

# Liberal Education

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ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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## MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES

**MOOCs are just a new way of maintaining the status quo, of re-institutionalizing higher education in an era of budget cuts, sky-rocketing tuition, and unemployed college graduates burdened by student debt.**—AARON BADY

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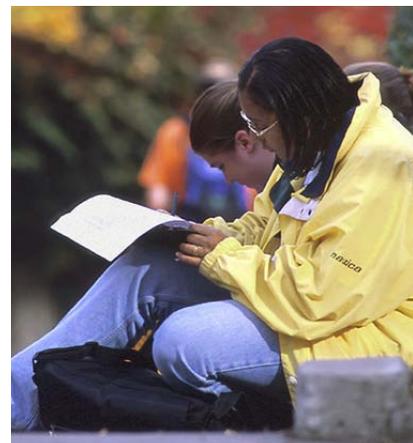
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## If Competency Is the Goal, Then Students' Own Work Is the Key to Reaching It\*

EVEN AS MOOCs—the topic featured in this issue of *Liberal Education*—continue to fascinate, attention has now turned to competency-based learning as well. Indeed, competency approaches have gained added currency from President Obama's call for higher education to accelerate its experimentation with both digital and competency learning as a way to reduce costs. As readers may know, AAC&U is already hard at work on both learning outcomes and competency-based reforms, and in that context, I offer here my own views on what we should expect—and what we should resist—as this particular innovation takes off.

Competency-based learning is hardly new. In the 1970s, I worked in a competency-based “university without walls” program, one of many around the country that the Ford Foundation helped establish to serve working adults. At the time, Alverno College already was celebrated for its pace-setting competency-framed curriculum. By 1980, I myself was leading a FIPSE-funded University of Chicago project to create an entire consortium of colleges and universi-

### P R E S I D E N T ' S M E S S A G E

ties experimenting with ways to foster and demonstrate competency for adult learners. Students

in these early programs developed learning portfolios, connected academic and field-based learning, and completed significant senior projects. They also were helped to integrate the big-picture perspectives of the liberal arts with their career-related studies and aspirations.

Lumina Foundation's current work on the competency-framed Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) is led by a team of scholars, myself included, who know this long history. AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative also has been influenced by these earlier efforts.

Both LEAP and the DQP focus on the kinds of capacities or competencies that long have characterized college-level liberal learning at its best: a big-picture perspective on and knowledge about science, cultures, and societies; studies-in-depth in one or more fields; strong, cross-cutting intellectual skills, such as analytic inquiry, ethical reasoning, communication and information fluency, engaging diverse perspectives and problem solving; civic and ethical learning and engagement. But, echoing the history described above, these reform efforts also value and recommend *applied* learning—students' demonstrated ability to connect their learning with real-world challenges, in their jobs, their communities, and their own lives.

When competency-based programs point us to these important cross-cutting goals for student learning, this movement is indeed, I believe, a potent force for good. It can help traditional and older students alike achieve the kind of education that expands opportunity and builds capacities for lifelong learning. Competency frameworks also provide needed opportunities for faculty to work—together—in mapping competency expectations and related assignments across their educational programs. If students learn what they practice, then faculty should collectively ensure that their programs sufficiently emphasize the needed practices.

Especially today, when so many teaching faculty are “contingent” rather than full-time members of departments and programs, a competency framework can help everyone both understand and take responsibility for ensuring that course work and assignments align with competency goals and expectations. I have seen in my own experience how helpful a competency framework can be both to contingent faculty and to their students. That experience builds

my confidence that competency goals can—and should—provide a much needed educational compass for faculty and students alike.

While competency-based learning certainly can be a force for good, it's also the case that not everything labeled “competency” comes even close to meeting the DQP or LEAP learning outcomes. Narrow training programs do not meet the test; they almost always shortchange both broad learning and civic learning, focusing only on job skills and not on the knowledge graduates need as citizens or for lifelong learning. Educators also need to look with a high degree of skepticism at so-called innovative programs that claim the language of “competency” but, in fact, have simply slapped new labels on certifiably underperforming practices borrowed from traditional forms of higher education.

For example, many “innovative programs” employ what we might call the “once and done” approach to competency. The student takes a course that meets a competency requirement—writing, say, or quantitative reasoning—and the competency is checked off the list. But is the student demonstrably competent? We have only to read the national studies on traditional college seniors’ weak writing and math skills to see how poorly this check-off strategy actually works. Writing, quantitative reasoning, analytic inquiry, and all the other intellectual skills LEAP and the DQP recommend need to be practiced frequently, across the entire educational experience and beyond. With very rare exceptions, students cannot expect to develop and consolidate a complex competency in a single course.

Another faux approach to competency is what we might call the “coverage is enough” strategy in which a student reads course materials and then passes one or two examinations, often consisting of short answer and/or multiple-choice questions. Borrowing this weak practice from traditional courses, many “innovative” programs now tout course-based test scores as evidence that the students are “competent.” But there is a huge disconnect between this approach to teaching and the complex competencies that educators value and the economy rewards. Bloom’s taxonomy of intellectual skills (used by educators for half a century) highlights this disconnect by distinguishing “knowledge” and “comprehension” from capacities such as “analysis,” “synthesis,” and “evaluation.”

Too many of the tests students take in both traditional and innovative programs probe comprehension only. But pretending that “comprehension” is equivalent to “competency” will do nothing to help students develop the complex proficiencies in critical inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, and problem solving that a good education should foster.

The fact is that students learn what they practice. If competency is the goal, then students’ own effortful work on projects, papers, research, creative tasks, and field-based assignments is the key to reaching it.

As innovators claim breakthrough practices, we need to ask whether their programs will help students develop high-level intellectual skills or competencies that can be adapted to new problems and new settings. Are competency goals accompanied by frequent proficiency-development assignments and practices? Do program faculty come together to assess their students’ progress and gains on the key expectations of their program?

Ultimately, we need to evaluate the “transformative” claims made for any specific innovation—whether digital, face-to-face, or blended—against the evidence of student competency that is (or is not) transparently demonstrated in students’ own portfolios of educational accomplishments. The proof of students’ competency development should be found in their actual work. A competency design for an entire program is a good beginning. But students themselves need to show us what they can do with their learning.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

**Students themselves  
need to show us  
what they can do  
with their learning**

*\*An earlier version of this essay was published in The Chronicle of Higher Education on September 30, 2013.*

**Massive Open Online Courses**, or MOOCs, have very quickly become the darling of prominent columnists eager to seize upon and promote the next big thing, of legislators and other policy leaders eager to square the circle by expanding access to education while reducing costs, and of trustees and administrators eager to position their institutions along the cutting edge. Meanwhile, a well-founded skepticism prevails among those closer to the ground—that is, among those more directly involved in the education of students; those involved in the development of new quality frameworks, such as LEAP and the Degree Qualifications Profile; and those involved in efforts to advance educational equity.

As with any application of the “digital revolution” to higher education, it is important to ask pointed questions about the contribution to student learning. Do MOOCs help students achieve the empowering educational outcomes they’ll need to succeed in today’s world, or do they simply represent a faster and cheaper repackaging of bad pedagogy?

In this issue’s lead article, Aaron Bady urges us all to step back and take a hard look at the case for MOOCs as it is being made by some of the most prominent MOOC boosters in order to see whether

## FROM THE EDITOR

these courses really live up to all the hype. Bady effectively punctures the aura of “innovation” surrounding

MOOCs, concluding that “there is almost nothing new about the kind of online education that the word MOOC now describes” and, indeed, that the story of the MOOC “is not that distinct from the longer story of online education.”

The second article takes an equally skeptical look at the suggestion that MOOCs are the answer to the problem of access. Scott Newstok introduces the term “close learning” as an aid to understanding the difference between liberal education and the broadcast lectures and online discussions to which MOOCs promise to give disadvantaged students access. As Newstok uses the term, “close learning” refers to the “personal, human element to liberal education,” to the “millennia-tested practice” of “personalized instruction.” In other words, “close learning” refers to what is sacrificed to the scale, speed, and expediency of the MOOC.

Finally, in the third featured article, Leland Carver and Laura Harrison urge us to consider whether the supposed “transformation” of education being ushered in by MOOCs really comports with the core purposes of education in a democratic society. Although “MOOCs have the potential to democratize higher education,” it is by no means certain that this potential will ever be realized. In fact, as Carver and Harrison warn, a number of developments may already be conspiring against that much hoped-for outcome of the “MOOCs revolution.”—DAVID TRITELLI

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**LEAP Employer-Educator Forum Held in Boston**

On October 28 in Boston, AAC&U brought together educators, employers, policy makers, and civic leaders from the New England region to address the changing nature of work and to chart specific ways that educators and employers can collaborate in order to provide students with the skills and knowledge needed for long-term success in a rapidly changing economy and global community. The forum, titled “Making High-Quality Learning Our Priority as Americans Go to College: A New England Employer-Educator Forum,” featured engaged and hands-on forms of liberal education that have been developed to better prepare students for careers and for lives as engaged citizens and community members. The October event built on AAC&U’s release of a recent national survey of employers, *It Takes More than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success*, which is available online at [www.aacu.org/leap](http://www.aacu.org/leap).

**Convocation Brings Educational Leaders Together Around Sustainability**

Together with Project Kaleidoscope, AAC&U’s center of STEM higher education reform, and in cooperation with the Disciplinary Associations Network for Sustainability and Mobilizing STEM Education for a Sustainable Future, AAC&U held a convocation at the National Academy of Sciences on September 19 and

20. This event, organized as part of the national initiative Sustainability Improves Student Learning, brought together more than sixty educational leaders, practitioners, and stakeholders from a wide array of organizations. The convocation highlighted innovative curricular approaches and explored ways to continue transdisciplinary collaboration within and beyond STEM fields in order to engage students and improve learning outcomes by connecting undergraduate education with pressing global challenges.

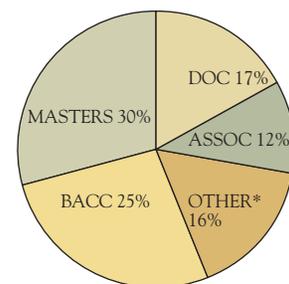
**AAC&U Hosts Forum on Principles and Practices of Integrative Liberal Learning**

On October 5 and 6 in Providence, Rhode Island, the Faculty Leadership for Integrative Liberal Learning: Principles and Practices project convened participants for a forum. Attendees shared innovative examples of integrative learning at their institutions; identified strategies to leverage traditional strengths and advantages of residential liberal arts colleges as well as strategies to explore new pathways to high-quality liberal education; and identified how faculty leaders have initiated, developed, and sustained these integrative practices. The participating campus teams are currently preparing case studies that will illustrate important principles and practices of integrative learning at their institutions.

**Upcoming Meetings**

- January 22–25, 2014  
**AAC&U Annual Meeting: Quality, E-Quality, and Opportunity: How Educational Innovations Will Make—Or Break—America’s Global Future**  
Washington, DC
- February 27–March 1, 2014  
**General Education and Assessment: Disruptions, Innovations, and Opportunities**  
Portland, Oregon
- March 27–29, 2014  
**Diversity, Learning, and Student Success: Policy, Practice, Privilege**  
Chicago, Illinois

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# The MOOC Moment and the End of Reform

AARON BADY

THE MOOC PHENOMENON has happened very quickly, to put it mildly. Last November, the *New York Times* declared 2012 to be “the Year of the MOOC” (Pappano 2012), and while it feels (at least to me) like we’ve been talking about MOOCs for years now, the speed by which the MOOC has become the future of higher education is worth thinking carefully about, both because it’s an important way to frame what is happening and because that speed warps the narrative we are able to tell about what is happening. Coursera, Udacity, and edX are all just over a year old, and while the first two—which are Silicon Valley startups out of Stanford, essentially—have already enrolled millions of students, the nonprofit consortium edX has grown just as prodigiously. Beginning as a partnership between Harvard and MIT, edX now includes a dozen different universities, and that number will surely grow.

