

# What's Happened to the Major in Liberal Education?

In *Our Underachieving Colleges* (2006), Derek Bok points out that the original aim of requiring undergraduates to do concentrated work in a field was to develop capacities for thinking, problem solving, and “other habits of thought that almost any student could use with profit in later life.” Majoring in a discipline, then, was originally conceived as an essential part of a liberal education. Bok goes on, however, to cite research indicating that many majors as currently designed do not significantly advance the widely acknowledged goals of undergraduate education, and in some cases “are linked to declines in writing . . . and other important aims of a rounded liberal education.”

Over the years, majors have changed and so has our understanding of liberal education. Would the leaders of scholarly disciplines, then, be willing to take a fresh look at the relationship between the

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undergraduate major and liberal education? There was one way to find out: invite applications. That is

what the Teagle Foundation did in 2006. We were amazed by the size (fourteen) and quality (high) of the response to our request for proposals. In the end, we funded the projects of six disciplinary working groups, whose reports are summarized here.

As the projects got underway, we urged the working groups to do two things that were often lacking in similar inquiries: be *empirical* and be *inclusive*. These injunctions have been interpreted in different ways by the various disciplinary groups, but their white papers are all, in varying ways, based on evidence rather than opinion, and the process of analyzing that evidence has not been restricted to professors within the individual fields. The working groups have included colleagues from other disciplines and professions, graduates who have left academia behind, and undergraduates still crafting a liberal education out of the scattered building blocks their college or university calls a curriculum.

So what is to be learned now that the papers are complete? A lot of good news, I think, and a list of things that need to be done.

The good news includes, first, that the “Essential Learning Outcomes” set forth by AAC&U in *College Learning and the New Global Century* (2007) and elsewhere command great respect as a way of thinking about liberal education. These are ambitious goals, such as cognitive capacities including critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, as well as the development of personal values and social responsibility. Many of the working groups in this project accepted them as the gold standard for liberal education and went on to ask how majoring in their departments would help students reach those goals.

Second, those who worked on these white papers included leaders of their professions, eminent scholars, and other widely respected workers in these fields. That these leaders were willing to roll up

their sleeves points to the importance of rethinking the relationship between the major and liberal education. The topic belongs on every departmental agenda, as well as on the programs of professional societies and national organizations.

It's not all good news, however. While AAC&U's exploration of the goals of a genuine and robust liberal education has helped many institutions reformulate their educational mission, departmental goals are still often poorly aligned with those of the college or university. In fact, the situation is even worse than that: while content mastery is often specified in great detail, departments often fail to specify how the requirements of the major contribute to students' intellectual and personal growth. That appears also to be the case at the course level. As the report from the Center for Hellenic Studies points out, of 114 course syllabi in classics, "only one specifically addressed how . . . that course . . . fit within the objectives of the major"—let alone the goals of a liberal education. Comparable figures are not available for other fields, but it seems unlikely they would be much better.

Somewhere between the good news and the bad news falls the shibboleth of assessment. Without prodding from Teagle, many of the groups confronted the question of how to determine how much progress students are making toward the ambitious cognitive and personal goals of a liberal education. That question is now inescapable in higher education. But appropriate answers to it do not emerge with clarity in most of these reports. Is that because some of the desired outcomes, such as critical thinking, are "domain specific" and not amenable to cross-field evaluations such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment? It is more likely, I suspect, that the hard thinking about educationally appropriate forms of assessment that has been going on at the national level is only now beginning to shape departmental thinking about how to do the best educational job possible for all students.

While these reports show that we still have a long way to go, that should not obscure the implication of these white papers: *student engagement and learning can be brought to a much higher level*, if the work of departments is more closely coordinated with the rest of the curriculum.

Where does this work go from here? Most of the leaders of these groups want to follow up with more and wider "conversation," but also with action. There are, I suspect, success stories waiting to happen as these recommendations are applied and tested in departments in various fields and types of institutions around the country.

That may not be enough. If this work is to bear fruit, three deeply rooted parts of academia have to be weeded out. The first is a skewed reward structure that polarizes student learning and faculty research and then awards recognition only to the latter. The second is graduate education. The effective professor in tomorrow's college needs to be a master of more than field content and research methodology. Graduate education has to find better ways to help the next generation of faculty understand how students learn and how they can learn better. Third, the culture within departments has to change so student learning is at the top of the agenda. As these papers show, the time is ripe for doing things right.—W. ROBERT CONNOR is president of the Teagle Foundation

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