"What Must (Not) Change in the Liberal Arts and Sciences?"

AAC&U Annual Meeting

Washington, D.C., January 2014

What **must** be kept in liberal education? (courses or philosophically)

1.

2.

3.

What should be added in liberal education, given changes in our world?

1.

2.

3.

What can be safely (or grudgingly) discarded in liberal education to make room?

1.

2.

3.
THE CICERO SERIES: 2013-2014
Sponsored by the College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Dakota

All sessions are held in MUC #216 from 12:00 – 1:15 p.m.

Everyone is welcome and please feel free to bring in your own lunch.

This year’s Cicero Series is a series of open-ended conversations on the nature and future of liberal education in the academy.

Thursday, October 24, 2013: What should be kept/changed in liberal education?

Friday, November 15, 2013: How does the current focus on innovation, disruption and entrepreneurship in the academy affect liberal education?

Wednesday, February 12, 2014: Is liberal education really threatened by MOOCs?

Friday, March 21, 2014: What steps should be taken in the near future to position liberal education at USD?

Previously Read in the Cicero Series
Derek Bok, Our Underachieving Colleges. Princeton University Press, 2006
James Engell & Anthony Dangerfield, Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money. U of VA Press, 2005
Harry Lewis, Excellence without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?. Public Affairs, 2007
Martha Nussbaum, Not for Profit. Princeton University Press, 2010

Previous Faculty Panels in the Cicero Series
Diversity as a Value in Liberal Education, panel moderated by Dr. Barb Yutzenka, Department of Psychology
The Role of Arts and Sciences in Today’s University, panel moderated by Dr. Judith Sebesta, Department of History

Marcus Tullius Cicero was a noted Roman philosopher, orator, lawyer, and statesman credited with coining the phrase "liberal arts education." The Cicero Series provides a forum for interested participants to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing the liberal arts and sciences at American colleges and universities. The Cicero Series began in 2009.
Softly Fading: The Liberal Arts and Sciences in Higher Education

Matthew C. Moen
University of South Dakota

The foundation of American higher education is being chipped away, not deliberately, but by the cumulative effect of seemingly disconnected events. What is this foundation? It is an education in the liberal arts and sciences, where liberal is understood not in the contemporary political sense of liberal and conservative, but in the classical sense of liberalization of the individual mind from ignorance and superstition.

The precise origin of an education in the liberal arts and sciences is hard to pinpoint, but the Roman orator Cicero is usually credited with coinining the actual phrase “liberal arts” education. Like his better known ancient Greek predecessors (Socrates and Aristotle), Cicero was interested in the search for truth and knowledge, but also in the specific role that education played in creating more enlightened citizens.

As time passed, medieval scholars specified what was needed to be an educated person, identifying a trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and a quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy) as the seven pillars of wisdom.

Because of their intellectual and practical importance, these subjects are still taught as a core element at colleges and universities. Students take general education requirements in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences as part of their broader liberal education.

So what’s the rub? The liberal arts and sciences collectively seem to be slowly fading as the central fixture of American higher education. Enrollments are dropping in the liberal arts and sciences and their stature on campus seems to be eroding. Here are some of the reasons why.

The word liberal has been narrowed to an almost exclusively political phrase, despite its nine more expansive meanings in my Webster’s unabridged dictionary. The term “liberal education” was once a majestic description of the classical education worthy of a free (as opposed to a servile) person, but it now sounds to the general public like a leftist scheme. The word liberal has been hijacked, and the sustained criticism of the academy as a place where left-wing professors indoctrinate their students may make it difficult for regular university officials to explain and proclaim the virtues of liberal education.

The ability of university administrators to press the arguments for liberal education may be diminishing. In earlier times, colleges and universities selected their accomplished teachers and scholars as their deans, vice presidents for academic affairs, and presidents. These people readily articulated the case for liberal education. This may still be true, but increasingly administrators are selected as much or more for their management or fundraising abilities. This isn’t necessarily bad — there are many aspects to running a university where sound business sense is helpful, and many leaders out of the private sector strongly support liberal education. Yet, with more and more top administrators drawn from outside of academic circles, the likelihood increases that they will lack the ability (or the rhetorical skill, or even the interest) of their academic predecessors in boosting the liberal arts and sciences.

