

The Chronicle Review

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i30/30b00601.htm>

From the issue dated April 1, 2005

Liberal Education on the Ropes

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Surely "liberal education" is the most used and abused phrase in the rhetoric of higher education. Just as surely it has no universal meaning. The Association of American Colleges and Universities recently launched a 10-year campaign to "champion the value of a liberal education" -- and to "spark public debate" about just what that is. But the concept may be more alive and well in four-year liberal-arts colleges than it is in our great research universities that are setting the agenda for higher education today. Those institutions are my concern: I fear that undergraduate education in the research university is becoming a project in ruins.

Last year we heard of the renewal of interest in liberal education at those institutions when Harvard University announced that it was reforming its "core curriculum." The obvious question that wasn't asked in all the newsprint devoted to Harvard's statement is whether research universities can purport to offer undergraduates a liberal education. Furthermore, the questions that were asked indicate just how contested the meaning of liberal education is at research universities. Should the core curriculum offer common knowledge? Or a way of learning? Should it require set courses, or provide student choice? Focus on big questions, or on specialized exploration in a variety of disciplines?

It seems that we have not traveled very far in defining a liberal education at research universities. Not in the last year. Not, perhaps, in the last 100 years.

Reliable truisms are available. The association of colleges and universities currently defines liberal education as: "a philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. Characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than specific content, liberal education can occur at all types of colleges and universities." While the association's new campaign seeks to unite that philosophy with what it calls "practical education," the elements of the definition that have been at the heart of the most important ambitions of liberal education for the last century are likely to remain -- empowering students, liberating their minds, preparing them for citizenship. In short, a process rather than a substantive orientation.

Through most of the 20th century, liberal education was more or less exclusively identified with the four-year liberal-arts colleges and a handful of elite universities. Both the institutions and its advocates were avowed educational elitists. But times have

changed -- hence the attempt of the association of colleges and universities to universalize liberal education across all types of institutions. But liberal education is being asked to carry more freight than it did a century ago, and it is not clear that it can succeed.

As it has expanded throughout higher education, it has suffered inevitable losses and unresolved tensions. As it spread from what were once primarily church-related colleges, for example, it lost its focus on moral values. But even the surviving emphasis on an orientation that stresses general values has been an uncomfortable fit in the modern research university, which has increasingly stressed the production of scientific knowledge over the transmission of culture.

Many of the attempts to package liberal education in the modern university have centered on "general education." The idea of general education derives from Matthew Arnold, and it was picked up and Americanized in the United States early in the 20th century. Although we seldom recognize the fact, there were actually three streams in American thinking at the time.

The first stream is perhaps one of the oldest, but still continues. It has been the self-conscious rejection of specific courses in favor of a vague notion of enforced diversity of subject matter, to be provided by regular disciplinary departments. Here the pre-eminent example is, alas, my own university, Princeton. Under the leadership of James McCosh in the late 1880s, Princeton developed the "distribution" system that is still all we have to provide structured liberal education at Old Nassau.

At Princeton it was not necessary to offer special courses or designate faculty members to provide the content of liberal education -- just to ensure that students did not concentrate too narrowly by requiring a variety of what McCosh called "obligatory and disciplinary" courses. With the exception of a sequence of humanities courses and a large program of freshman seminars, present-day Princeton still has neither nondepartmental general-education courses nor any structured mechanism for thinking about the broader contours of undergraduate liberal education. We review the program periodically, but we seem always to conclude that McCosh had it right. Well, perhaps.

The most obvious and most highly publicized example of the next stream began at Columbia University as the United States was entering World War I. This was an attempt to ensure that undergraduates in an increasingly scientific university would be broadly educated across the fields of the liberal arts and to integrate their increasingly fragmented selection of courses into some coherent form. (Admittedly, it was also fueled by a felt need to promote Western civilization in the face of German barbarism.) Combining new synthetic courses outside the disciplinary-obsessed department structure with the inculcation of a notion of democratic citizenship, the curriculum was organized around surveys of "Contemporary Civilization." In essence, the Columbia sequence humanized the now-secular university curriculum by broadly historicizing it. As time passed, most other elite institutions did the same.

In the 1930s Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler at the University of Chicago launched an important experiment in this approach. It was complex and somewhat inwardly self-contradictory, but the bottom line was an insistence on the centrality of the Greek classics and other Great Books to undergraduate education, later supplemented by the construction of a "core curriculum" to educate undergraduates across the liberal-arts subjects and to force them to think through and across traditional disciplinary approaches.

