

I want to begin by thanking Caryn Musil and Carol Schneider and the commitment that AAC&U continues to make as the nation's leading advocacy voice for liberal education. I also want to recognize my colleague and establishing funder for the Bringing Theory to Practice Project, Sally Engelhard Pingree. Sally will have the opportunity to greet you at the beginning of the next session. The BTtoP Project is the co-sponsor of this conference and has structured sessions throughout the next two days to which you are welcome to attend. Of most importance, however, is an expression of gratitude to you—those attending—who have provided over many years, by your intellectual leadership and your practices, some of the best work of liberal education. We are indebted to you, and much of what we have to offer during this conference is a reflection of your work.

This morning, our collective intent is to assist and support you in the consideration of what it means to rethink or reassert the core purposes of liberal education and to join you in focusing on clear means to determine whether and to what extent those purposes are realized. As the initial panelist, I would like to make six observations, adding very brief comments to each.

Observation/Argument 1

There are at least three core purposes of liberal education. Each is fundamental, as is their interrelatedness. The language characterizing each may vary, but the complexity of core purposes has at least these irreducible components.

In the broadest of terms, the classical ideal of education was focused on a public community purpose, namely good citizenship. The humanists added to the goal of education for good citizenship the goal of education for self-fulfillment or realization...both purposes compatible with the enlightenment's objective to link education to discovery and to the gaining of knowledge.

I want to argue that there has been, similarly, a "triad" of interrelated core purposes for liberal education: the epistemic (coming to know, discovery, as well as the development of critical thinking, analytic and synthetic skills, and the advancing of knowledge and understanding); the eudemonic (the fuller realization of the learner, the actualizing of the person's potential—classically to achieve individual well-being and happiness—not pleasure and not devoid of melancholy); and the civic (the understanding that learning puts the learner in relation to what is other, to community and its diversity in the broadest sense, as well as the responsibility that comes from sustaining the community and the civic qualities that make both open inquiry and self-realization possible).

The full purposes determined the original missions of the many colleges and universities that were founded to provide liberal education; and, I believe, they should be at the core of any renewal, or rebirth, of liberal education. Institutions providing a liberal education forged a de facto social contract. For its part, the college or university was expected to contribute to what is known, to teach and discover; it was also established to serve as a positive and reinforcing context for the emotional and moral development of students, and to encourage greater responsibility for the common good. In return, society supported the institution and the conditions of liberty required to sustain open inquiry—as difficult as that often appeared.

Observation/Argument 2

The achievement or realization of each of the core purposes and their relatedness is expressed in outcomes—effects and affects—exhibited in the learning, behavior, dispositions, choices and actions by students. The outcomes can be operationally defined, and metrics can be developed to assess their achievement.

In recent years, much excellent work (particularly the Collegiate Learning Assessment initiatives) has been devoted to the assessment of particular learning outcomes beyond information gain. This work helps to establish whether and how the epistemic purpose of liberal education is being achieved. However, the scope of assessment should not be restricted to a single aspect of liberal education. Attention to each of the core purposes—the epistemic, the eudemonic, and the civic—is necessary to assess the full promise of liberal education. All three core purposes produce outcomes that can be documented and studied.

With support from the Bringing Theory to Practice Project and others, an initiative (the Outcomes Project) is now underway to operationally define a fuller range of outcomes and to develop reliable metrics for determining if institutional efforts to help generate these outcomes succeed in doing so. You are invited to be a part of the emergent consideration of defining the eudemonic (well-being) outcomes that result from engaged and active learning. An early report on the work of those leading the "Outcomes Project" will be featured at the session following this one this morning.

As those who have long worked in support of liberal education, it is not surprising to you, or viewed as beyond the scope of what we do as educators, to think that liberal education could be a necessary part of the development of the habits, resiliency, dispositions, and patterns of choice that are relevant to healthy and productive lives.