The MOOC phenomenon is also a shift in discourse, a shift that’s happened so quickly and so recently that it fills up our mental rear-view mirror. When the word “MOOC” was first coined in 2008, by a set of Canadian academics who needed a term to describe the experiment in pedagogy they were putting together, the word itself was a niche term that most people in higher education would not hear about, or need to. In the last year, the MOOC has gone from a rather singular experiment in connectivist and distributed learning to a behemoth force that we are told is reshaping the face of higher education. And whether MOOCs are disrupting education through innovation—as Clay Christensen’s model of disruptive innovation in business would have it—or simply representing the disruption of education as it is embedded in the market, the phenomenon under discussion has changed quite dramatically as it has migrated from Canada to Silicon Valley.

This is why it’s interesting to note that *Inside Higher Ed*’s new booklet of essays, “The MOOC moment,” introduces its subject by observing that “the acronym MOOC (for massive open online course) first appeared in *Inside Higher Ed* in December 2011, in reference to a course offered by a Stanford University professor. These days, the acronym is omnipresent and—to many—needs no definition” (*Inside Higher Ed* 2013, 3). I would say in response that this apparent lack of a need for a definition is exactly why we need to slow things down and figure out what the heck we’re talking about. For one thing, when we start the story in 2011, we forget about the 2008 MOOCs, and if the MOOCs are the future and the future is now, then it tends to have little to do with what was happening at the University of Manitoba in 2008, or why.

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AARON BADY is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Texas at Austin. This article was adapted from the author’s remarks at “MOOCs and For Profit Universities: A Closer Look,” a roundtable discussion and event sponsored by the University of California–Irvine Humanities Collective, May 2013.

**There is almost nothing new about the kind of online education that the word MOOC now describes**



The MOOC that debuted in *Inside Higher Ed* in December 2011 was Sebastian Thrun's "Artificial Intelligence" MOOC, a course that was offered at Stanford but opened up to anyone with a broadband Internet connection. The way this story is usually told is that his incredible success—160,000 students from 190 countries—encouraged Thrun to leave Stanford in order to try the new model of pedagogy he had stumbled upon. After seeing a TED talk given by Salman Khan, the founder of Khan Academy, Thrun decided to give it a whirl, and it was a huge success. In January 2012, he founded the startup Udacity, and the rest is history.

However, another way to tell the story is that Thrun was a Google executive—already well known for his work on Google's driverless car project—and that he had already resigned his tenure at Stanford in April 2011, before he even offered that artificial intelligence class. Ending his affiliation with Stanford could be described as completing his transition to Silicon Valley proper. In fact, despite *Inside Higher Ed*'s singular "a Stanford University professor," Thrun co-taught the famous course with Google's director of research, Peter Norvig. It's important to tell the story this way, too, because the first story makes us imagine a groundswell of market forces and unmet need, a world of students begging to be taught by a Stanford professor and Google, and the technological marvels that suddenly make it possible. But it's not education that's driving this shifting conversation. As the MOOC became something very different in migrating to Silicon Valley, it's in stories told by the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Time* magazine that the MOOC comes to seem like an immanent revolution whose pace is set by necessity and inevitability.

It would be an exaggeration to say that a David Brooks column and a few articles in the *Wall Street Journal* were the cause of the abrupt firing of the president of the University of Virginia (UVA) in June 2012, for example, but it would not be that much of an exaggeration. As we can now roughly reconstruct—from e-mails obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request by the UVA student newspaper—UVA's rector and vice rector essentially engineered Teresa Sullivan's resignation because they decided she was moving too slowly on online education. And what you get from reading these e-mails is an overwhelming sense of

### It's not education that's driving this shifting conversation

speed, which they are repeating, verbatim, from the articles they are e-mailing and forwarding to each other. The rector e-mailed a *Wall Street Journal* column titled "Higher Education's Online Revolution" with the subject line "good piece in *WSJ* today—why we can't afford to wait," for example, an article she had gotten from a major donor who suggested that it was "a signal that the on-line learning world has now reached the top of the line universities and they need to have strategies or will be left behind." She immediately replied: "Your timing is impeccable—the BOV is squarely focused on UVA's developing such a strategy and keenly aware of the rapidly accelerating pace of change." At a meeting of UVA deans and vice presidents, UVA's rector said, "The board believes this environment calls for a much faster pace of change in administrative structure, in governance, in financial resource development and in resource prioritization and allocation. . . . We do not believe we can even maintain our current standard under a model of incremental, marginal change. The world is simply moving too fast."

Where does such a person get this kind of conviction? You find the best examples of this kind of rhetoric in the *New York Times*. For example, Thomas Friedman (2013) recently argued that the "MOOCs revolution . . . is here and is real" and remarked on "how much today's traditional university has in common with General Motors of the 1960s, just before Toyota used a technology breakthrough to come from nowhere and topple G.M." This kind of comparison has become common sense. MOOCs are a "campus tsunami," to use columnist David Brooks's (2012) term, one that we all need to pay attention to before it's too late.

### A strange temporality

Where this urgency comes from, however, might be less important than what it does to our sense of temporality, how we experience and talk about the way we are, right now, in "the MOOC moment." In the MOOC moment, it's already too late—*always* already too late. The world not only *will* change, but it *has* changed. In this sense, it isn't simply that "MOOCs are the future" or that "online education is changing how we teach." Those kinds of platitudes are chokingly omnipresent, but the interesting thing is the fact that the future is *already* now,



that it has already changed how we teach. If you don't get on the MOOC bandwagon, yesterday, you'll have already been left behind. The world has already changed. To stop and question that fact is to be already belated, behind the times.

The first thing I want to do, then, is to slow us down and go through the last year or so with a bit more care than we're usually able to do—to do a “close reading” of the year of the MOOC, as it were—because, to be blunt, the MOOC only makes sense if you don't think about it too much, if you're in too much of a hurry to go deeply into the subject.

The logic of the MOOC is a function of shallow thinking, of arguments that go no deeper than a David Brooks or Thomas Friedman column. But they also valorize and reward that level of depth, even make it compulsory. MOOCs are literally built to cater to the attention span of a distracted, multitasking teenager who pays attention in cycles of ten to fifteen minutes. This is not a shot at teenagers, just an observation about what the form anticipates—and, therefore, rewards and reproduces. In place of the fifty-minute lectures that are the norm at

my university, for example, a MOOC will break a unit of pedagogy down into YouTube-length clips that can be more easily digested, whenever and wherever. Much longer than that, and it falls apart; the TED talk is essentially the gold standard. But I want to suggest that the argument in favor of MOOCs can't handle all that much complexity either. It makes sense at the speed of a TED talk or the length of a *New York Times* column, but starts to come apart very quickly if you go any deeper or longer than that.

The “MOOC moment” relies on a belated temporality where we're always already behind the times, which is necessary to make the MOOC seem like the kind of self-fulfilling prophecy it has become. If Harvard, Stanford, and MIT are making MOOCs, then anyone who doesn't jump on the bandwagon will be left behind. We don't have to understand why it's happening, where it's going, or where it came from; the fact that it's happening *there* is all the reason we need. Framed by this temporality, the MOOC becomes a kind of fetish object: because we treat its existence as self-evident fact—or to the extent that we treat its existence as a kind of

## Harvard is actually struggling to get where the University of Phoenix already was in 1989

self-evident fact—its objective reality obscures the contingencies of its production and the ideological formations that make it seem to exist. Why are Harvard, Stanford, and MIT making MOOCs? It doesn't matter. Only the fact that they are making them is important.

This is a logic that particularly appeals to universities that aren't in the Ivy league but see themselves at the forefront of higher education. But it's also an argument that only works at the depth (or non-depth) of a David Brooks column, because its claims only work if you don't interrogate their foundational premises too much.

For example, David Brooks (2012) began his "Campus Tsunami" column in this way: "Online education is not new. The University of Phoenix started its online degree program in 1989. Four million college students took at least one online class during the fall of 2007. But, over the past few months, something has changed. The elite, pace-setting universities have embraced the Internet. Not long ago, online courses were interesting experiments. Now online activity is at the core of how these schools envision their futures." This is a sophisticated piece of discourse, in its way. By acknowledging that "online education is not new," Brooks is working to distinguish the thing that is *not* new (online education) from the form of online education that is new, the MOOC. To rebrand online education—which has generally had a well-deserved bad reputation—he has to conjure forth this distinction, creating space between the old kind of online education (the University of Phoenix) and the new kind, which, because it is new, can shed that baggage. He therefore opens by acknowledging online education's lack of novelty so he can then resituate our perspective in a different place, just ahead of the cutting edge: if the University of Phoenix's online program is decades old—and, therefore, not cutting edge—the kind of online education that he's interested in discussing, which is different from the University of Phoenix, *is* cutting edge. And the difference is a shift from the bottom to the top, from low prestige to high prestige: "over the past few months, something has changed. . . . The elite, pace-setting universities have embraced the Internet."

What he's *not* saying, of course—what he's working very hard to un-say—is that Harvard is actually struggling to get where the University

of Phoenix already was in 1989. You have to read him against the grain to draw that out, but it's there. He's essentially observing the way that Harvard is emulating the University of

Phoenix. But, of course, that can't be, can it? After all, by definition, Harvard, Stanford, and MIT are cutting-edge, while the University of Phoenix—a for-profit, low-prestige university that markets to nontraditional students and employs a no-name teaching staff—well, they can't be the cutting edge, by definition.

These definitional "facts" allow Brooks to finesse a truly jaw-dropping rhetorical move: though he began with the statement that "online education is not new," he manages, in only four sentences, to write the words: "Not long ago, online courses were interesting experiments." How does he get from "online education is not new" (old hat, established, conventional) to the line "Not long ago, online courses were interesting experiments"? How does online education go from something older than most of our students to a temporality where it's just on the cusp of being developed, where in very recent memory, it was pure speculative futurity, where it's the future we hurtling backward into?

The key to this piece of rhetorical alchemy is that you can't overthink it, in the way I just have. Brooks is taking something that lacks prestige and cultural capital—a mode of education that is not valuable, only expensive, not innovative or exciting—and placing the name "Harvard" around it, thereby making it into something that suddenly *is* both valuable and worthwhile, as a function of Harvard's symbolic role in American higher education. And when he writes "Now online activity is at the core of how these schools envision their futures," he means that because *these* schools are envisioning it—because attached to *that* brand—online education is now the future we must emulate and pursue. Because it's at Harvard, it's "now" instead of being where the University of Phoenix already was the year the Berlin Wall fell, before our students were born.

If I have one overarching takeaway point in this article, it's that there is almost nothing new about the kind of online education that the word MOOC now describes. It's been given a great deal of hype and publicity, but that aura of "innovation" poorly describes a technology—or

set of technological practices, to be more precise—that is not that distinct from the longer story of online education, and which is designed to reinforce and reestablish the status quo, to make tenable a structure that is falling apart.

If you read the people who were creating MOOCs in 2008, by contrast—as I’ve been doing—you’ll actually see a lot of thinking that’s kind of out there, as far as how we conceptualize what education is for and what it does. But the innovations in pedagogy that produced the first MOOC in 2008 at the University of Manitoba had to be forgotten and erased from the historical timeline if the MOOCs that we’re talking about were to become the standard bearer for “cutting edge.” When *Inside Higher Ed* writes about the MOOC moment, after all, that moment has to begin not in 2008, but in December 2011, and in Silicon Valley, where and when the hype machine really gets into gear.