In 1945 Harvard, under James Bryant Conant, issued *General Education in a Free Society*, commonly known as the *Harvard Red Book*. I still have my copy, for it was the basis of my undergraduate education at Harvard beginning in 1951, when as a freshman I took a "Natural Sciences" course in the general-education sequence taught by President Conant, a stunning chemistry professor named Leonard Nash, and an obscure assistant professor of physics named Thomas S. Kuhn. I never had a better undergraduate course. The political rationale for the *Red Book* was grander than Columbia's or Chicago's, but the basic principles of general education were not that different, based on sweepingly synthetic historical approaches to classically great ideas. The attempt to give all undergraduates at least a taste of different disciplines is now one of the unchallenged principles of general education.

The third stream, which in some ways has had a more profound influence on our actual educational practices, was that championed by John Dewey and Arthur O. Lovejoy. This effort focused on cognitive development and individual student growth, and its key was the idea of reflective thinking as a goal of liberal education. That concept was institutionalized at Columbia under the leadership of Dewey and at the Johns Hopkins University under Lovejoy. This approach was entirely cognitive, lacking in specific education content. To this day it forms the basis of the stress on process at the heart of approaches to liberal education.

To be sure, there have been many other approaches to liberal education over the years. Until recently, many liberal-arts colleges used both sophisticated distribution systems and a variety of innovative course designs. Many still continue to innovate. As Ernest L. Boyer forcefully noted in *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, first published in 1987, some such colleges have become university wannabes or citadels of preprofessional education. In any case, in most of the major four-year institutions that are educating a larger and larger proportion of undergraduates, the challenge has seemed to be modifying the historical principles of general education in order to bring them up to date.

Harvard, as usual, got the most publicity, first for the creation of its "core curriculum" in the 1970s -- another attempt to problematize and repackage general-education courses in a manner consistent with the epistemology and intellectual progress of the era. This twist on general education dehistoricized it, organizing the curriculum around abstract concepts like "moral reasoning," "quantitative reasoning," or "social analysis."

Last year Harvard seemed to concede the failure of that approach and has begun to consider what I would call "Core Two." According to the dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, William C. Kirby, reporting to the faculty, the aim is to empower students to "grasp the importance and relevance of fields to which they do not themselves owe personal allegiance and in which they have not developed special expertise" so that they may "understand, criticize, and improve our world constructively."

Harvard is adding to its definition of general education a focus on international studies and one on scientific literacy. New "Harvard College Courses" are proposed to supply the new approaches, along with courses already in the curriculum. Freshman seminars are suggested and other small-group learning engagements for the final three years of college. A parallel aim of the new curriculum is to limit the student's concentration (Harvardese for "major"), by changing when undergraduates begin to major in a particular field from freshman year to the middle of the sophomore year (talk about epicycles!), and to limit the requirements for concentrators. The report also suggests that the university facilitate undergraduate research opportunities. Not one of those seems like either a new or very exciting idea.

The Harvard document, when it is completed and put into effect, will predictably be the most discussed document on liberal education over the next few years. I have no doubt that it will, if put into practice in anything like a full-blooded fashion, significantly improve general education at Harvard. But it is a modest, reformist document.

It defines liberal education in an altogether traditional manner, and each of its proposed reforms is mostly familiar. After all, internationalization has been on everyone's mind for some time, and there has not been a moment in the last century during which some group has not lamented that we are not doing a good job of conveying science to the nonscientist. Similarly, freshman seminars are hardly a new idea (I taught one the first year they were offered at Harvard, in 1961), nor is the call for more small-group instruction or for more undergraduate research. Three years is arguably too long for an undergraduate to major in a discipline. Undergraduates already do research and take courses in professional schools (if, perhaps, that has just been harder at Harvard than at comparable institutions). For those of us at other institutions who are long-term observers of liberal education, there does not seem to be a lot to learn from Harvard.

My intention is not to attack any particular definition of liberal education. It is to suggest that we have not traveled far in our definitions over the past 100 years. Until we do, we can do little to fundamentally improve undergraduate education at research universities.

Moreover, whatever the definition, we all face a dilemma. As I've suggested for a number of years, the real problem is that both long-term changes to the social, political, and economic environment for higher education and the recent internal restructuring of the university make it difficult -- if not impossible -- to achieve a satisfactory liberal education for undergraduates. Even if Dean Kirby can persuade his university significantly to increase the number of faculty members to help teach general-education courses (and President John E. Sexton of New York University is making a similar

proposal), what are the odds (a) that Harvard or NYU can afford it, and (b) that they can and will hire the sorts of faculty members competent (and inclined) to be superior undergraduate teachers? Does anyone believe that possible? I do not.