Think about the reverse — if educators parachuted into the role of CEO of a Fortune 500 company, they likely would be missing the marketplace language of their employees and stockholders.

A recent book has argued that private sector leaders may be less effective at leading our nation’s major research universities than their academic counterparts. As all types of university leaders scramble to find new resources in the midst of declining state support, former Harvard President Derek Bok worries that they will look more toward vocational programs and marketplace salaries, thus obscuring “the larger message of a true liberal arts education — that there is more to life than making money.”

Program accreditation chips away at most of the unaccredited liberal arts and sciences. Professional schools of business, education, health sciences; and engineering long have brought teams of external reviewers to campus to place a stamp of approval on academic programs. This is fine, necessary, and very helpful as a quality control measure. Yet, it also places the unaccredited programs in the liberal arts and sciences at a competitive disadvantage in hard budget times. Put yourself in the shoes of a university leader. Would you put faculty positions in nursing to keep accreditation and solid relationships with the local hospitals clamoring for qualified nurses, or would you add faculty positions in speech, Italian, and history? Administrators do not relish the public consequences of losing accredited programs, and so resources almost inevitably flow to fix accreditation issues first.

Policy makers have chipped away at the liberal arts and sciences by pushing universities down a path of testing and assessment in the broader spirit of No Child Left Behind for K-12 schools. Their manifesto was the 2006 Spellings Commission Report, which called for sweeping and controversial reforms in higher education accountability. Interestingly, as Phi Beta Kappa has pointed out, the Spellings Commission had literally nothing to say about education in the liberal arts and sciences. It was not even on their radar screen. The major higher education reform effort of the Bush presidency, and many a word about the liberal arts and sciences? Diane Jones, former Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education in the Bush administration, left her position out of frustration with DoEd’s indifference to the liberal arts and sciences.
What started out as a benign or even constructive effort to measure student learning and progress has since mushroomed into a cottage industry. Colleges and universities have hired assessment gurus and armed them with a range of benchmarking tools, such as the Delaware Study, National Survey of Student Engagement, Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, and testing devices such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress. These nationally circulated assessments and tests are frequently helpful, but they are also often commercial products that typically make money for the entities that create them. They are supplemented by campus testing and assessment efforts, and also by groups like EduMerry, Kaplan, and Sylvan Learning, plus all types of self-appointed educational consultants, who have stepped in to make a tidy sum off pervasive testing.

One day I listened to two fellows from a school of education in Missouri who developed a rubric that they sold to universities indicating what content should be taught in college courses, including a course on the U.S. Congress. By that time, I had taught Congress for sixteen years, worked on Capitol Hill, directed a congressional internship program at a research university, and written books about Congress. Hearing their lecture about what content I should teach so their rubric could test it was the day of my epiphany about the rise of a cottage industry.

Notably, the Fins ignore this entire hubbub in their K-12 schools, and still manage the highest student test scores in the world.4 Interesting too is that testing on the most easily testable subjects does not really tell us anything about whether we have instilled in our students a greater appreciation for artistry, ambiguity, tolerance, or civic life. There is certainly much to commend in measuring student progress—we just have to remember that it is overdone when the objective is profit rather than students, and that testing does not touch Cicero’s concerns that education must also foster citizenship.

Declining state support for higher education has ripple effects that harm the liberal arts and sciences. Typically states now provide only limited funding for campus buildings (relying on donations from private donors) and defray only a small portion of the true cost of a college education. To cite one example, less than 20% of the funding for the University of Wisconsin-Madison comes from the state of Wisconsin. That is a lower percentage than enjoyed by some state universities, but better than others. This leads to higher and higher tuition, requiring that students borrow more heavily than ever to pay the escalating cost of higher education. Students and their parents necessarily think more in careerist terms, gradually shifting college more exclusively into job preparation, rather than its original goal of intellectual exploration.

The rapid rise of proprietary institutions and electronic diploma mills also bites liberal education. These have emerged in the last two decades to become now more than one-fifth of all higher education institutions.