Things are moving so fast because if we stopped to think about what we are doing, we’d notice that MOOCs both are not the same thing as normal education and are being positioned to replace “normal” education. But the pro-MOOC argument is always that it’s cheaper and almost never that it’s better. The most utopian MOOC boosters will rarely claim that MOOCs are of equivalent educational value; the most they’ll say is that someday they might be. This point is crucial to unpacking the hype: columnists, politicians, university administrators, educational entrepreneurs, and professors who are hoping to make their name by riding out this wave can all talk in such glowing terms about the onrushing future of higher education only because that future hasn’t actually happened yet. It’s still speculative in the sense that we’re all speculating about what it will look like. This means that the MOOC can be all things to all people because it is, literally, a speculation about what it might someday become.

To put my cards on the table, the MOOC seems to me like a speculative bubble, a product that’s being pumped up and overvalued by pro-business legislators, overzealous administrators, and a lot of hot air in the media. But like all speculative bubbles—especially the ones that originate in Silicon Valley—it will eventually burst. The only question is what things will look like when it does.

### **MOOCs and the future of public education**

A bill currently before the California State Senate—SB520—will, if it passes, require all

three sectors of California’s public university system to accept MOOCs from a certain approved list for course credit. The details are yet to be determined, and it seems most likely that the final bill will be something different from what was originally introduced. But the assumptions and ambitions of SB520 offer a useful way to frame the direction the MOOC tsunami is taking: the capture of public education.

For the Twenty Million Minds Foundation, one of the drivers behind the bill, SB520 is all about options, opportunity, and choice for students. The bill’s sponsor, Senate Pro-Tem President Darrell Steinberg, cites the very real problems of access to over-enrolled courses—and the fact that students are failing to graduate on time, because they cannot get required courses for their majors—and uses this as a rhetorical wedge to argue that MOOCs should actually be acceptable as replacements for normal college classes. As he put it, “We want to be the first state in the nation to make this promise: No college student in California will be denied the right to move through their education because they couldn’t get a seat in the course they needed” (quoted in Lewin 2013). But the irony of Steinberg’s formulation is that even he admits that instead of solving a problem that has a very simple definition—which is basically reducible to a number, the fact that there are more students than there are chairs and classrooms—they are simply redefining the problem, imagining into existence a chairless classroom.

The problem is real: years of consistent budget cuts have left public universities without the money to buy “chairs” (and everything that represents), so public universities have shifted the financial burden onto the backs of individual students, whose tuition now pays much more of the cost. Since educating more students would cost money—and it would also cost money to fully staff the necessary courses—there is no solution to the problem that does not require spending more money on chairs, classrooms, and teachers. MOOCs enter the picture, then, as a kind of fantasy solution to this unsolvable problem. Instead of addressing the problem by either admitting fewer students or adding more courses, we will define the problem differently: chairless classrooms! Everyone is happy.

In this case, the cliché that California is where everything happens first has some truth to it. If SB520 passes, it will define the shape of things to come not only by creating a model

for other states to follow, but also by creating a kind of market value for MOOCs that didn't exist before and that wouldn't exist otherwise. By making certain selected MOOCs convertible into course credit—at California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and the University of California system—the legislature will quite literally create value where it didn't exist before, by making MOOCs a thing that are worth paying for. This shift is important. But mandating that a MOOC is the same thing as college—that it can be literally credited as a college class—not only changes what a MOOC is, it changes what college is.

After all, if a MOOC is simply a free educational resource that you can find on the web—which is what MOOCs presently are—then there's nothing to object to in them, and everything to like. Such a MOOC is an almost wholly good addition to the universe. Other than opportunity costs and the costs of a computer—which are not nothing, but they are also not that much—it's simply a free and useful thing, available to those who want it. But the moment that such a *use value* becomes a *market value*, when it becomes something that can be exchanged for the kinds of course credits that students pay very high tuition for, MOOCs become a radically different beast with a radically different kind of economic value. It'll be much easier to charge for them, on the one hand, and almost unthinkable that associated costs won't rise, as they did with the once free California public universities (especially since Udacity and Coursera are literally for-profit enterprises). And on the other hand, they will radically devalue the resource that they can now be used to replace. If you can replace “chairs” (by which I mean the brick-and-mortar campus) with a chairless university—if those things are literally exchangeable—then the market value of “chairs” goes down, at the same time as the actual costs stay the same. If we can't fully staff our classrooms now, how will we staff them in the future, when they have to compete with *free*?

To put it slightly differently, pumping up the value of MOOCs in this way—declaring, by legislative fiat, that MOOCs are now interchangeable with “real courses”—actually does have an important cost. If the platonic ideal of the classroom experience is the gold standard, then declaring that a bunch of other unrelated metals are also gold will lower its

value, especially if those metals are freely available in infinite supplies. Why would someone pay a teacher to give one-on-one attention to students when those students could get the same formal credential from an online course? You can point out that there is an actual and effective difference between a student-to-professor ratio of seventeen to one and a ratio of ten thousand to one online. But once market equivalency has entered the equation, once the market recognizes an equivalence between a MOOC and an in-person class, pointing out the difference that is experienced by the student will be trumped by the equivalence of market logic, which will dictate paying for the cheaper of the two. An in-person education will become an unnecessary luxury, an ornamental marker of elite status.

To legislators, MOOCs can seem like a win-win solution to an otherwise intractable fiscal crisis. Students who are locked out of over-enrolled required courses can complete their degrees by taking those classes with an online provider, possibly even at a lower cost and at no extra cost to the state. Meanwhile, allowing Silicon Valley start-ups like Coursera and Udacity to offer courses that will transfer into the California State University and the University of California systems will give those companies a legitimacy in the education marketplace that they have never had before. When you see that Sebastian Thrun is one of the people who helped write SB520 and that Darrell Steinberg held his press conference announcing the bill on “Google Hangout,” a lot of things become clearer.

If this bill passes, the winners will be Silicon Valley and the austerity hawks in the California legislature. While the former will have privileged access to the largest student market in the state, the latter will be relieved of the burden of having to educate the state's young people. The losers will be teachers and students.

### **The value of MOOCs**

MOOC boosters live in the future. Actually existing MOOCs are a far cry from what their champions promise they will someday become, which allows us to gloss over any troubling trends in their present day iteration. After all, MOOC boosters like to brag about the thousands of students—even hundreds of thousands—who sign on to learn from super-professors like Harvard's Michael Sandel or Sebastian Thrun. But completion rates for these courses

consistently hover in the single digits. A software engineering MOOC taught by University of California–Berkeley professor David Patterson in May 2012, for example, may have enrolled over fifty thousand students, but fewer than four thousand actually completed the course—and this is typical. What’s more, as Patterson himself was quick to observe, his MOOC was a “cheating-rich environment” (quoted in Meyer 2012). It’s safe to assume that the number of students who *actually* completed the course is somewhat lower than even the 7 percent who received a completion certificate.

This doesn’t mean that MOOCs are without value, of course. Just because most of Patterson’s students didn’t complete his course doesn’t mean they didn’t benefit from taking it, and it seems reasonable to assume that many online learners are not interested in completion certificates. Patterson observed, for example, that

**If we can’t fully staff our classrooms now, how will we staff them in the future, when they have to compete with free?**

many of his students already had degrees, and that some were instructors themselves. For learners wishing to brush up skills or keep abreast of new pedagogy, a MOOC might be just the thing. In applied fields

like software engineering, where the ability to code is a valuable enough skill that course credit becomes almost irrelevant—and where the material lends itself naturally to online instruction—the free availability of high-quality course materials is an almost pure social good.

It does, however, demonstrate what the technology is not good at: accreditation and mass education. The MOOC rewards self-directed learners who have the resources and privilege that allow them to pursue learning for its own sake. But if you want it to function as a gate-keeping mechanism, which is one of the things that universities do, it’s not very good at that. A MOOC is almost designed to make



University of  
Texas at Austin

cheating even easier than ever before. MOOCs are also a really poor way to make educational resources available to underserved and underprivileged communities, which has been the historical mission of public education. Historically, public systems like California's have provided high-quality education to citizens of the state who could not have gotten the equivalent anywhere else. MOOCs promise to see to it that what the public universities are able to provide is not, in every sense, the equivalent of what rich people's kids get.

The irony is that when the term was first coined in 2008, this was all quite well understood. The MOOC came into existence as something that, by its very nature, could never be used to replace a normal college class. The whole point was that it was something fundamentally different from a college class.

Dave Cormier originally suggested the name for an experiment in open courseware that George Siemens and Stephen Downes were putting together at the University of Manitoba, a class of twenty-five students that was opened up to over 1,500 online participants. For them, this MOOC was part of a long-running engagement with connectivist principles of education, rooted in the idea that we learn best when we learn collaboratively, in networks, because the process of learning is less about acquiring new knowledge—the commodified “content” that a Udacity or edX MOOC tries to reify and market—and much more about building the social and neural connections that will allow knowledge to circulate, be used, evolve, and grow. A class that's animated by a contractual agreement that spells out the costs, requirements, and credential to be acquired is one thing, and it may even be a good thing; but the goal of these original MOOCs was to foster an educational process that was something totally different. It would be as exploratory and creative as its participants chose to make it. It was about building a sense of community investment in a particular project, a fundamentally socially driven enterprise, and its outcomes were to be fluid and open-ended. I would argue that getting a “grade” for such a thing—or charging money for it—would be fundamentally to change what it is.

Today's MOOC looks very different, starting with the central narrative of “disruption” and

### **MOOCs really are more like an end of something than a beginning**

“unbundling.” Instead of building social information networks, the neoliberal MOOC is driven by a desire to liberate and empower the

individual, breaking apart actually existing academic communities and refocusing on the individual's acquisition of knowledge. The MOOC being praised by utopian technologists in the *New York Times* might be the diametric opposite of what Siemens, Downes, and Cormier said they were trying to create, in this sense, even though it deploys some of the same idealistic rhetoric. Rather than transferring course content from expert to student, the original MOOCs stemmed from a connectivist desire to decentralize and de-institutionalize education, creating fundamentally open and open-ended networks of circulation and collaboration. But the MOOCs being developed by Silicon Valley startups Udacity and Coursera, as well as by nonprofit initiatives like edX, aim to do exactly the same thing that traditional courses have done—transfer course content from expert to student—only to do so massively more cheaply and on a much larger scale.

This is why, instead of de-institutionalizing education or making learning less hierarchical, we see some of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the world treating the MOOC as a lifeline in troubled economic waters, leveraging the figure of the “super-professor” to maintain their position of excellence atop the educational field and even to create new hierarchical arrangements among universities. These MOOCs are just a new way of maintaining the status quo, of re-institutionalizing higher education in an era of budget cuts, sky-rocketing tuition, and unemployed college graduates burdened by student debt. If the MOOC began in the classroom as an experimental pedagogy, it has swiftly morphed into a process driven from the top down, imposed on faculty by university administrators or even imposed on administrators by university boards of trustees and regents.

From within academia, the MOOC phenomenon is all about dollars and cents, about doing more of the same with less funding. And while MOOC boosters like to deride the “sage on the stage” model of education delivery—as if crowded lecture halls are literally the only kind of classroom there is—most of the actually existing MOOCs being marketed are not much more than a massive and online version of

that very same “sage on a stage” model. And what could be more hierarchical than a high-prestige university like Harvard lecturing to less prestigious institutions?