The modern university has been in tension with the liberal-arts college it harbors within its bosom for years. We are at a point in the history of the research university at which, in all likelihood, curriculum reform can no longer plausibly produce what we are looking for, despite the best efforts of admirable administrators like Bill Kirby or John Sexton. That is why I fear that liberal education for undergraduates in the research university, despite the recent hoopla, is in ruins.

There are two ways of thinking about why that is so. The first is the intellectual task of reconceptualizing what the content and curricular mechanisms should be at the beginning of the second century of modern liberal education. The second approach is to consider the structural changes in the modern research university that are relegating undergraduate education to the margins.

I will not attempt more than to gesture at what seem to me the contours of the intellectual problem. The overriding difficulty is the vast expansion of the domains of knowledge from the late 19th century to the early 21st century. After all, the by-now-traditional academic disciplines only took shape from the 1880s to the 1920s. The social sciences, in particular, were very much the original product of that period, and one of the original objectives of general education was to locate the social sciences within the new sociology of knowledge (itself a creation of the first half of the 20th century).

As undergraduates increasingly "majored" in a single discipline, the question was how they could relate what they were learning to the larger intellectual cosmology. That was what Columbia and other elite colleges were addressing. But the intellectual panorama was already changing rapidly. By the 1940s, when Harvard introduced its undergraduate curriculum, atomic physics was most obviously where the action was, but the revolution in cell biology was quietly beginning and, with it, the total transformation of the life sciences. New forms and combinations of knowledge were being institutionalized in the natural sciences along the model that had produced biochemistry in the 1930s. What had begun as a private philanthropic initiative in the 1920s and 1930s was suddenly overwhelmed by the entrance of the federal government following World War II, especially through the mechanisms of the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. There would soon be no such thing as the generally educated scientist, much less the generally scientifically literate undergraduate student. There was simply too much to know because of the range, depth, and quantity of new scientific scholarship, and of the increasing centrality of complex mathematics to scientific understanding.

Change was afoot in the humanities and social sciences as well. Those were more complicated and subtle stories, but the larger outlines seem clear enough. The social sciences became more complex theoretically, more scientific in their methodology, and more wide-ranging in their ambitions. They became less focused on understanding the

problems of building democracy in the United States (as they had begun to do in the 1920s and 1930s), and more interested in fostering both economic and political development abroad, especially in the "underdeveloped" areas of the world. As in every other disciplinary domain, the traditional social-science disciplines splintered, sprouted new lines, and recombined in novel ways.

In the humanities, the focus moved from studies of Europe (especially classical Europe) and America to contemplation of the rest of the world. We discovered world literature, philosophy, history, and music. New subdisciplines developed (the history of everything in the social sciences and humanities, for instance), new languages were studied, new techniques were employed. And the relevance of the humanities to politics became a problem and an opportunity.

For undergraduate education, the center simply could not hold. There were many attempts to identify an essential core of knowledge, and many new attempts will undoubtedly be made. I think them unlikely to succeed given the breadth and complexity of the intellectual content students now confront.

Nor do we seem to have the educational leaders capable of defining new content. Let me say that I do not think the blame should fall on university presidents and deans. It should be assigned to research faculties for whom thoughtful consideration of undergraduate education is simply not on the agenda. They are dominated by scholars committed to disciplinary approaches, who would mostly prefer to teach graduate students and, increasingly, postgrads. The professional schools at least claim to prefer to admit generally educated students, but what about graduate departments? Can we simply presume that the products of American secondary education are already liberally educated? To ask the question is to answer it.

And that brings me to my second concern: the extent to which structural changes in the university, especially the research university, tend to marginalize undergraduate education generally and, more important, make it difficult to theorize and put into effect anything like liberal education. Some of those factors also affect colleges and general universities, but the problem is worst in the research universities. Quite apart from the intellectual transformation I have just described, the most important thing that has changed for higher education is the entirety of the social and political environment in which it is situated.

The most significant shift is from elite to democratic higher education, which began in the 1930s and took off after World War II, heralded by the GI Bill. Since then the numbers of undergraduate students in four-year institutions have expanded exponentially, and student bodies have come to resemble the diversity of the general population of the country. Of course, pluralism requires something less morally prescriptive, less tailored, more diverse, and more practical than the elite higher education of the early-20th century. Notions of democratic higher education originated a century ago, but they took on new urgency and complexity after World War II. That is why Harvard went to such lengths to explore the democratic character of general education in its postwar *Red Book*.

