocational, introducing students to the world of ideas and laying the foundations for continued learning.

The past is always prologue. The unfortunate (and inaccurate) result of nearly a century of vigorous educator effort to draw strict dividing lines between broad liberal learning and vocational preparation is the widespread public and policy conviction—which continues to this day—that the liberal arts are essentially irrelevant to career success.

One of the great proponents of this view was Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago (1929–1951). Hutchins was insistent and enormously influential in persuading the public that liberal education was profoundly antagonistic to the practical, entrepreneurial spirit that characterizes both U.S. society and U.S. students themselves. The Hutchins legacy persisted, long after he himself had been forced from his presidency. Arriving as an administrator at the University of Chicago in 1977, I was told almost immediately by the dean of my division: "We take great pride here in teaching absolutely nothing useful."

Absolutely nothing useful? This was a gutsy assertion even from a citadel of liberal education—and certainly far from true. But the ethos behind it—the goal of cultivating a love of learning for its own sake—provides a useful benchmark against which to track the developments across the *Change Magazine* era. For even as my dean was embracing “use-less” liberal learning, that Ivory Tower mindset he embodied was already coming under severe reinvention pressure from faculty and students alike.

FROM THE IVORY TOWER TO AN ERA OF WIDESPREAD EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

To be clear, many of the faculty and staff leading “reform initiatives” in the *Change Magazine* era did not set out to “re-invent” liberal education. Rather, they were responding to dramatic changes in the needs and backgrounds of the students they were educating and, in order to better prepare these students, sought to reinvent some aspect of undergraduate learning, such as writing, or undergraduate research, or diversity learning.

Nonetheless, the totality of these myriad collective change efforts would result, over time, in a significant redirection of American liberal education. That redirection was crystallized in AAC&U’s 2005 LEAP call to foster liberal learning for all students, across all disciplines, in all institutions (Schneider, 2005; AAC&U, 2007).

The multiple reform efforts that led to this newly inclusive approach to liberal education had many authors and many motives. But in my view, the ultimate catalyst was educators’ deep commitment to their students. From the 1970s on (as many articles in this volume attest), higher education was opening its doors wider than ever before. The academy had begun to admit—indeed, to seek out—whole new groups of students: adult learners, students of color, international and immigrant students, students from low-income families, students who were working full time and attending college part time.

Collectively, faculty, staff and administrators across the U.S. were scrambling to respond to the needs, circumstances, and often the forcefully advanced “demands” of this changing student body. The result was a whole wave of innovative movements designed to help higher education’s recently included learners get the best education possible.

Led almost invariably by scholar/teachers who themselves had once imbibed the “learning for its own sake” approach to liberal education—and in most cases, eliciting intense opposition—these influential reform movements included:

- **New Fields of Study:** Responding directly to the perceived need for societal change, a host of scholar/teachers began to invent new fields of scholarship and teaching: gender studies, racial and ethnic studies, peace and justice studies, urban studies, public policy studies, environmental studies, international and comparative cultural studies, and many more. Typically drawing from many different disciplines, these new fields resisted the concept of learning as an end in itself and

joined forces with career fields in both valuing and emphasizing experiential and applied learning.

- **New Competency and Learning Outcomes Frameworks for the College Degree:** Initially in the service of assessment and more recently as good practice in its own right, almost all institutions and many academic fields have defined the learning outcomes or competencies students should achieve through their studies. Through these learning-outcome and competency-based learning reforms, educators brought into view a high degree of convergence across all fields around intellectual skills like analytic inquiry, diversity competence, ethical reasoning, or communications skills. Where the liberal arts once claimed primacy in fostering students’ intellectual development, now many fields seek to develop these essential capacities in ways relevant to the particular subject matter (Arum, Roksa, and Cook, 2017).
- **High Impact Practices (HIPs):** First advanced as a set of separate curricular and pedagogical improvement movements—e.g., first year experiences, writing-across-the-curriculum, undergraduate research, learning communities, and many more—these previously discrete reform agendas quickly evolved into a collective HIPs juggernaut after national research showed their collective benefits both to increased persistence and to deeper learning (Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2017).
- **College Learning for a Diverse and Globally Engaged Democracy:** In strong reaction against public policies that treat higher education as a “private economic benefit”—with the corollary that students themselves rather than the public should bear the cost—educational leaders and faculty have created a host of twenty-first century designs for a renewal of civic and democratic learning, ranging from requiring diversity and global studies to civic pedagogies like service learning and intergroup dialogue. Many High Impact Practices or HIPs directly relate to this civic renewal, including service learning, diversity and global learning, and collaborative projects with community partners.
- **The Reinvention of General Education:** Pronounced a “disaster area” by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1977, general education has become in the decades since a locus for far-reaching reform efforts, including skills-across-the-curriculum; civic, diversity, and global learning; integrative or thematic pathways built around a topic such as health; and some form of culminating learning.
- **Cornerstone to Capstone or the Redesign of “Breadth and Depth”:** Often in the context of a general education review, educational reform began to center on integrative and vertical designs for college learning. These integrative or “braided” redesigns seek new connections between general and specialized study, and place new emphasis on preparing students to succeed with an advanced, culminating project or integrative ePortfolio. “Breadth and depth” are evolving into “integrated and applied.”