My presidential address at the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences noted “how odd it is to have institutions of higher learning motivated less by sharing the value of wisdom, than by the value of shares.”5

I am an unrepentant capitalist, but I still think it odd when I see the NASDAQ stock price refreshed every twenty minutes on the website of for-profit Corinthian Colleges, or when I read about the $67.5 million dollar settlement paid by the University of Phoenix to end a federal lawsuit that they recruited unqualified students into their programs in order to glean a tidy profit from the financial aid those enrolled students bring with them. Perhaps education can be about profit, but it has traditionally been about discovery, wisdom, and the creation of civic virtue. The latest twist in this story is the May 2010 PBS Frontline report that proprietary institutions educate only about 10% of col-
25% of federal student financial aid and represent 44% of students who default within three years of graduation. What should we think of that particular return on investment? The specific problem for the liberal arts and sciences is that the proprietary institutions focus heavily on applied and profitable fields of study, like criminal justice, business, or education. They make little effort to teach world languages, or archeology, or inorganic chemistry, since it is expensive and hard to push students successfully through it. Rather, they cherry-pick large enrollment courses with few instructional costs, where they turn a tidy profit.

Pulling choice and money-making parts of the curriculum out of traditional colleges and universities is lucrative for stockholders, but it undercuts the model of cross-subsidy that allows colleges and universities to offer the more expensive programs that may be in the nation’s interest: fluency in regional Arabic dialects or maybe graduate education in the health and physical sciences, engineering, and mathematics all come to mind. America has thrived in this world for many reasons unrelated to universities, but the intellectual contributions of our research universities are part of our success. They are squarely built on a model of curricular cross-subsidy that is now being undermined.

No grand conspiracy is afoot. The issues are complicated and purposefully overstated at times here to make a point. But a combination of political rhetoric, administrative career trajectories, accreditation, testing, diminishing state support, rising student indebtedness, and multiplying proprietary institutions are taking a collective toll on the academic core of most colleges and universities. The irony in this is that employers eagerly say the skills they value the most—critical thinking, writing, communication, teamwork—are associated with liberal education.8 Ironic too that Chinese are actively importing the reactive American tradition of the liberal educational model, with the hope of breaking out of a sometimes stultifying curriculum.9

Testing, credentialing, and profit have always been somewhat at odds with those aspects of liberal education that refine the views of young people and instill good habits in their hearts. But it just all seems a little bit out of whack right now. Some type of corrective is in order.

Notes
Council of Colleges of Arts & Sciences at a glance...

Founded in 1965

CCAS was founded to provide opportunities for deans of arts and sciences to discuss issues of common concern and to advocate for the intellectual stature and the public understanding of the disciplines of the arts and sciences.

Representing 600 deans of arts and/or sciences and 1000 associate and assistant deans

Governance

CCAS is governed by a Board of Directors, consisting of four officers (president, past president, president-elect, and treasurer) and 12 members serving three-year term appointments.

Executive Office

Host institution: The College of William & Mary
Anne-Marie Mccartan, Executive Director
What is liberal education?

Liberal education has nothing to do with liberal or conservative politics.

Liberal education is the simple idea of a broad and well-rounded course of study in the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and the arts. The overarching goal is to liberate the mind from ignorance and superstition.

CCAS members often speak in terms of the “liberal arts and sciences,” reflecting our special commitment to liberal education in the context of comprehensive Colleges of Arts and Sciences.

I’ve heard the phrases *trivium* and *quadrivium* – what are they?

The medieval western university emphasized a course of study for an educated person that included the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the *quadrivium* (geometry, arithmetic, music, astronomy). These “seven liberal arts,” as they are sometimes called, are still taught centuries later at colleges and universities because of their critical role in the intellectual development of students.

What is its origin?

The roots of liberal education in western civilization are often traced to ancient Greece, where political philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle spoke of the need for citizens to be broadly educated and to pursue truth. As part of this tradition, colleges and universities discover knowledge and advance understanding of the world. We teach students critical thinking, reasoning, qualitative research, and the scientific method, and we advance disciplinary and interdisciplinary understanding. We hope that some of our discoveries will lead to commercial products and patents that improve the human condition.

The Roman jurist Cicero is usually credited with coining the actual phrase “liberal arts” education, which comes from the Latin expression for the best arts (*optimae artes*). Cicero believed that liberally educated people would live more informed and personally fulfilling lives, while also being more engaged citizens. As part of this tradition, colleges and universities educate young people to build personal character. We emphasize civic virtue and political participation, responsibility, moral reasoning, tolerance, community, stewardship, and global citizenship.