### Conclusion

I’ve titled this article “The MOOC Moment and the End of Reform” because I had to call it something; I couldn’t just say that the MOOCification of Higher Education is a Terrible No Good Very Bad Thing, although I think you have a sense of what I think about it. But MOOCs really are more like an end of something than a beginning. Instead of a transition between old and new, they represent the end of a process of constant change that has defined higher education for as long as it has existed. At the micro level, MOOCs are cheap because you record them once and then reuse them. They don’t grow and evolve, and they don’t require the hiring of academic faculty, whose intellectual lives keep intellectual inquiry moving forward. This is what makes them cheap, but it’s also what will make them solidify hierarchy by placing a pantheon of academic superstars at the center of pedagogical practice, reifying knowledge into a commodity that, because it has value, cannot be allowed to change. If academic life is anything, it’s a devotion to endless process: the scientific method tells you how to take the next step, not where to stop. MOOCs are structurally devoted to pinning knowledge down like a butterfly, putting it on file, putting a price on it, and floating it on the market.

MOOCs also represent the end of reform at the macro level. The University of California, for example, is a profoundly recent creation. It was basically a two-campus university until the 1950s; today, there are eleven campuses. The same is true of the California State University (CSU) system and the California Community College system. Between 1957 and 1965, California established eight new CSU campuses—out of an eventual twenty-three—while more than half its present complement of 112 community colleges was built in the period between 1957 and 1978. California’s public university system is, in many ways, the biggest and best expression of a moment in time when futurity was incredibly important and possible. It represented a massive investment of public funds in the state’s collective future. The 1960 Donahoe Act, better known as the Master Plan for Higher Education, was a complex piece of legislation,

but at its heart was, quite simply, a blanket commitment from the state to educate all the California students who wanted an education. And as society grew, the university was to grow with it, adapting to changing needs by staying in a permanent state of reformulation.

Even though California State Senate Bill 520 begins by citing the Master Plan, this piece of legislation represents a refusal of futurity: because the future is now, there is nothing to plan for. The only reality is the economic reality that a funding shortfall must be dealt with. And instead of solving this problem, SB520 seeks to institutionalize it, to render it permanent. We solve the problem of frustrating ambitions by forswearing ambition, by refusing to have desires that can be frustrated. □

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# A Plea for “Close Learning”

SCOTT L. NEWSTOK

FEATURED TOPIC

**Close learning exposes the stark deficiencies of mass distance learning**

WHAT AN EXCITING YEAR for distance learning! Cutting-edge communication systems allowed universities to escape the tired confines of face-to-face education. Bold new technologies made it possible for thousands of geographically dispersed students to enroll in world-class courses.

Innovative assessment mechanisms let professors supervise their pupils remotely. All this progress was good for business, too. Private entrepreneurs leapt at the chance to compete in the new distance-learning marketplace, while Ivy League universities hustled to keep pace.

True, a few naysayers fretted about declining student attention spans and low course-completion rates. But who could object to the expansively democratic goal of bringing first-rate education to more people than ever before? The new pedagogical tools promised to be not only more affordable than traditional classes, but also more effective at measuring student progress. In the words of one prominent expert, the average distance learner “knows more of the subject, and knows it better, than the student who has covered the same ground in the classroom.” Indeed, “the day is coming when the work done [via distance learning] will be greater in amount than that done in the class-rooms of our colleges.” The future of education was finally here.

2013, right? Think again: 1885. The commentator quoted above was Yale classicist (and

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SCOTT L. NEWSTOK is associate professor of English at Rhodes College. This article was adapted from an essay published in *Inside Higher Ed* on July 11, 2013.

future University of Chicago President) William Rainey Harper, evaluating *correspondence courses*. That’s right: you’ve got (snail) mail. Journalist Nicholas Carr has chronicled the recurrent boosterism about mass mediated education over the last century: the phonograph, instructional radio, televised lectures. All were heralded as transformative educational tools in their day. This should give us pause as we recognize that massive open online courses, or MOOCs, are but the latest iteration of distance learning.

In response to the current enthusiasm for MOOCs, skeptical faculty (Aaron Bady, Ian Bogost, and Jonathan Rees, among many others) have begun questioning venture capitalists eager for new markets and legislators eager to dismantle public funding for American higher education. Some people pushing for MOOCs, to their credit, speak from laudably egalitarian impulses to provide access for disadvantaged students. *But to what are they being given access?* Are broadcast lectures and online discussions the sum of a liberal education? Or is it something more than “content” delivery?

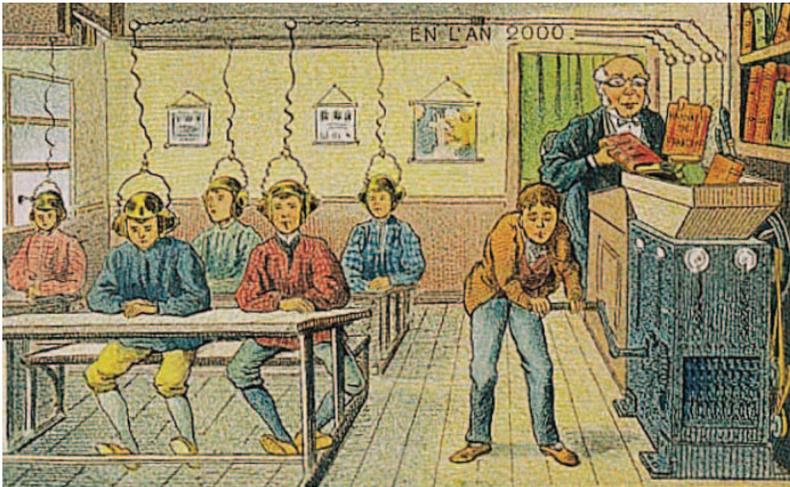
## “Close learning”

To state the obvious: there’s a personal, human element to liberal education, what John Henry Newman once called “the living voice, the breathing form, the expressive countenance.” (2001, 14). We who cherish personalized instruction would benefit from a pithy phrase to defend and promote this millennia-tested practice. I propose that we begin calling it *close learning*, a term that evokes the laborious, time-consuming, and costly but irreplaceable proximity between teacher and student. Close



learning exposes the stark deficiencies of mass distance learning, such as MOOCs, and its haste to reduce dynamism, responsiveness, presence.

Techno-utopians seem surprised that “blended” or “flipped” classrooms—combining out-of-class media with in-person discussions—are more effective than their online-only counterparts, or that one-on-one tutoring strengthens the utility of MOOCs. In spite of all the hype about interactivity, “lecturing” à la MOOCs merely extends



**“At the School” (1910), French postcard envisioning techno-pedagogy in the year 2000.**

the cliché of the static, one-sided lecture hall, where distance learning begins after the first row. As the philosopher Scott Samuelson (2013) suggests, “The forces driving online education, particularly MOOCs, aren’t moving us toward close learning. We should begin by recognizing that close learning is the goal and then measure all versions of our courses by that standard. Many giant lecture-hall courses are going to be found wanting, as will many online courses, and all (or almost all) MOOCs. In the end, we’re still going to need a lot of face-to-face learning if want to promote close learning.”

The old-fashioned Socratic seminar is where we actually find interactive learning and open-ended inquiry. In the close learning of the live seminar, spontaneity rules. Both students and teachers are always at a crossroads, collaboratively deciding where to go and where to stop; how to navigate and how to detour; and how to close the distance between a topic and the people discussing it. For the seminar to work, certain limits are required (most centrally, a limit in size). But these finite limits enable the infinity of questioning that is close learning. MOOCs claim to abolish those limits, while they paradoxically reinstate them. Their naïve model assumes that there is always total transparency, that

passively seeing (watching a lecture or a virtual simulation) is learning.

A Columbia University neuroscientist, Stuart Firestein, recently published a polemical book titled *Ignorance: How It Drives Science*. Discouraged by students regurgitating his lectures without internalizing the complexity of scientific inquiry, Firestein created a seminar to which he invited his colleagues to discuss what they don’t know. As Firestein repeatedly emphasizes, it is informed ignorance, not information, that is the genuine “engine” of knowledge. His seminar reminds us that mere data transmission from teacher to student doesn’t produce liberal learning. It’s the ability to interact, to think hard thoughts alongside other people.

In a seminar, a student can ask for clarification, and challenge a teacher; a teacher can shift course when spirits are flagging; a stray thought can spark a new insight. Isn’t this the kind of nonconformist “thinking outside the box” that business leaders adore? So why is there such a rush to freeze knowledge and distribute it in a frozen form? Even Coursera cofounder Andrew Ng concedes that the real value of a college education “isn’t just the content. . . . The real value is the interactions with professors and other, equally bright students” (quoted in Oremus 2012).

The business world recognizes the virtues of proximity in its own human resource management. (The phrase “corporate campus” acknowledges as much.) Witness, for example, Yahoo’s controversial decision to eliminate telecommuting and require employees to be present in the office. CEO Marissa Mayer’s memo reads as a mini-manifesto for close learning: “To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side. That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices. Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings. Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home. We need to be one Yahoo!, and that starts with physically being together” (quoted in Swisher 2013).

Why do boards of directors still go through the effort of convening in person? Why, in spite of all the fantasies about “working from anywhere” are “creative classes” still concentrating in proximity to one another: the entertainment industry in Los Angeles, information technology in the Bay Area, financial capital in New York

City? The powerful and the wealthy are well aware that computers can accelerate the exchange of information and facilitate “training,” but not the development of knowledge, much less wisdom.

Close learning transcends disciplines. In every field, students must incline toward their subjects: leaning into a sentence, to craft it most persuasively; leaning into an archival document, to determine an uncertain provenance; leaning into a musical score, to poise the body for performance; leaning into a data set, to discern emerging patterns; leaning into a laboratory instrument, to interpret what is viewed. MOOCs, in contrast, encourage students and faculty to lean back, not to cultivate the disciplined attention necessary to engage fully in a complex task. Low completion rates for MOOCs (still hovering around 10 percent) speak for themselves.

### Technology as supplement

Devotion to close learning should not be mistaken for an anti-technology stance. (Contrary to a common misperception, the original Luddites simply wanted machines that made high-quality goods, run by trained workers who were adequately compensated.) I teach Shakespeare, supposedly one of the mustiest of topics. Yet my students navigate the vast resources of the Internet, evaluate recorded performances, wrestle with facsimiles of original publications, listen to pertinent podcasts, survey decades of scholarship in digitized form, circulate their drafts electronically, explore the cultural topography of early modern London, and contemplate the historical richness of the English language. Close learning is entirely compatible with engaging in meaningful conversations outside the classroom: faculty can correspond regularly with students via e-mail and keep in close contact via all kinds of new media. But this is all in service of close learning, and the payoff comes in the classroom.

Teachers have always employed “technology”—including the book, one of the most flexible and dynamic learning technologies ever created. But let’s not fixate upon technology for technology’s sake, or delude ourselves into thinking that better technology overcomes bad teaching. At no stage of education does technology, no matter how novel, ever replace human

## Low completion rates for MOOCs (still hovering around 10 percent) speak for themselves

attention. Close learning can’t be automated or scaled up.

As retrograde as it might sound, gathering humans in a room with real time for dialogue still matters. As educators, we

must remind ourselves—not to mention our legislators, our boards, our administrators, our alumni, our students, and our students’ parents—of the inescapable fact that our “product” is close learning. This is why savvy parents have always invested in intensive human interaction for their children. (Tellingly, parents from Silicon Valley deliberately restrict their children’s access to electronic distractions, so that they might experience the free play of mind essential to human development.)