OUT OF ALL THESE INNOVATIONS, A NEW CAN-DO MINDSET FOR AMERICAN LIBERAL EDUCATION

As we all learned from Kuhn long ago, when layers of change accumulate within a given framework or paradigm for practice, the dominant paradigm itself gives way. Collectively, as colleges, community colleges, and universities reorganized their undergraduate programs to better serve their students, the “Ivory Tower” mindset that Eliot and Hutchins had envisioned for liberal and liberal arts education imploded. It was replaced with efforts—still very much in the making—to design purposeful pathways that prepare all students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need both for success in the economy and for their roles as citizens.

Taken together, these educator-led change efforts have led to a far-reaching reframing of each of the broad purposes for liberal learning I described at the outset of this essay: 1) developing the powers of the mind, 2) cultivating an examined sense of responsibility, 3) acquiring empowering knowledge.

Moreover, the inventive spirit that has swept through higher education over the past five decades has added a fourth purpose to a twenty-first century liberal education: 4) the capacity to integrate different facets of one’s learning—skills, knowledge, sense of responsibility—and *apply* that learning, adaptively, to new contexts and real-world problems. Indeed, to my mind, this fourth purpose both signals and enables the shift from an “Ivory Tower” mindset to a distinctively American “can-do” mindset for a contemporary liberal education.

Here, outlined below, are the redefined purposes for a twenty-first century liberal education, fostered across the entire educational experience, from first to final year, and intended to prepare students to grapple successfully with complexity, diversity, societal interconnection, and change:

Developing the Powers of the Mind: Liberal Education Now Emphasizes An Expanded Suite of Intellectual and Practical Skills

Where earlier iterations of liberal education focused primarily on writing, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking, the contemporary emphases include a much-expanded set of intersecting capabilities that are important to employability, civic choices, and further learning. Taken together, the list is formidable, which argues for new connections between K–12 schooling and college to ensure that students have many opportunities to develop these capabilities:

- **Inquiry learning skills:** In the new ecology, students’ content studies are expected to foster critical or analytical inquiry, creative thinking, quantitative reasoning, information and data fluency, engaging diverse perspectives, communication, and developing an evidence-based position.
- **Learning by doing:** The HIPs movement has led to a widespread emphasis on field-based learning of many kinds—work-related, community-based, study either “abroad” or “away,” internships and practicums, and, where relevant, creative projects. Learning by doing

can also involve research projects, both in course-based contexts and in mentored work beyond the classroom.

- **Collaborative problem-solving skills:** Learning by doing is almost never a solo activity. Through their work in the field, students develop proficiency in collaboration and team work, working with diverse partners, systems thinking, reflecting on and learning from hands-on experience, and the capacity to innovate.
- **Agency:** This is an emerging area. But a growing body of research indicates that students’ own sense of self-direction, resilience, and grit are critical components fueling all aspects of student success. Educators are starting to explore the relationship between applied or hands-on learning and students’ development of a sense of agency.

Cultivating an Examined Sense of Responsibility to Self and Others: Liberal Education Now Emphasizes Engaging Difference, Civic Inquiry, and Creating More Just and Inclusive Communities

Where in the sixties and seventies involvement with public questions was often viewed as extra-curricular, virtually all institutions have now developed some version of civic engagement and/or service learning through which students connect their formal studies with issues and communities beyond the classroom. The new priorities include:

- **Learning across difference:** U.S. diversity learning is already required at 73% of postsecondary institutions (Hart Research, 2015a). But in light of current racial, ethnic, and religious tensions, many institutions now are exploring ways to deepen and strengthen students’ capacities to engage difficult differences. Employers see problem-solving with diverse partners as a critical job skill (Hart Research, 2013, 2015b).
- **Ethical reasoning and judgment:** Values questions have always been central to liberal education, but today there is increased emphasis on helping students develop the skills to work through complex ethical dilemmas. Employer interest in this capacity has literally soared since ethical blinders nearly collapsed the global economy, with 75% now regarding ethical learning as an important college outcome (Hart Research, 2013).
- **Civic and global problem-solving:** This is the newest area of civic and global emphasis, and typically involves ongoing partnerships between the educational institution and community-based organizations, whether at home or abroad. Students become part of ongoing efforts, not just to provide “service,” but to help community partners ameliorate systemic problems (e.g., poverty, illiteracy, violence) and advance human well-being.

