

## **The Challenges to Liberal Education and St. John's College in the Twenty-First Century**

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The modern world is certainly doing everything it can to make liberal education difficult to obtain. I suppose that it was always so. The pressures of the moment invariably seem so *pressing* that it is hard to remember the Biblical injunction "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." And even harder to keep one's eye on the goal of training one's mind, heart, and soul for the attainment of happiness, which is the ultimate end of liberal education, as the pursuit of happiness is our political birthright.

I wish to examine a few of the rather practical demands upon higher education today and to close with an overarching challenge to liberal education, in the hope that I may turn a largely pessimistic task into an opportunity for all who care about liberal education.

One of the most insistent of these demands is the nearly universal *call for reduction in the cost of education*. To most people, this means a reduction in the price being paid by students and their families. While we would all like to pay less for the things we want and need, this demand fails to recognize that colleges have done a remarkable job of containing costs. In the first place, at our not-for-profit colleges no one actually pays for the full cost of their education, even if they pay the full list price, because the costs are subsidized by government support, endowment income, and gifts from friends, alumni, corporations, and foundations. Second, the inflation-adjusted price of attending college at most independent colleges has, on average, actually remained stable or dropped over the last decade due to generous financial aid programs. This has occurred despite the recent uncertainty of our investment returns, fundraising challenges, and sharp increases in financial aid as a result of the Great Recession. Third, many colleges have cut or frozen staffing and compensation as well in order to reduce costs.

So colleges have, in fact, responded aggressively to the demand to reduce costs, although this fact seems not to be well appreciated by the press, by our political leadership, or by the families of college-bound students, who in increasing numbers are allowing price, more than quality of educational offerings, to shape their choice of college.

**Another demand** that threatens higher education is *the demand for ever more assessment of student learning and assessment of the colleges that provide learning opportunities*. In higher education circles, there is something of a feeding frenzy surrounding the issue of *assessment*. The federal government wants assessments that will allow it to compare colleges and universities that provide "value"; accrediting organizations want assessments of student learning outcomes; state agencies want assessments to prove that tax dollars are being spent efficiently; institutions want internal assessments that they can use to demonstrate success to their own communities.

The main purpose of all this assessment is to determine whether an institution effectively *delivers knowledge* to its students, as though teaching and learning were a transaction, like a commodity exchange. This view of education very much downplays the role of students in their own education. I share the view of Mr. David Levine, in his remarks at this same conference, that no matter how good one's professor, no matter how great the learning material, no one else can learn for you. Learning belongs to the student! If there is anything that is effective at St. John's College, it is learning. This is because the learner is at the center of learning at the College.

Current assessment models, it seems to me, habitually—and almost obsessively—understate the responsibility of the student for his or her own learning, and, what is more consequential, overstate the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers are directed to provide clear written statements of observable learning outcomes; to design courses in which students have the opportunity to achieve those outcomes; to assess whether students achieve those outcomes; and to use the assessments of students to improve the courses so that attainment of the prescribed outcomes is enhanced. The standards do not entirely remove the student as an agent—the course provides the “opportunity,” while the student must “achieve” the outcomes. But the assessment procedures prescribe in advance the outcome for the student; the student can achieve nothing of significance, as far as assessment goes, except what the professor preordains.

This is a mechanical and illiberal exercise. If the student fails to attain the end, is it because the professor has not provided a sufficient opportunity? Or because the student, in his or her freedom, hasn't acted? Or, heaven forbid, because the student has upon reflection rejected the outcome desired by the teacher in favor of another! The assessment procedure accurately measures the effectiveness of the curriculum precisely to the extent that the student's personal freedom is discounted.

True learning is not about having the right answer. So measuring whether students have the right answers is at best incidental to the essential aims of education. True learning is about mastering the art of asking questions and seeking answers, and applying that mastery to your own life. Ultimately, it is about developing the power of self-transformation - or self-formation, as so many of the young are still developing a self to be transformed. This shaping of the self is the single most valuable ability one can have for meeting the demands of the ever-changing world in which we live. Meaningful assessment has to find a way of measuring attainment in these areas rather than those best adapted to the economic metaphor.