What remains to be seen is whether we value this kind of close learning at all levels of education enough to defend it, and fund it, for a wider circle of Americans—or whether we will continue to permit the circle to contract, excluding a genuinely transformative intellectual experience from those without means. Proponents of distance education have always boasted that they provide access, but are they providing access to *close learning*? □

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# MOOCs and Democratic Education

LELAND CARVER AND LAURA M. HARRISON

FEATURED TOPIC

**What implications will this potential transformation of higher education have?**

MOOCs, or massive open online courses, have entered the world of online education with a splash, and their potential to transform higher education is being widely hailed. Indeed, many involved in the creation, implementation, and facilitation of this new format regularly speak in terms of “revolution” and massive “disruption.” The president of Northeastern University has gone so far as to suggest that “with the advent of the MOOCs, we’re witnessing the end of higher education as we know it” (quoted in Carlson and Blumenstyk 2012). But what implications will this potential transformation of higher education have for our society’s fundamental commitment to democratic values and participatory engagement? In this article, we examine both the democratic potential and the potential pitfalls of the integration of MOOCs into higher education.

## **The structure of MOOCs**

MOOCs represent the latest evolutionary step in the development of distance learning. Beginning with written correspondence courses, various methods have been used to meet the educational needs of individuals who cannot attend a brick-and-mortar school. Because of the inherent disadvantage of providing coursework and transmitting knowledge away from the classroom, distance learning has remained

at the forefront of efforts to incorporate existing and emerging technology in order to bridge the gap between instructors and learners. Efforts to take the “distance” out of “distance learning” have included the use of correspondence, television, radio, film, audio tapes, video recordings, compact discs, interactive software, immersive conferencing, and the web.

Initially developed in 2008, MOOCs rely on a confluence of contemporary media, technology, and learning theories. By bringing together the technology of Web 2.0 and today’s social media innovations, MOOCs have enabled faculty at a select few institutions to open their virtual classrooms to very large numbers of students. For example, Stanford computer scientist and leading MOOC proponent Sebastian Thrun had an enrollment of over 160,000 students for a course on artificial intelligence that he taught in the fall of 2011. Other Stanford MOOCs have had similar eye-popping enrollments.

MOOC designers incorporate “social learning” as a viable means of facilitation and use a number of Internet-related innovations as learning tools, including social networking, wikis, blogs, cognitive tutors, virtual learning communities, and learning management systems. A MOOC is similar to a traditional course in that it has participants, facilitators, course materials, and start and end dates, but it differs in that there are no course assignments and participants are not required to follow a single path from the first week to the last week. The “open” in “massive open online course” has several meanings: the course is open to anyone, the course is offered free of charge, participation takes place in the

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LELAND CARVER is a doctoral student of higher education and student affairs, and LAURA M. HARRISON is assistant professor of higher education and student affairs, both at Ohio University.



open space of the Internet, and one's work is shared openly with the other participants. Although participants are not charged a fee, some universities have offered the courses for credit and students have been charged accordingly. Participants not seeking college credit can determine for themselves the extent of their participation and are free to choose only the activities they find most useful. In Thrun's artificial intelligence course, which he co-taught with Google's Peter Norvig, those not working for college credit but having completed the class were given an official "Statement of Accomplishment."

MOOCs also separate themselves from conventional online courses through their use of tweets, tags, video lectures, blog posts, and discussion boards to create networked courses. Although MOOCs rely to a large extent on existing cyber infrastructure and associated tools of conveyance, the considerable costs of designing these courses effectively limits their development to a handful of prestigious, well-endowed universities. Along with Stanford, Harvard, Duke, Yale, and Carnegie Mellon Universities, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the

University of California–Berkeley, and the University of California–Los Angeles have led the way in the development of MOOCs, partly due to their ability to absorb the startup costs involved in course design. The leading role played by these well-branded institutions has helped legitimize MOOCs and sparked the interest—and apprehension—of many less-renowned colleges and universities.

### **Democratic potential**

MOOCs hold great democratic promise. The courses are designed to be open to all interested participants, allowing access for students from around the world. Thrun's breakout artificial intelligence course registered students from 190 different countries, for example. This open access is reminiscent of Horace Mann's call for a "common school" to develop not just the brightest citizens, but all of the nation's youth. Mann's democratic vision is now widely recognized around the world and is reflected in Article 26 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes education as a human right. The fact that this new model of



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instruction is limited to a small number of well-endowed universities is a boon for students who would otherwise lack the credentials to attend these schools.

Participants gain access to course material, resources, networks, and top-notch instructors. In democratic societies where social and economic class is de-emphasized, the notion of equal access to these courses integrates relatively smoothly.

The ability of MOOC providers to offer free enrollment also appeals to fundamental democratic principles. Because there are no fees, low-income students have the opportunity to participate in courses that might otherwise be unaffordable. This absence of tuition-related obstacles potentially increases the diversity of the student body, which, in turn, enhances to the MOOC environment by generating different points of view as students from various backgrounds bring their life experiences to the social media setting.

MOOCs also have the benefit of a global reach. (While we acknowledge the “digital divide” between the developed and the developing world, we limit our analysis to countries where a digital infrastructure exists and is accessible to the majority of citizens.) A transnational educational model carries with it many of the benefits of study abroad programs. In particular, the MOOC’s collaborative design incorporates ample opportunities to encourage cultural exchange and reinforce diverse approaches to problem solving. Participants share their work with others, build social networks around topics of shared interest, and are given opportunities to review the research of their peers.

Because the courses may not be tied to college credit, the model affords greater levels of freedom. Moreover, the flexibility of the MOOC framework allows participants to determine for themselves their levels of course engagement. Participants can enroll in a MOOC to benefit their own research or to explore similar work being done by others. For those uninterested in obtaining two- or four-year degrees, MOOCs offer the freedom to build networking skills and take courses based on their own interests.

This learning design can help participants develop social-networking and independent learning skills. Participants are encouraged to work in their independent areas and to create networks that can be used well beyond the

**This absence of  
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length of the course period. Participants are empowered by taking ownership of their own learning and by deciding for themselves what they want to gain from the course. At the

same time, they are adding to the distributed knowledge base of the Internet. In this way, the MOOC is a commitment to the individual needs of the student and the collective needs of the community.

Among the theories developed in the literature on open online learning is connectivism. Based on the work of George Siemens and Stephen Downes, the originators of the MOOC concept, connectivism holds that learning is based on connection and that such connections occur in mental processing at both conceptual and social levels. Learning, like a well-constructed spider web, happens when connections are multiplied and form networks. These networks are influenced and fortified by socialization, diversity, and the creation and availability of space that foster such connections and networks (Tschofen and Mackness 2012). The communitarian overtones of connectivist theory recall the social contract theories of Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau from which many democratic societies derive their energy.

**Democratic pitfalls**

Many in higher education question how long the “open” in “massive open online course” will remain a defining feature of the format. For-profit companies have begun to coalesce around the MOOC concept, and providers are looking for ways to appeal to investors. As sustainable business plans are developed, much of the democratic potential of the MOOC may be lost. The promise of increased student diversity would likely go unrealized, for example, if MOOCs were to morph into a tuition-driven online format like that of the University of Phoenix. While the “massive” enrollments for open Internet courses should help offset potential tuition costs, some educators wonder whether the “M” in MOOC may evolve to take on a new meaning: education for the “masses.”

The MOOC design and its ability to generate massive enrollments have created excitement throughout educational circles. The MOOC offers a model for the educational integration of the latest technological advances. It is a template being driven by some of the nation’s

finest institutions, and this has heightened the excitement. As the novelty of these large enrollments begins to fade, however, the direction of this educational model may shift as well. For example, Greg Graham (2012) worries that, as governments grapple with dwindling funds, the MOOC may emerge as a cost-effective but highly divisive solution: “Ironically, although the move toward online education is being advanced by some of the nation’s most elite universities, in the end it will be the lower half of the student population that will be forced out of the traditional classroom, widening the gap between the have and the have-nots.” Such a widening of the gap undermines the democratic principle of equal access. Graham’s concern about the potential of online education to further stratification is shared by Northeastern University President John Aoun, who suggests that MOOCs could result in the emergence of a two-tiered educational system with “one tier consisting of a campus-based education for those who can afford it, and the other consisting of low and no-cost MOOCs” (quoted in Carlson and Blumenstyk 2012).

Currently, most MOOCs focus on technology and the natural and hard sciences. These courses can be objectively evaluated, and assessments

### **As online education continues to develop, there are concerns about how it will be implemented and used**

are oriented toward single correct answers. Taylor Walsh (2011) reports that many MOOC providers are skeptical that all disciplines lend themselves to the massive online mode, which is best suited to fact retrieval. The social sciences and the humanities, disciplines that are vital to the maintenance of democratic societies, are more difficult to assess. When evaluating the potential and pitfalls of adopting a “revolutionary” change in higher education, it is important to ask whether the change is likely to foster the full range of student learning outcomes, or whether it is more likely to reduce learning to what can be measured by assessments that focus on right and wrong answers.

### **A call for democratic action**

If MOOCs are truly on the point of “revolutionizing” higher education, then several important questions must urgently be raised and discussed—questions grounded in core social beliefs about the purpose of education. Examining critical notions about the role education plays in forming individual subjects and societal structures can help determine the questions that are asked and, moreover, can inform the direction the future development of this educational model takes.

The purpose of education, according to critical theorists, is to provide students with

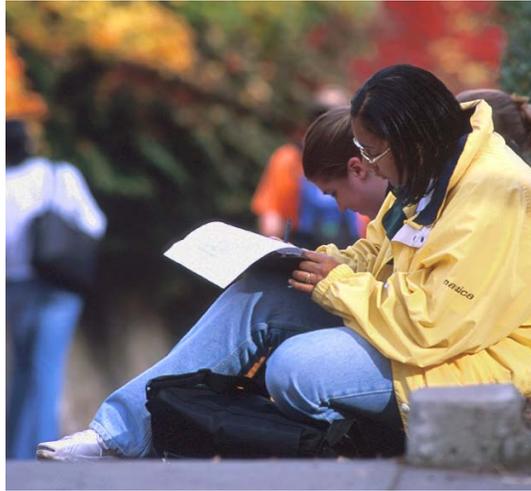


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the critical skills needed to reflect on the world in order that they may change it. For educational philosopher Paulo Freire (2000), a human's "ontological vocation" is that of a subject whose mission is to act on the objective world. A praxis of reflection and action occurs when humans contemplate the world and, by acting on it, strive to improve their conditions. The individual's capacities should be developed to the maximum extent possible. But this human development should be democratically oriented; it should be firmly grounded in the belief that social betterment is attained as the individual flourishes (Giroux 2007). It is within the context of this broader purpose of education that the MOOC "revolution" should be evaluated: what is its potential for providing the skills and opportunities humans need to reflect on and improve their world?

MOOCs have the potential to democratize higher education. The availability of tuition-free courses could expand access and foster greater diversity, which, in turn, could improve the distributed knowledge base by providing multiple points of view and new approaches to problem solving. Open participation affords the opportunity for people from different countries, cultures, and occupations to engage with one another in virtual classrooms. The MOOC's design allows students to take ownership of their education by deciding how much they want to participate and what they want to take away from their courses. Independent and collaborative learning are encouraged by the incorporation of social media. The MOOC's structure answers the critical demand for spaces where individuals can reflect, act, and link their praxis to the broader democracy. However, it is in the administration of this new educational model that questions of social betterment and antidemocratic practice should give pause.

As online education continues to develop, there are concerns about how it will be implemented and used. The MOOC's ability to absorb "massive" enrollments may provide university administrators with a market-oriented answer to the rising cost of college. A commitment to serve all could be maintained by providing massive online courses at relatively low costs to economically disadvantaged students, while offering the traditional on-campus college experience to those who can afford it. This bifurcated approach to education fails the democratic test of equal access to all. Arguably, such social



stratification already exists in higher education today, with elite schools reserved for those of power and means and public schools for everyone else. But this only makes it all the more important that the democratizing potential of MOOCs not be lost.