Acquiring Empowering Knowledge: Educators Increasingly Focus General Education on Examination of Significant Questions, Both Contemporary and Perennial

Most regionally accredited postsecondary institutions remain committed to requiring broad studies in science,

social sciences, humanities and the arts, typically through general education requirements. There is a discernible trend, however, toward adding “integrative” components to general education (Hart Research, 2009; 2015a). Strategies include:

- **Big questions and “grand challenges”:** Increasingly, some fraction of the general education program will focus on unifying themes and questions as a way of bringing a larger sense of purpose to general education. These questions range from the perennial: identity and community; liberty and equality; power and responsibility—to the urgent: environmental sustainability; climate change; food and water challenges; health and social justice; deepening inequalities and how to redress them.
- **Cross-disciplinary learning and thematic pathways:** Big questions and grand challenges typically cut across disciplines. Many institutions are creating thematic general education pathways that focus on a key topic—e.g., health and society—and include science, social science, humanities and arts courses related to the topic. Frequently, these pathways include advanced courses and projects, rather than introductory studies alone. These thematic pathways may be tied directly to students’ majors.

Preparing for the World of Action: Teaching Students to Integrate, Adapt, and Apply Their Learning to New Problems and Real-World Settings

As outlined above, the re-envisioned goals for liberal education each now include a strong orientation to tackling significant questions and exploring solutions to those questions. But many institutions have gone further, making some version of integrative and applied learning a necessary part of the college curriculum. Key trends include:

- **Learning by doing:** (see the description of High Impact Practices or HIPs under “Developing the Powers of the Mind,” above)
- **Culminating experiences and projects:** Students bring their interests, knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility together by working on an advanced project which may take the form of research, a collaborative field-based project, creative work, a supervised practicum or a portfolio showing different aspects of students’ work. Capstone projects are increasingly included in two-year associate degree programs, especially in career fields, as well as in four-year programs.
- **E-Portfolios:** Many institutions see guided reflection on one’s learning as a necessary preparation for the world beyond college. Good practice in e-portfolios routinely includes opportunities for students to reflect, with mentors and peers, or what they have gained from different aspects of their learning and what areas of personal and professional development may need further attention.

TO MAKE EXCELLENCE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE, REDESIGN STUDENTS’ EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

As I put this essay together, I was reminded of a 2002 chart one of my AAC&U colleagues created, which we informally titled the “Also Chart” (AAC&U, 2002). That chart suggested that institutions were typically tacking newer practices—such as HIPs or thematic problem-centered general education programs—onto a pre-existing breadth and depth curriculum. Alas, adding more and more to an old, outdated structure is an invitation to overload, system exhaustion, and frustration.

Now, nearly two decades later, many voices are calling urgently for a redesign of students’ pathways to a college degree. Through a generation of creative experimentation, the “practical turn,” higher education has invented a 21st century framework for liberal education, centered on the value of inquiry-oriented, collaborative, and hands-on learning, both for students and for an innovation-fueled society.

The challenge now is to apply this framework to the invention of new, flexible, integrative and adaptive program pathways—digital, face-to-face, and blended—for students’ college study. “Breadth and depth”—a design for college learning straight from the age of the assembly line—has had its day. Today’s students need “spiraled” or “braided” designs for learning that weave together, from first to final year, big picture and specialized learning; intellectual and practical skills; examined responsibilities to the future of a diverse and globally interconnected democracy; and faculty-guided practice in integrating and applying their learning to meaningful questions and problems.

It is critical that this practical turn in liberal education be provided for all students in an equitable way. The liberal learning described above can and should be fostered across all fields of study, not just in a subdivision of the curriculum such as general education or in selected disciplines only. It must apply to all institutions and especially those that serve underrepresented, first generation, and other “nontraditional” students. To do otherwise is not only ineffective in providing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions society needs, but unjust in failing to provide truly equitable access to powerful learning for all students.

The jury is still out, however, on whether public policy, either at the state or federal level, will in fact summon the wit and the will to reverse the inequities that, to this day, provide a horizon-expanding liberal education for the most privileged, while routinely steering less advantaged students toward narrower forms of training. But as higher education works from within to become more equity-minded, the practical, problem-centered and “hands-on” turns in liberal education provide new guideposts for ensuring an empowering education to all postsecondary learners, and not just to the fortunate.

If the past fifty years have been an era of innovation, the next *Change* era must be a season of far-reaching redesign, equitably, for all students. □

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