all kinds of art, thought, and knowledge use as a sup-
plement to themselves . . . that every kind of art and
knowledge is compelled to participate in” (from Allan
Bloom’s translation of Plato’s Republic). Astronomy—
today’s meteorology—applied to fewer occurrences
but nonetheless to many vital ones, such as agriculture,
navigation, and war. And dialogic, or philosophical di-
aogue, was the universal methodology to discovering
what was real in any area of knowledge.

The liberal arts, the artes liberales, were first estab-
lished in the European medieval universities in the
eleventh century and consisted of seven areas of liberal
learning: the “trivium” of grammar (reading), rhetoric
(oratory), and logic (reasoning), and the “quadrivium”
of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—arts
philosophy and, instead, emphasized reading the clas-
sical languages of Latin and Greek, with the addition
of some natural philosophy or physics in the second
year, some metaphysics and moral philosophy in the
third year; and some mathematics in the final year. The
goals of the liberal arts curriculum were to discipline
the mind and to form the manners, morality, and piety
of a Christian gentleman. The study of the intricacies
of grammar and of mathematics was considered to be
the best general and foundational training of the mind,
valuable for its own sake and purposefully separated
from any real-world concerns and from professional studies,
like law or medicine, necessary, as Rudolph describes,
for “the full discovery and development of self.”

After the US Civil War, however, the distinctive
American university evolved from the colonial colleges
to address the practical needs of a growing agricultural
and industrial economy; the increasing importance of
research and specialized knowledge in the natural and
emerging practical-oriented social sciences, and the de-
mand for knowledge and skills of potential leaders in the
still-young democratic republic. These forces pres-
sured colleges and universities to make the liberal arts
more practical and relevant. The study of modern lan-
guages, especially English, became valuable for modern
life, and institutions eventually eliminated the entrance
requirement of knowing ancient Greek and Latin. Insti-
tutions created new disciplines—such as the study of
government, history, economics, and psychology—to
prepare students to understand and navigate the future.

Another significant curricular change in the second
half of the nineteenth century that unwittingly had fu-
ture pragmatic consequences was Harvard University
President Charles Eliot’s gradual replacement of the
prescribed liberal arts curriculum with a free elective
system in which, according to Rudolph, students could
study whatever they wanted based on their intellectual
interests, except for a year of freshman rhetoric. Con-
sidering empirical findings in psychology that students
have different intellectual capacities and more real-
ized that the elective system could effectively ad-
dress two longstanding problems with the classical lib-
eral arts curriculum: student motivation to care about
liberal learning, as Rudolph notes, and the re-
curring potential financial crisis of not having enough
student enrollment, as Laurence R. Vesey notes in The
Emergence of the American University. Eliot, however,
still firmly held to the claim that assumption that the val-
ue of undergraduate education was not to be practical
but to foster the enjoyment of learning and knowledge
for its own sake.

In the twentieth century, the philosopher John Dew-
cy appealed to experimental results in psychology to
focus his philosophy of education on the value of prac-
tical and relevant experiences that bring to students’
attention real-world issues, which inherently moti-
-\nve students to study and resolve them. The emphasis
on real-world experiences led to new types of liberal
arts courses and programs, such as American studies,
to understand global and national events like World
War I. Dewey, Frederick writes, believed that these
kinds of practical studies “gave a new dimension to
what for many had been the sterile disciplines of his-
tory and literature. Who are we and why? these new
programs asked.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, the demo-
graphic higher education increasingly included more
Black, Indigenous, and other students of color, as well
as more women, working adults, and international students,
prompting institutions to reconsider the content
and goals of liberal learning, such as how to give more atten-
tion to social and political activism and to inequalities
in all domains of life. At the same time, institutions across
the US began adopting general education (GE) pro-
grams, which at most colleges and universities are now
synonymous with the liberal arts tradition and which
might be viewed as the vestigial remains of the classical
liberal arts curricula. Created to counteract the narrow,
specializing tendency of the academic major through a
program of broad learning, GE programs usually give stu-
dents a menu of course options in the natural sciences,
social sciences, and arts and humanities. Some universities
also have institutional specific GE courses separate from
any specific liberal arts department and represent what
the institution considers to be essential liberal learning.

Now, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, I
believe the best defined and most compelling pragmatic
vision of liberal learning is the American Association
of Colleges and Universities’ framework of Essential
Learning Outcomes, which emphasizes the importance
of experiential and applied learning experiences that present
real-world problems to solve. Nonetheless, like other practical-oriented reforms
before it, AAC&U’s vision of liberal learning has excluded
the educational value of physical movement and the
potential, in the form of competitive sport activity, that
it has for providing meaningful real-world experiential
and integrative liberal learning.