If MOOCs really are going to transform higher education, then we must urgently weigh how the coming transformation will integrate with our existing educational system and examine the degree to which it comports with our democratic values. Because revolutions often require a disruptive reorientation of existing assumptions and established institutions, we must be sure not to lose sight of the fundamental purpose education serves in a democracy. □

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# Experience Matters

## Why Competency-Based Education

JOHANN N. NEEM

P E R S P E C T I V E S

THERE IS A GROWING TREND in higher education to offer college credit for “prior learning” and demonstrated competence. In one of the highest profile speeches of his tenure as secretary of education, Arne Duncan (2011) praised giving college credit for what students know instead of “seat time.” President Barack Obama has also spoken in favor of competency-based programs in his proposals to reform higher education (White House Office of the Press Secretary 2013). The Department of Education is actively encouraging colleges to offer competency-based programs (Field 2013). Given the rising cost of tuition—

caused in large part because of public

defunding—President Obama and Secretary Duncan applaud any approach that will bring down the amount students and their parents have to pay or, more important, borrow, while also increasing the number of Americans with college degrees.

Competency-based education works by identifying the specific things that someone needs to be able to learn and to do in order to earn a degree (or pass a course), and then allows students to move forward as soon as they have demonstrated that they have mastered the expectations. Prior learning seeks to reward students—especially older students—for work and other forms of experience that can be parlayed into academic credit.

Perhaps such an approach makes sense for those vocational fields in which knowing the material is the only important outcome, where the skills are easily identified, and where the primary goal is certification. But in other fields—the liberal arts and sciences, but also many of the professions—this approach simply does not work. Instead, for most students, the experience of being in a physical classroom on a campus with other students and faculty remains vital to what it means to get a college education.

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JOHANN N. NEEM is associate professor of history at Western Washington University.

### Liberal education

The goal of a liberal education is to transform a person by offering him or her serious and diverse intellectual experiences. As Edward Ayers (2010), president of the University of Richmond, put it, liberal education should be seen as experiential learning for the mind. It seeks not just to demonstrate a series of outputs, but instead it offers a significant number of inputs. The quality of intellectual experiences—not just the mastery of competencies—is the heart of a serious college education. “College education,” philosopher Gary Gutting (2013) writes, “is a proliferation of such possibilities: the beauty of mathematical discovery, the thrill of scientific understanding, the fascination of historical narrative, the mystery of theological speculation. We should judge teaching not by the amount of knowledge it passes on, but by the enduring excitement it generates.” In other words, traditional colleges offer students an education, not just certification.

A good liberal education is not just about learning to write well or to think critically, or any other specific outcome or competency. Instead, it is also about putting students into contexts in which they are exposed to new ideas, asked to chew on them, and to talk or write about them. One hopes that students will be disturbed and fascinated—and even thrilled—by what they learn.

These kinds of experiences happen when students spend time interacting with professors and each other on campuses—what Duncan calls “seat time.” Even if students have mastered the basic competencies, they should still take more classes, because liberal educators seek to ensure that students will have the intellectual experiences that make college education worthwhile.

It is hard to quantify the value and lasting influence of an experience. We know that the world is always interpreted, and these interpretations are shaped by the categories of thought that we use to make sense and to make meaning. A good education should offer experiences that

**The purpose of liberal education—unlike vocational education—is not to train but to change people, and this takes seat time**

# Will Not Replace Seat Time



reshape those categories so that our interpretations—in fact, the world itself—appears different to us before and after the educational process. Even better, a good education should provide us with the skills, categories, knowledge, and habits that make us not just interpreters but skilled, conscientious, thoughtful, and profound interpreters of our world.

In truth, there is an anti-intellectual tendency in the effort to award significant academic credit for non-academic experiences. The competency-based approach is designed to eliminate the mediating role of teachers. Teachers, after all, can be quirky and different from one another, since

each teacher is an expert but has a human—and, therefore, particular—relationship with his or her subject. But that is also why teachers matter. By caring about the material and about students, teachers create a connection between the two. They do not simply provide content but rather offer contexts for understanding. By watching others care deeply, students start to see why what seems unrelated to

them—in fact, what seems *academic*—can actually shape their relationship with the world. This kind of mediation is teaching at its best.

### Competencies

The competency-based approach not only reduces the role of teachers, it also often considers knowledge of a subject as secondary to mastering the skills—as some have put it, who cares what you know, it’s what you can do that matters (Friedman 2013). Certainly, recent work on the brain has made clear that *to know* and *to do* cannot be disaggregated—knowledge becomes so when it is learned through the brain’s active engagement (Willingham 2009; Zull 2002). Skills, however, are often the means, not the end. For example, we may read books and write papers to become better critical thinkers and writers, or we may learn to think critically and write papers in order to understand books better. In the academy, at least, the latter should be a priority.

Offering substantial credit for “prior learning,” for experiences beyond the academy, is by its very definition to conflate categories. Education—as

### Competencies cannot adequately represent the value of a liberal education, or even of a single course

Lawrence Cremin (1970–80) pointed out long ago in his multivolume history of the subject—is not limited to schooling. The education of a human being happens through culture, through families, through churches; only a part of education happens through formal schooling. Yet, these realms of life are different in their goals, in their criteria, and in their material. To recognize that people learn as much from life as they do from school is not an insult to formal schooling; it is a reality of living. Yet to give credit for experiences that are not properly academic is to undermine the higher academic—that is, intellectual—purposes of formal higher education in the arts and sciences.

This is not to say that there is no role for identifying competencies in the liberal arts. In fact, the American Historical Association (2012) is currently undertaking a “tuning” project to aid history departments in identifying what history majors should be able to do and to demonstrate these skills to outside constituents, including employers. Such an approach can improve teaching and help those outside the discipline understand the kinds of skills and intellectual habits that history majors develop, but these competencies cannot adequately represent the value of a liberal education, or even of a single course.

Even if one could prove that a history major has met a set of competencies—like learning to think historically, write well, and analyze data—that is not enough to earn a history degree, since one of the most important parts of being a history major is learning about different times and places in new ways. History programs ask students to take classes on different eras and places with different professors because it is worth doing even if students are “competent” historians. Demonstrating competence, therefore, is only *one* of the goals of the history major.

The same applies to other fields. In English, for example, is it enough to learn to read and analyze texts well? Or do we want students to spend time in classes where they engage in serious conversations about texts and where they have experiences that can inspire them to see the world differently? We hope students will be asked to take different courses and read different kinds of literature with different kinds of professors because these experiences are as



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important as the competencies students develop on the way.

This is as true of general education. The goal of general education is not just to master competencies, but also to expose students to different domains of knowledge and ways of thought in order to develop their potential as human beings and provide a foundation for citizenship. Much of this will be—as it should be—idiosyncratic and incapable of standardization, since we are dealing with people teaching other people about important topics.

The purpose of liberal education—unlike vocational education—is not to train but to change people, and this takes seat time. While colleges may hold themselves accountable for student outcomes, these outcomes can never and will never substitute for the experiences that happen on college campuses, both within the classroom and beyond it. The cumulative effect of these experiences transcends demonstrating competence in a subject or field. It is about students engaging, over several years, in an intellectual journey in which they develop new ways of understanding the world and are given the chance to explore.

### Conclusion

It is a shame that we live in a moment in which the pursuit of knowledge for noncommercial purposes is deemed to be of little value. It reduces the purpose of knowledge to generating profit—whether for individual students or for society. This is at odds with the very ideal of liberal education, which has always been oriented around teaching people how to resist the pursuit of immediate self-interest in order to serve larger human and civic purposes. A liberal education offers people the tools they need to make sense of a complicated world because doing so is of immeasurable value to individuals and society. Ideally, a liberal education would instill in students the disposition to ask questions that they did not know were worth asking.

Fostering students' curiosity about the world requires that they be immersed for a part of their lives in an environment that treats intellectual inquiry—not demonstrating competence—as the highest goal. Competency-based education can improve the quality of college education by helping colleges and disciplines identify some of the specific skills and knowledge that they

**Ideally, a liberal education would instill in students the disposition to ask questions that they did not know were worth asking**

want their graduates to exhibit, but it will always be just a small part of the overall picture. A good collegiate education also offers intellectual experiences not available elsewhere that can change a life and last a lifetime. This is why competency-based education and awarding credit for prior learning will not be a disruptive game changer for most college campuses, despite efforts to tout it as such. □

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## A Troubled Adolescence

# What the Fifteenth Birthday of the Bologna Process Means for Liberal Education

PAUL L. GASTON

P E R S P E C T I V E S

**Implementation of the Bologna Process has stalled in part because of a continuing hollowness at the core, the lack of a compelling vision of higher education**

CONCEIVED IN PARIS in 1998 and born in 1999 in Bologna, the European higher education reform initiative known as the Bologna Process approaches its fifteenth birthday. As is the case with some adolescents, there are problems.

If we were to plan a party for the occasion, we might encounter diverse reflections. First, we would be proud of what our honoree has accomplished. Second, we would regret that some of the honoree's aspirations have not been fulfilled, for reasons both indigenous and external. To be fair we would have to acknowledge how exploitation and misunderstanding have impeded Bologna's efforts. And we would have to concede that the environment for change in recent years has proved inhospitable. Third, we would feel concerns for the future based on what we see in the present. Finally, we might find ourselves looking beyond the accomplishments, the shortfalls, and the problems to question whether the values evident in the birth and growth of the Bologna Process are likely to sustain it over the long term. If the vision of Bologna should prove insufficient to sustain its agenda, the most important accomplishment of the Bologna Process may be its having established a base camp from which a more important climb can begin.

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PAUL L. GASTON is *Trustees Professor at Kent State University*. The author thanks Tim Birtwistle, *professor emeritus at Leeds Metropolitan University, who has served the UK as an appointed "Bologna Expert" since 2003. He reviewed a draft of this essay and offered valuable suggestions for its revision.*

### **Unprecedented accomplishment**

The Bologna Process can claim significant accomplishments. According to the 1999 Declaration, within a decade there would be in place a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in which students and faculty members would enjoy greater educational mobility, records-keeping would be transformed by an improved credit and transfer system, students would receive a "diploma supplement" interpreting their academic accomplishments, "overarching" learning outcomes would provide a framework for educational qualifications profiles in every participating nation, expectations for enhanced quality assurance would be defined, and a quilt of arcane credentials and varying degree program lengths would be re-stitched into an inviting duvet of programs of comparable length and with familiar names: bachelor's, master's, doctorate. Informing each of these objectives was a commitment to clarify, strengthen, and promote distinctive values of European higher education. As the process evolved, it incorporated a few additional action lines: the pursuit of a "social dimension," support for lifetime learning, and recognition of the global impact of the process. And it embraced important additional stakeholders as well, such as the European University Association, the European Students' Union, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, and Business Europe.

Many elements of this vision have been realized. Called on to report accomplishments at meetings every two years, the ministers focused first on what could be achieved most readily. And so in 2009 when it was time to take stock



EHEA Ministerial Conference and Third Bologna Policy Forum, 2012

of the first decade of the process, they pointed to reforms that had been accomplished primarily through governmental action: the creation of a consistent degree structure, the routine delivery of the diploma supplement, the expanded functionality of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, and the broad, if multifarious, attention given to lifetime learning. The number of nations with national quality assurance agencies has increased significantly, and thirteen countries now list agencies that have qualified for recognition by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education.