Education in the liberal arts and sciences is therefore both a quest for scientific truth and understanding, and an effort to create more informed and virtuous citizens. A detailed scholarly explanation of these two fundamental components of a liberal education may be found in Bruce Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1986).

Is liberal education an old-fashioned idea?

No. Learning a specific trade is the old-fashioned idea because the rapid pace of change in today’s world constantly threatens the job security of people who learn a single vocation. In contrast, education in the liberal arts and sciences provides the skill set for people to learn, adapt, and thrive.

What is the relationship between general education and liberal education?

Most colleges and universities have some core of general education courses that all students are required to take regardless of their academic major. While these phrases are sometimes used interchangeably, it is best to think of general education as an important subset of what it means to be liberally educated in the arts and sciences.

Why is a liberal education particularly important in today’s economy?

Mostly gone are the days of vocation and apprenticeship, or lifetime loyalty to a particular company or a business. Today’s citizen is likely to change employers and even careers many times over the course of a much shorter lifetime. Embedded in liberal education is the ability to think critically, write well, separate fact from fiction, understand diverse perspectives, and arrive at cross-cutting solutions to complex problems. These are the skills that employers consistently say in surveys they value most.
How does liberal education serve the individual person?

- Providing a broad foundation of knowledge that lasts a lifetime.
- Expanding a person's social, cultural, and scientific horizons.
- Instilling analytical and communication skills that serve any career.
- Inspiring intellectual curiosity and life-long learning.
- Providing an appreciation of divergent worldviews.
- Contributing to the development of personal talent and character.
- Preparing a person for graduate or professional training in an arts and sciences discipline, law, or medicine, to name but a few possibilities.

How does liberal education serve our society?

- Providing citizens with fresh perspectives and creative solutions to problems.
- Redoubling a commitment to life's enriching activities, such as literature, language, and arts.
- Instilling a deep appreciation of democratic traditions in a world where tyranny often exists.
- Increasing scientific and mathematical literacy in an era of human history where the pace of scientific understanding is breathtaking.
- Promoting high ethical standards.
- Advancing global awareness and stewardship.

What specific role do Colleges of Arts & Sciences play?

Liberal education can be delivered across different academic structures, but a fairly typical and historical arrangement on campus is a College of Arts and Sciences. Such a college typically delivers most general education courses; houses academic majors in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences; and, provides intellectual leadership for education beyond the technical or purely professional.

Besides CCAS, what national organizations support liberal education?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is strongly committed to education in the liberal arts and sciences, advancing the cause through research, publications, panels, workshops, and conferences.

Phi Beta Kappa (PBK) is the most prestigious undergraduate society devoted to study of the liberal arts and sciences. Started in 1776 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, PBK today consists of 276 chapters at colleges and universities. PBK members include 17 Presidents of the United States, 37 Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, and 151 Nobel Laureates.

What is the role of Arts & Sciences deans?

Deans must be effective advocates of liberal education in the 21st century. Financial pressures on colleges and universities pressure them to suspend lightly enrolled programs, such as Latin. Student indebtedness pushes them toward narrower, professional career paths. Commercialization of higher education has cut into the principle that education is intrinsically valuable, substituting the idea that a diploma is a ticket to a lucrative career. These and other trends have pressured some colleges and universities to chip away at the liberal arts and sciences. Deans with administrative jurisdiction over the humanities, social sciences, and sciences must articulate the values and virtues of liberal education.

Deans are also responsible for helping maintain high academic standards in the academy. They help hire the faculty responsible for delivering the liberal arts and sciences curriculum. They advance the principle of peer-reviewed research in order to maintain the intellectual integrity of discovery. They articulate the many dimensions of an education in the liberal arts and sciences to internal and external audiences. The role of deans is especially critical in this time of tremendous change in the higher education environment.

Contributed by Dr. Matthew C. Moen, CCAS President, 2007-2008
"...arts and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling [a person's] life, lifting it from the spheres of mere physical existence and leading the individual towards freedom."

— ALBERT EINSTEIN