None of us wants to go back to traditional educational elitism. I assume that the "best" institutions these days aspire to meritocratic elitism, leavened by diversity programs aimed at casting a broad net, and compensating for past deficiencies where necessary. However, in all but the most selective institutions, students have a broad range of motivations for "going to college," and many (if not most of them) cannot choose freely to construct their educations. They are older, part time, and financially hard pressed. That does not mean that they are narrowly preprofessional or unreceptive to the need for a liberal education, but that they are obviously very different sorts of candidates for general education than students of my own or earlier generations.

Over time the social and political pressures that shaped the modern research university have shaped the way that undergraduate education is conceptualized. It is at least arguable that the early research universities genuinely thought of themselves as collegiate institutions -- by which I mean a university surrounding an undergraduate college. That notion is still embodied in institutions such as Harvard and Yale University, where the phrase "the college" has some meaning. The term "Harvard graduate" (or "Yale graduate") still means someone who has completed the undergraduate program. But the fuller notion that the liberal arts are the core of the university has eroded badly mainly, I think, in response to the university's attempt to satisfy concrete and immediate pragmatic social demands.

My contention is that we have gone so far down this road in the major universities that we have reversed our priorities and now give precedence to research and graduate and professional training -- in the kind of faculty members we recruit, in the incentives (light or nil teaching loads) we offer them, and even in the teaching we value (graduate over undergraduate students). Our research faculty members have little interest in joining efforts to build core or general-education programs, much less in teaching in them. Moreover, can we be confident that those prized faculty recruits are sufficiently liberally educated to participate in general education? The same is true of our fractionalizing of universities into research centers. Those increasingly become pawns in the faculty recruiting game -- we will finance a research center for you, help you recruit postdocs and graduate students to do the research -- with little room or thought to undergraduate education.

Another problem, though one hard to document and discuss, is the difficulty of financing the humanities and soft social sciences, the fields in which so many undergraduates find their most important liberal-education experiences. We all know that faculty members in those fields teach more, get paid less, and have fewer resources for research than their colleagues in the natural sciences and hard social sciences. They have less leverage in the institution to get what they want, from secretarial services and office space to computers. They are also, on balance, the faculty members most likely to be concerned with undergraduate education, but they are in a weak position to influence decisions within their universities.

Perhaps most important, those who administer our research universities are less and less likely to be well-known teachers, especially collegiate teachers. Presidents have less and

less time to worry about education problems, and even provosts and deans of faculty are incredibly hard pressed to keep the lights on and the laboratories functioning. They themselves seldom teach. Such administrators are often forced to prize efficiency in undergraduate education -- the more bodies in a classroom the better, and cheaper. It may well be that in most American universities the economic realities are such that the administrators have few alternatives.

I think I would know what to do about the plight of liberal education in the modern research university if I were offered the magic wand. We all have lovely theories. But none of us, and no university president, has such power. That makes it all the more important that we be conscious of the nature of the task at hand. I asked my friend Charles S. Maier, a professor of history at Harvard who has been working on its curricular review, about the university's recent proposal. "I do think it's a step in the right direction to bury the Core, which essentially said students should understand how scholars do scholarship. The Gen Ed that you and I took was a far more humanist enterprise. But by the early 1970s, faculties no longer had confidence in Values and thus turned toward Expertise," he told me. "At least we now have a sense that Values -- aesthetic, civic, moral -- are important again, even if we don't have confidence we know which values are important."

I believe he's right. Lest we continue to be mired in incremental reforms, we need to be clearer about the larger function of general education. If we believe that values do have a role in education, then the challenge may be to rehistoricize and rehumanize the underclass curriculum. That does not mean going back to Contemporary Civilization courses or the *Red Book*. It does mean rethinking the content of knowledge appropriate for our contemporary society, and summoning the intellectual courage to embolden students to make qualitative judgments about the materials they are required to engage with in their underclass years.

Of course, that will not be possible unless we are safely beyond the conflicts of the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. That seems to me problematic at the current moment in American history, but perhaps I am too pessimistic.

Even if we are able to open a new discussion about reforming the curriculum, however, we will still fail unless we take seriously the structural constraints on higher education today. At best we have been taking those constraints for granted; at worst, enthusiastically embracing them.

The changing structure of the university is the place we may need to start the discussion. A great deal is at stake for undergraduate education, and for the country. If we believe, as so many of the founders of liberal education did, that the vitality of American democracy depends upon the kind of liberal education undergraduates receive, we need to put the reimagining of liberal education near the top of our agenda for education in our research universities.

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Section: The Chronicle Review

Volume 51, Issue 30, Page B6

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