The way to judge whether students have attained the sort of freedom that can be acquired by study is simply to demand that they undertake and successfully complete an intellectual investigation on their own. We do this in virtually every piece of writing required of our students in every class at St. John's College. And we do it in our classroom conversations and laboratories as well. The regular practice of undertaking these independent investigations, we hope, will become a habit that our alumni will use as a matter of course throughout their lives. This independence will empower them to meet the challenges of life and work, and it will help them shape lives worth living, arrived at through thoughtful exploration of the question of just what kind of life they want to make for themselves.

On the whole, higher education would do well to repurpose most of the money being spent on assessment. Use it instead to do away with large lecture classes (the very embodiment of information transfer, or education-as-commodity) so that students can have serious discussions with teachers, and teachers can practice the kind of continuous assessment that really matters in helping students to meet the responsibilities of their own learning. But when there *are* lectures, let

them be stimuli for serious conversation, so that the students can appropriate for themselves what belongs to themselves, not the lecturer, as they thoughtfully sift through what they have heard.

**A related demand** that threatens liberal education is the demand for a national college ratings program. The current government plan for improving higher education depends greatly on developing a ratings system to determine which colleges offer “best value.” “Value” will have price and cost as factors in determining the ratings. This sort of ratings system will certainly produce unintended and detrimental consequences for liberal education.

To the extent that the value of an education is measured in monetary terms—by such factors as cost, price, future earnings, and loan indebtedness—it fundamentally mischaracterizes the nature of higher education. The highest learning—the kind that helps you to become the owner of your life—is not a commodity any more than your life is a commodity. To measure the value of an education largely in terms of its price of entry or its economic return is to be complicit in the ongoing cheapening of education.

To the extent that value is *not* measured in economic terms, it will be extremely difficult to find a common standard for determining the value of an education, since students weigh many different factors in choosing a college suited to their individual needs. Ratings of any kind suggest that all students are, or ought to be, looking for the same kind of thing from a college education; it also assumes that colleges are more alike than they actually are. Better instead to find ways of getting as much information as possible about each school to each student and let them make their own ratings—ones that will suit their own individual needs!

Only freely educated citizens freely pursuing their own paths to a life worth living can shape a society that will protect the lives and promote the happiness of us all. This statement ought to be the basis of all public policy in this area. I think it explains the success of the Pell Grant Program, which has resulted in a leveraging of federal dollars to give students from all walks of life a real opportunity to exercise their choices freely within the broad range of accredited schools.

**After discussing these demands, all relating in some way to the commodification of higher education, let me now mention a challenge**—probably the most pressing challenge that we liberal arts colleges face: persuading our institutions, the press, and the public that society desperately needs our kind of education. Here I can say a few encouraging words about how we might, together, begin to turn the tide of opposition to liberal education.

The world seems to be approaching an inflection point in its previously insatiable demand for more and more specialized knowledge. Today it is clamoring not only for intelligence and specific expertise, but also for ingenuity and the ability to connect disparate areas of experience.

Those who do not recognize the liberal arts as the province of ingenuity and interconnection seem to believe that these demands can be met by following the very course that led to uninventiveness and fragmentation in the first place—namely, by pursuing more specialization. “If we just do enough research,” they seem to think, “perhaps we could come up with a checklist, or a training program, or a college curriculum that would deliver the ingenuity and integrated thinking we want.”

This blind spot for anything that does not fit the research paradigm, which has been growing for something like two hundred years now, prevents the world from seeing that the solution already exists, and has existed for millennia. The human faculty that makes ingenuity and interconnection *possible* is imagination. And developing imagination in all its forms is the proper excellence of

the liberal arts. Through repeated encounters with the greatest writings and artworks of the past—in literature, philosophy, mathematics, science, history, ethics, politics, music, painting, sculpture, dance, and so on—we become accustomed to the habits of imagination that enabled our most talented predecessors to conceive boldly, to invent what did not yet exist, to recreate both themselves and the world around them.