Unfortunately, however, for many institutions, in official handbooks and documents, there is testimony given with eloquence and conviction to the importance of students' personal and civic development, but there is offered little or no evidence that students actually achieve the full range of essential outcomes. And only rarely are the institution's resources, including its faculty and professionals, prepared and aligned to accomplish these ends. What is even more regrettable is that the current national debate about accountability has essentially ignored both the personal and the civic aims of a strong liberal education. As educators, as parents, as a society at large, all too many have simply not been willing to hold ourselves, or hold our institutions, responsible for achieving these full purposes or demand and expect such achievement. In fact, all too few institutions have in place, or have given individuals the mandate of determining clearly what could be examined and how to examine the core outcomes of higher education, and if they are being, even partially, achieved.

Observation/Argument 3

Because of their relatedness, an effective means of assisting in bringing about the fuller range of outcomes is found in increasing the expectations held by those participating and in the assurance of (in fact, insistence upon) active, engaged, and developmentally informed learning on our campuses—reinforced by the pedagogies and campus culture that supports and rewards such engagement.

Engaged, active learning emphasizes the open exploration of multiple ways of knowing and the arbitrariness of the boundaries among disciplines. It emphasizes the lasting rewards of previous inquiry and the products of that inquiry. It insists on the development of skills of critical assessment, understanding the importance of subtlety and ambiguity, but seeking clarity and evidence.

Engaged learning can occur in the classroom and beyond. The pedagogical conditions sufficient for engaged and active learning insist that patterns of learning and knowing vary, and that to maximize both teaching and learning requires the use of multiple techniques. It takes seriously the general admonition that “not all teachers are faculty, and not all academically valued learning takes place in the classroom”. Engaged and active learning pedagogies are not devoid of the model of the lecture or the transfer of information—but they are not limited to those models and most effectively incorporate them only as needed.

Engaged, active learning requires recognition of the development of the whole student and the reality of multiple and interconnected elements of the student’s experience. Engaged learning is encouraged within a context—a learning community—that reinforces the gestalt of the multiple aspects of that experience. The consequence of lingering forms of Cartesianism has been to segment and categorize as discreet elements the aspects and sources of student experience. A commitment to crafting models of engaged learning is enhanced, and more likely to succeed, if it is accompanied by suspension of such categorization, and we consider crafting structures and opportunities that reinforce the integration of student life and learning. Practically, this means considering with equal importance with the matters of curriculum and pedagogy such issues as identifying the spaces and times where students gather beyond the classroom. What is encouraged by such spaces and times? Who is available for interaction? What opportunities do students have to apply elements of what they learn to examples beyond the classroom? What models for the application of knowledge do they encounter? And how are they held responsible for applying what they learn in ways that encourage further engagement?

Community-based inquiry and research, collaborative laboratory experiences, or performance studies are ready examples in our own work which involve active, engaged learning by the student. Each extends greater expectations for the student; each pushes the student to connect insights and their application—and each obliges the students to claim greater responsibility for learning and its connection to their individual development and their civic or community lives.

Observation/Argument 4

The failure to actively engage students in learning, or to create a campus culture that supports and rewards such engagement, is at least connected to (perhaps complicit in) the manifestation of chronic and currently acute expressions of disengagement – academic, social and behavioral, and civic.

Student disengagement takes many forms and is particularly apparent in academic contexts -- as when many students avoid rigorous study, or see little value in attending class -- when students submit only uncritical opinion or an initial draft as their best contributions to meaningful involvement -- when professors and students mutually agree to a “if you don’t bother me, I won’t bother you” compact -- and when students and their families define education in terms of degree attainment—the cheaper and faster the better. Other patterns of disengagement are perhaps most visible in student behavior and student culture. National surveys now indicate that over 40 percent of current millennial age students self report episodes of depression sufficient to interrupt their academic work, yet students report only occasional faculty awareness of the crises they, the students, see among fellow students or the pain they themselves endure. Over 35 percent of current students engage in bingeing with alcohol or other drugs with the intent of passing out—emotionally and physically disengaging. And for some observers, students’ civic disengagement is so alarming as to question what and who will be preserving key democratic values in the future.

It was these symptoms that have led many of us to look at whether patterns of disengagement could be affected by our work as educators in realizing the promise of liberal education – and to do so we stepped back to consider an initial hunch leading to the next observation/argument.

Observation/Argument 5

The manifestations of disengagement are symptomatic of what can be seen as “the more fundamental problem” –that of the disintegration (the “Humpty-Dumpty”) of the purposes and outcomes of liberal education. And if it is “the more fundamental problem,” steps toward the re-integration of core purposes may be at least a part of the solution.