Another measure of Bologna's success may be found in the expansion of its membership and influence. Since 1999, the number of participating nations has increased by more than a third, from twenty-nine to forty-seven, and from a compact European footprint to one that stretches from Reykjavik (Iceland) to Vladivostok (Russia). Moreover, as David Crosier and Teodora Parveva have documented in their 2013 study for UNESCO, *The Bologna Process: Its Impact in Europe and Beyond*, Bologna's influence now extends far beyond Europe, to nations from North Africa to Latin America. To this end, the European ministers agreed in 2007 to a strategy described in their white paper, *European Higher Education in a Global Setting*. Indeed, an important effort to build consensus in the United States regarding learning outcomes, the *Degree Qualifications Profile*, has clear roots in Europe's "overarching framework." My 2010 book, *The Challenge of Bologna: What United States Higher Education Has to Learn from Europe, and Why It Matters That We Learn*

Kent State University



It, argues that many elements of Bologna Process, suitably adapted, could contribute significantly to the strengthening of US higher education.

For a comprehensive view of all that has been accomplished, both nation by nation and through the process as a whole, we can consult *The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report*. The record is impressive. It may not be an exaggeration to describe Bologna, in the words of Crosier and Parveva's UNESCO study, as "the most significant and transformative higher education reform process in history."

### Unfulfilled aspirations

Any fair-minded observer would have to find Bologna's birthday goblet more than half full. But even the most positive view would have to acknowledge that there have been flaws in execution, that much remains to be accomplished, that some of the accomplishments have not led to the desired results, and that documentation of recent performance has been far from encouraging. For a complete (and remarkably candid) overview of Bologna's shortfalls, we may consult the 2012 EHEA report mentioned above. Or we may take up the somewhat more critical review offered in *Bologna with Student Eyes 2012*. This report from the European Students' Union (ESU) points to unsatisfactory progress in many areas and finds the Process "deplorably sliding backwards on some of the key action lines" (5). The picture is complex, but we may summarize areas of concern according to three categories: sluggishness, selectivity, and ambiguity.

The first area of concern involves action lines for which progress lags behind expectations. For instance, many nations have failed to meet explicit deadlines for the completion of national outcomes frameworks. As another example, while the diploma supplement may be provided routinely, acceptance and understanding by employers remains a challenge. Charts in the EHEA report show clearly which nations are in the lead on particular initiatives, which are trailing, and which appear to be having difficulty getting under way.

The second area of concern arises from the perception that some nations are choosing which initiatives to pursue and which to ignore. Because a fundamental value of the Bologna Process has been the synergy of its combined elements, what many commentators have described as a

*la carte* approaches to implementation may call into question a nation's commitment to the process as a whole. Here, again, the EHEA and ESU reports are revealing.

The third area of concern may be the most worrisome. It includes the perception that success in one area may have created impediments for another. As an example, wide implementation of the three-year baccalaureate, which requires an urgent and efficient curriculum, has made it more challenging for students to consider study abroad, with the result that the significantly greater mobility envisioned in the Bologna Process has not been attained. The concern also includes misgivings about whether actions taken at the ministerial level have yet had appreciable impact on teaching and learning. For instance, has the implementation of new program structures inspired curricular reform? Or did reform end in some countries with the assignment of new degree names to five-year programs brusquely divided into three-year (baccalaureate) and two-year (master's) programs?

To this area of concern belongs also the pursuit of the "social dimension" of the process, an action line recommended by the universities and their students. Not until 2007 did the ministers clarify that this priority would focus on greater inclusiveness, a closer correspondence between the diversity of national populations and that of higher education student bodies. Since then, this priority has led to greater visibility of concerns over access, to increased understanding of the problems involved, and to some considerations of remedial policies, such as improved recognition of prior learning. But so far there appear to be few specific targets for improvement, much less any indicators of substantive gains.

Such a brief summary can do little more than suggest areas of underperformance that are doubtless inevitable in any undertaking this ambitious. The question is whether a revitalized commitment to full implementation of the Bologna Process will eventually address and resolve such issues. Or do they point to more intractable impediments?

### **Unsettling portents**

There were signs even in the early going that the ministers might have been unrealistic so far as the initial ten-year Bologna timeline was concerned.

## **The significantly greater mobility envisioned in the Bologna Process has not been attained**

Even by the third biennial conference, it had become apparent that not all nations—in fact, not very many—would meet the deadline for filing their completed national qualifications frameworks. As the decade continued, more problems in maintaining the anticipated pace on this and other action lines would appear, even as additional action lines were adopted. As a result, in 2007 the ministers agreed that the work of Bologna would not be complete by 2009 and would require a second ten-year term.

If the future of Bologna at this point were dependent solely on the promise inherent in the action lines, we might anticipate not only their completion within all participating nations, but also an important consolidation of gains already made. But Bologna has encountered two kinds of problems. Some are indigenous. Others have arisen from external circumstances.

Bologna's internal woes stem largely from three limitations.

First, the process was implemented unapologetically as a top-down mandate—but one with no legal force. The ministers assumed that the kinds of reforms they had in mind at first could be achieved largely through bureaucratic will, and they were encouraged by early success. When it became apparent that the cooperation of university leaders would be essential for continued progress, the process expanded to include them. When faculty members undertook to define disciplinary learning outcomes through "tuning" discussions, Bologna recognized this effort as complementary. And when the students called for a "social dimension" to the process, the ministers listened. But the legacy of Bologna's autocratic origins remains an impediment at the institutional level, where faculty support for Bologna hardly registers and where student resistance, though sometimes misinformed, has often become vociferous.

Second, the Bologna priorities reveal both internal contradictions and a neglect of audiences. We have already noted that the effort to shrink the baccalaureate to an urgent and pragmatic three-year program might create a challenge for the effort to persuade undergraduates to devote a semester or a year to the enlightening inefficiencies of study abroad. Similarly, the need to interpret and promote the three-year baccalaureate and the diploma supplement for employers might have been more fully acknowledged at the outset.

Finally, by avoiding the costs of creating an administrative hub for the process, preferring instead a rotation of managerial responsibilities among member states, the ministers avoided one issue, the costs of yet another centralized organizational superstructure, but have encountered another: a lack of continuity, consistency, and strategic thinking. There has been a dearth of leadership.

Beyond having to manage these internal issues, supporters of the Bologna Process have encountered several misfortunes not of their making. Most conspicuous has been the harsh and long-lasting impact on Europe of the worldwide global recession. Though designed for efficiency and economy, the Bologna Process, like any program of reform, requires funding for both practical and subjective reasons. But a 2013

report from the European Commission documents declines in spending on higher education in nearly half of the twenty-eight countries surveyed. Not surprisingly, higher education has suffered most in countries with the greatest deficits. And, not surprisingly, when funding for higher education is being reduced, funding available to support reform initiatives represents an even greater challenge.

Almost as daunting as the financial problems has been erosion in the level of commitment to European unification. From its origins, the Bologna Process has reflected the understanding that if the nations of Europe are to become more competitive internationally, they must expand their cooperation with one another, eliminate all but the most meaningful national idiosyncrasies, and measure their progress more



Kent State University

as a community, less as an aggregation of competing countries. Three factors have arisen within the past decade to threaten this progressive view.

First, rising nationalist sentiments throughout Europe have revealed deep cracks in the façade of European unity. While the 2005 failure of EU constitutional ratifications in France and the Netherlands may have reflected concerns about the competence of the EU in economic matters more than opposition to European integration, the doubts threw a stumbling block in the path toward increased unification. Since then, virtually every month has brought reports of dissension. Most recently,

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fractious pronouncements during the spring 2013 effort to reach agreement on an EU budget offered a reminder that tensions continue to develop. A computer search on the issue “EU discord,” though of dubious value as a research technique, will turn up

1,280,000 results! Some countries are experiencing this pressure on two fronts, internal and external. For example, the UK now faces two critical referendums, one, in 2014, on the issue of Scottish independence, the other, scheduled for 2017, on the UK’s membership in the EU.

Second, proponents of nationalism have found an advantage in concerns about the economic stability of some EU nations. If the shared currency, the euro, depends on agreements that successful economies must direct assistance to those encountering problems, the euro’s days may be numbered. Objections in Germany to the so-called 2012 “bailout” of Greece are a conspicuous indicator of growing concerns as to the sustainability of such arrangements.

A final factor so far as European unity is concerned lies in one dimension of Bologna’s success. By accepting into the process newcomers such as Russia and many of the former Soviet republics, the Bologna Process embraced a far broader spectrum of practice, principle, and process. That diversity appears in results reported in the 2012 EHEA report, which reveals that more recent Bologna arrivals from the East are as a rule less likely to document across-the-board progress. Strong contrasts between significant progress in some action lines and very little in others, though in part a reflection of their different start dates, suggest that the *a la carte* approach may have expanded also.

Two other external distractions deserve brief mention. First, the Bologna Process has provided protective cover for some European political leaders pursuing their own agendas for change in higher education. Some have cited the Bologna Process in effecting changes in higher education funding and in governance when any connection between such initiatives and Bologna is peripheral at best. By contrast, and equally as damaging, some European political and educational leaders have announced important higher education reform initiatives without mentioning the Bologna Process. Both trends—Bologna as protective cover, Bologna as



afterthought—threaten the durability of the Bologna Process.

It may in time become apparent that the current period of “EU discord” has been but an aberration in the continent’s otherwise fairly steady progress toward economic, political, and academic integration. But it could also be the case that the portents of the past few years point to continuing erosion in a sense of European community. Much hangs in the balance—including the Bologna Process.

#### **A question of vision**

The origins of Bologna were unambiguously autocratic, utilitarian, economic, and Eurocentric. Europe would once again become the world’s preeminent higher educator, more competitive, more attractive to international students, and its more efficient, effective, and well-coordinated systems of higher education would fuel the European economy. In the short term, the pragmatism of these objectives probably facilitated their implementation. The first stages, those of programmatic restructuring, a broader mandate for the credit registry, and a commitment to the diploma supplement, required primarily state-level governmental support. That such support was in general made available within an urgent time frame responded to the consistent focus on European political and intellectual ascendancy and a clear link between education reform and economic growth.

Since then, Bologna has evolved in several positive ways—in part because of the influence of students and university leaders, in part because of growth and turnover in the ranks of Bologna education ministers, and in part because the path to success has proved more problematical than earlier envisioned. But as Bologna approaches its fifteenth birthday, it must appeal to the public, to university leaders, to faculty members, and to students if its reforms are to take root and strengthen learning. There’s the rub. While a generous reading of the Bologna Declaration and ensuing documents may trust that they somehow reflect broader assumptions concerning education’s capacity to engage students in different ways of knowing and stimulate their appetite for disinterested learning, there is little evidence of attention to such values.

To the contrary, following accomplishment of the initial priorities, the limitations of Bologna’s

### **Following accomplishment of the initial priorities, the limitations of Bologna’s objectives have become increasingly apparent**

objectives have become increasingly apparent. For one thing, the advertised link between educational reform and economic development, while remaining theoretically intact, has become less persuasive during a protracted recession. For another, students

have found that their restructured programs allow little space for any but the most restrictive programs of study. Universities have sometimes found themselves junior partners in discussion of their most vital interests. And employers, consulted infrequently in the early stages, have expressed through their hiring preferences a skepticism concerning new program structures and new credentials.

Hence more recent stages of implementation requiring the engagement of higher education in defining what students should know and be able to do have proved more challenging. For instance, if the development of a national educational outcomes framework is to influence learning as it is achieved and measured, it must embody the experience and wisdom of university authorities, of faculty members, and of students. But the discussion required for framing meaningful, practical, and engaging learning objectives at a national level must necessarily move beyond utilitarian objectives if they are eventually to inspire commitment by those essential to their accomplishment.