To reinvent the world in the face of modern challenges, we need to reinvigorate imagination through liberal education. But the world cannot see this, because liberal education is situated precisely in its blind spot. And most of the current arguments in defense of liberal education ignore this blind spot. We try to persuade those who see no practical benefits in liberal education that it has higher aims—broad learning, development of character, and preparation for citizenship. But these aims are incompatible with the research paradigm, and fall squarely in the world's blind spot. For the intended audience, this rhetoric makes insubstantial noises that seem to come from no one, from nowhere.

We must stop defending liberal education in this way. Indeed, as Hunter Rawlings has recently suggested ([http://hechingerreport.org/content/offense-liberal-arts\\_17299](http://hechingerreport.org/content/offense-liberal-arts_17299)), we should stop defending liberal education altogether. The rhetorical task that faces us is *not* to make the world see something it cannot see, but to point to something in its blind spot so clearly that its existence cannot be denied, even if it is invisible.

Fortunately, liberal artists are good at rhetoric. We know how to hook an audience through its desires and then persuade it to follow. The world wants ingenuity and interconnectedness? Then that is the place to start. Let us create beautiful and aspirational arguments leading from ingenuity and interconnectedness back to imagination and its guardian, liberal education. Let us abandon the defensive posture altogether, and replace it with the confident bearing of a physician who knows the cure. Let us recreate the rhetorical landscape around the world's current desires. Let us devise a new repertory of innovative and attractive tropes that will succeed where the old defensive tropes have failed. Let us invent the positive rhetoric that will help to shrink the world's blind spot, so that it can begin to see liberal education, rather than specialized education, as the answer to its needs.

I have no doubt that we liberal artists can do this. We are the offspring of godlike poets, the heirs to the most persuasive rhetors who ever lived. If we can summon a smattering of their inventiveness, tell our story with a fraction of their ardor, and forge fresh language suited to the dignity of our object, we can wean the world from its addiction to specialization, at the very least in our high schools and early years of college.

But we must do it in concert. The attack on liberal education will not likely be turned back by individual efforts, no matter how ingenious. On the contrary, we must devise and deploy our alternate rhetorical idiom as a coordinated force. We must use that idiom almost to the exclusion of the other, refusing to speak in its terms. With persistence, if our vision is attractive enough, we will crowd out and eventually replace the world's idiom.

What will this rhetoric sound like? It will eschew the economic metaphors that distort the essence of learning and teaching—rejecting terms like “value,” “investment,” “payoff,” “consumer,” “provider,”—and it will invariably and vigorously question the use of such terms, so that the users may begin to suspect they have a blind spot. It will defer the old tropes about breadth, character, and citizenship, at least until we are certain that the blind spot has diminished enough for our listeners to see where those arguments are coming from. And, finally, its central collection of tropes will focus on imagination—imagination as the source of ingenuity and

interconnectedness, imagination as the leader to be followed by specialization, imagination as the priceless treasure protected and transmitted by the liberal arts.

**Let me close** by saying that we proponents of liberal education are, and have been for a long time, implicated in bringing about the very threats that face us.

We do not understand our situation well if we portray it to ourselves as enlightened champions of liberal education facing uncomprehending hordes of venal politicians and careerist parents. The problem is cultural, and we advocates of liberal education are in part responsible for the uncomprehending hordes.

Why do almost all of our politicians come from the ranks of lawyers, businessmen, or professional office-seekers? Because of specialization. What societal institution is most responsible for extreme specialization? Higher education. To the extent that those of us involved in higher education have acquiesced to the historical trend toward ever-increasing specialization and ever-diminishing liberal learning, we are responsible for raising up people who are incapable of seeing beyond the blinders imposed by their specialties. Is it any wonder that such people do not understand liberal education or its importance to the individual and to humanity?

The situation for liberal education will get better when integral citizens from all walks of life take an active part in all the institutions that nourish our democracy.

No one can bring this about but us. So let's get to work.

Thank you.