What the symptoms suggested is a failure to attend to our fuller core purposes and linked responsibilities to affect the development of the whole person—intellectual, emotive/behavioral, and civic. Many of you, however, are leading the effort to demonstrate that the integration, the reassertion, and the achievement of these all-important aims and their outcomes can and must become the priority of our colleges and universities. And if we are to have reliable indices of quality and achievement at our institutions, we can and must develop reliable means that get at, individually measuring, each of these outcomes and their interrelatedness—and hold ourselves accountable for doing so.

Our institutional reluctance to acknowledge or address the multiple aspects of disengagement suggests a mix of anxiety over liability (or marketing) concerns by the institution, campus peer pressures by the students, a concern of being too busy or “it’s not my job” by faculty, and a

lingering sense among most that we, as individuals and as institutions ought to be, but are not, dealing openly with these problems. What is apparent is that the efforts and resources currently in place on many campuses are offering only partial treatments of symptoms, rather than using their defining strengths of teaching and learning to deal with causes.

As your own campus work, and the research from BTtoP Demonstration Sites attests, even a partial solution to the patterns of disengagement by students, and by institutions, will surely come as a result of at least noticing the linkages among the forms of disengagement and how each of the forms of disengagement can be affected through specific contexts that intentionally expect and deliver student active engagement and learning.

Observation/Argument 6

Research, and the documented evidence from the initiatives taken by some campuses, suggest that the necessary and sufficient conditions that could make possible the re-integration of the core purposes of liberal education can be identified and they can be realized. This is possible even given the magnitude of the challenge, the inertia and the campus culture that resists such re-integration on many campuses, and the attitude and expectations of the public-at-large to consider higher education a service or commodity.

Collectively, engaged learning practices may comprise elements of a solution to the most troubling aspects of student disengagement. But these practices will work best only when colleges and universities themselves both expect and reward greater student and faculty involvement—and when faculty who insist on greater engagement in learning are valued and rewarded within the institution and within the profession.

In addition to the research now available documenting the relationships among liberal education's outcomes, the process a campus can use to address the challenge can make its own contribution. Using the opportunities that already exist (from faculty meetings to parent weekends, from board discussions to town hall meetings), the institution that wants to tackle the problem of disengagement can bring together its multiple constituencies (faculty and students, administrators and boards, researchers and parents, those within the campus, and those in the community beyond the campus)—and simply begin by considering openly and candidly the realities of disengagement on their own campus and their shared, among all of these constituencies, responsibility in both causing and solving them. This is, in fact, just how many of the institutions receiving support from AAC&U and BTtoP have begun. A few on campus thought that they were lone voices. When they used a small grant to convene an interdisciplinary and inter-constituency conversation, they discovered a latent chorus.

The view of liberal education's full purpose recognizes that the call for knowledge is joined with the call for justice (civic engagement) and the call for the individual's realization. We cannot say that our attention to two out of three is enough. Each is a key, a co-core component. Dewey characterized them as the "necessary phases of a developing and growing life". To ignore "the pursuit of justice" or the "realization of the individual learner" would be to ignore the fact that inquiry and knowledge are intimately connected with the affairs of life, both individually and collectively. It would be to ignore the inherent linkage of inquiry to social action as well as its relevance to a healthy and developing self and community.

When joining our campus constituencies and those beyond our campus to encourage the actualization of the full core purposes of liberal education, we are in the messy work of creating contexts and opportunities so that in the words of Benjamin Mays, "learners can choose to liberate themselves" – to free themselves from ignorance, prejudice, and shallowness of judgment - and by so doing amplify the value and utility of education and the necessary conditions of a strengthened democracy. Essential to that messy work of creating contexts for emancipation must be the crafting of contexts in which, when engaged, students can directly encounter what they are trying to understand, enabling them to appreciate the perspective of having their own views and privileges exposed and examined. When we think about basic or core purposes of liberal education we understand our work is to craft contexts that reinforce the integration of learning with the possibility of the realization of the learner, and their being prepared to act, including to challenge, and thereby to bring about the more general – the community or civic good.

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