When we turn to the “overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA” for guidance in terms of the educational vision guiding the Bologna Process, what we find are highly utilitarian standards of competence in a “field of study.” A first cycle (baccalaureate) qualification should provide “knowledge and understanding” commensurate with “a professional approach to their work or vocation.” Degree recipients should be able “to form judgments that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues.” And they should have the skills to succeed in further study. Students pursuing the second cycle should build on what they have accomplished in the first, apply what they have learned to a broader range of environments, and have the ability to “communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously.” The distinctive elements of the third

cycle include “the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity.” Doctoral students are to extend “the frontier of knowledge.”

Where within that statement or within any of the statements developed through the Bologna Process do we find a summons to address “big questions, both contemporary and enduring”? Where do we find an emphasis on creativity, problem solving, teamwork? Where is there the expectation for “intercultural knowledge and competence”? Where the understanding that knowledge must be “anchored through active involvement with diverse communities”? And, perhaps most to the point, where is there the acknowledgement that learning must be integrative, seeking *beyond* “a field of study” the expanding knowledge that can be found only at the boundaries between such fields?

These references to the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (2007) Essential Learning Outcomes offer a useful critique of expectations that remain resolutely utilitarian. With the model of the Essential Learning Outcomes in mind, we may find it difficult to avoid the impression that implementation of the Bologna Process has stalled in part because of a continuing hollowness at the core, the lack of a compelling vision of higher education that can speak to those most directly engaged in its pursuit.

To conclude optimistically, that may change. As universities become more deeply engaged with the Bologna Process in the remaining years of its tenure, particularly with the effort to interpret and implement national learning outcomes, an expanded Bologna vision may emerge, as what has so far been accomplished provides a platform for discussions that could lead Europeans and their colleagues throughout the world to recognize and revisit important questions of purpose and meaning. Having offered the United States a valuable example through its logistical reforms and innovative tools, perhaps Europe’s higher education leaders might now consider accepting an example in return, namely, that of the advantages inherent in the American commitment to liberal education for a nation “going to college.” Perhaps those dedicated to the success of the Bologna Process are already beginning to move in this direction. They have come a long way, after all. But they have a long way to go. □

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# Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies

EBOO PATEL

P E R S P E C T I V E S

THERE HAS BEEN DRAMATIC GROWTH in interfaith activity over the past twenty years, no doubt linked to the increasing diversity many people are now experiencing and to the prevalence of high-profile religious extremism and conflict. A half century ago, few cities had any organized interfaith programs. Today, dozens have some sort of initiative, everything from interfaith councils to festivals of faith. Religious denominations have invited leaders from other

religions to give keynotes at their

gatherings, and local congregations have started interfaith exchange programs. Think tanks have commissioned task forces and issued reports. The United Nations has launched a major interfaith initiative called the Alliance of Civilizations. Muslim and Christian theologians have unveiled a document called “A Common Word Between Us and You.” Celebrated world religions author Karen Armstrong has used her TED prize to issue a “Charter of Compassion,” calling all religions to redefine themselves by that shared, core value. Princes, prime ministers, and presidents have all, in various ways, lent their support to the interfaith cause.

I’ve been involved in interfaith work for some fifteen years, most of that time as founder and president of an organization called Interfaith Youth Core, which partners with college campuses on interfaith programs. When I was just starting out in the late 1990s, and whenever I happened to mention the term “interfaith” to someone, I mostly got met with a blank stare. When I tell someone now that I run an interfaith organization, there’s a good chance that

I’m met with a knowing look, followed by a dizzying range of responses, such as “It’s so great that you are working to support people’s spiritual journeys” or “I believe in all religions too” or “I’m glad someone is out there standing up for morality.” We’ve gone from no recognition of a term to a hundred different definitions, some of them contradictory.

Scholars from a range of fields have long taken an interest in how people who orient around religion differently interact with one another. Indeed, this phenomenon has been the subject of important works in political science (*The Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel Huntington), sociology (*American Grace* by Robert Putnam and David Campbell) and religion and theology (*No Other Name?* by Paul Knitter). As the activity in this area increases, one crucial role for the academy is to give some definition to what is clearly an emerging field of research, study, and practice. Another role is to recognize the importance of training people who have the knowledge base and skill set needed to engage religious diversity in a way that promotes peace, stability, and cooperation—and to begin offering academic programs that certify such leaders. What follows is my attempt to define the contours of “interfaith studies” and to give it some shape by articulating what a course of study in this field might look like.

## Interfaith studies

As an academic field, interfaith studies would examine the multiple dimensions of how individuals and groups who orient around religion differently interact with one another, along with the implications of these interactions for communities, civil society, and global politics. Clearly, it would be an interdisciplinary field. A psychologist might research how individuals who grow up in a religiously homogenous environment

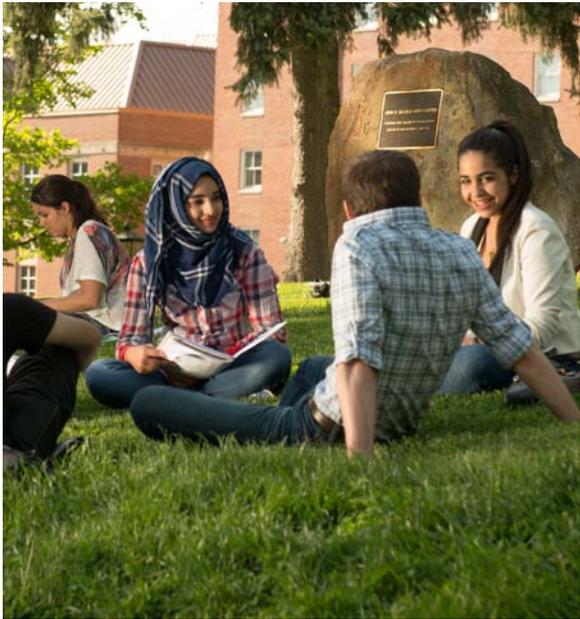
**Interfaith studies would examine the multiple dimensions of how individuals and groups who orient around religion differently interact with one another**

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EBOO PATEL is founder and executive director of Interfaith Youth Core. This article was adapted from the author’s Coca Cola World Fund Talk, delivered at Yale University in January 2013.



experience and cope with moving to religiously diverse surroundings. A political scientist could study why some nations have been more effective than others in absorbing religious minorities, or why politics is dominated by religion in some states and not in others (or perhaps the relationship between the two). A historian would draw parallels between the relatively tolerant empires of medieval Islam and contemporary North America. A sociologist might look at the role religious institutions play in assimilating immigrants. Philosophers might compare theories of pluralism, theologians would elucidate how to be Christian or Muslim or Jewish amongst “others,” professors of art and literature could choose to examine any of a thousand great works that have been created at the crossroads of religious imaginations.



**Ohio University**

Without a doubt, research projects such as these already exist in the academy. But they are disconnected—published in separate journals and discussed independently of one another at different conferences and in different departments. Academic fields are useful because they are formal spaces for a group of colleagues to engage in long-term data gathering, sustained reflection, and extended discussion. It is a question not only of collecting things, but of connecting them and cooperating together to decide what they might mean and how to apply key lessons. Consider similar areas that have become fields, gathering scholars from different disciplines to inquire, connect, and apply—urban studies, human and family studies, education, community development, social work.

One thing that unites the fields I’ve mentioned is a strong practitioner dimension. Scholars in these areas ask and pursue critical research questions, but they also create programs of study that shape leaders who “do” in their areas. Social work departments educate social workers, education departments train teachers, urban studies departments train city managers,

and so on. A major part of what interfaith studies would be about is nurturing a cadre of professionals, a group that I’m calling interfaith leaders. I’m defining an interfaith leader as someone with the framework, knowledge base, and skill set needed to help individuals and communities who orient around religion differently in civil society and politics build mutual respect, positive relationships, and a commitment to the common good. Put simply, an effective interfaith leader is one who can work with diversity to build pluralism.

Like Harvard University Professor Diana Eck, I define diversity as simply the fact of people and groups with different identities living in close quarters. Pluralism, according to Eck, is an achievement—it is the proactive engagement of this diversity toward positive ends. My own definition of pluralism has three parts: respect for different identities, positive relationships between diverse communities, and a collective commitment to the common good. Diverse societies that achieve pluralism have a strong civic fabric—one that can withstand the provocations of extremists and haters—and bridge their social capital in ways that can take on some of their toughest social problems. But bridges don’t fall from the sky or rise from the ground; people build them. And the people who are on the vanguard of such work, we call leaders.

### **A curriculum for developing interfaith leaders**

What kind of academic program could educate and train interfaith leaders? For the purposes of this discussion, I’m imagining a concentration in an undergraduate program—a course sequence a student might take as part of a major in religion, political science, or international relations. The foundational course would be called “Religious Diversity, Civil Society, and World Politics,” and the first text that would be taught is Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*. The first assignment would be to read Huntington alongside a week’s worth of the *New York Times* and come to class prepared to argue against his thesis. If it is a typically bloody week, there will be far more that seems to illustrate Huntington’s ideas than disprove them.

This discussion would hopefully raise a series of questions that the rest of the coursework would attempt to answer. The first question is about religious trends. Huntington was one of the first prominent academics to say that the

### What kind of academic program could educate and train interfaith leaders?

secularization theory was bunk, that religious identity was deeply ingrained in the human condition, and that most of humanity was likely to identify most closely with their faith for the foreseeable future. So twenty years after the *Clash of Civilizations*, what do we know about trends in religious identification? That is, what do we know not simply about the number of adherents of different religions across the globe, but also about diversity within cities, nations, and regions and about how people's religious orientations shape their attitudes toward everything from polio vaccines to the separation of church and state to girls' schooling? How devout and how diverse is our chosen area of interest, and how much is that likely to matter for issues of peace and stability?

The second question the Huntington conversation would be likely to raise is whether conflict between communities that orient around religion differently is in fact inevitable, as Huntington suggests. The third question is related to the second: if religious violence is not inevitable, then in what situations have diverse communities coexisted and even cooperated? This question is best answered through the literature of three disciplines. One is history—simply reading about the instances where diversity has become coexistence or cooperation. Some of my favorites include Maria Rosa Menocal's *The Ornament of the World* about medieval Andalusia and Zachary Karabell's *Peace Be upon You*.

A second discipline that helps answer this question is political science. I think political theory raises the hardest and most important question when it comes to religious diversity, namely, under what political and social conditions can communities who have very different ideas of what is good and lawful on Earth, based on a set of cosmic convictions, live together in the same society? To give just one example, many Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains believe that all of life—including all animals and some vegetables—is holy and should be unharmed. They live together in India with about 140 million Muslims who believe that slaughtering goats on certain days is holy and that eating meat on most other days a very good idea. How can these groups with such basic differences anchored in cosmic convictions be expected to share a society together?

These are the kinds of questions that the political theorists Michael Walzer, Alfred Stepan, and John Courtney Murray have explored.

Finally, sociology. What do we know from people doing empirical work, both ethnographic and quantitative, about how communities who orient differently around religion might get along? Robert Putnam and David Campbell's *American Grace* asks how America, as a nation that is both religiously diverse and religiously devout, has remained largely tolerant, even during times of religious tension and conflict elsewhere. Karl Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac's *Pax Ethnica* takes an ethnographic look at a range of highly diverse cities around the world and asks what makes places like Flushing or Marseille largely cooperative? Brown University Professor Ashutosh Varshney has a hugely important study of India called *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* in which he asks why some cities in India remain calm during times of communal tension and others erupt in violent conflict. The answer is surprisingly simple: the single biggest difference between stability and violence seems to be attributable to whether or not civic networks (Rotary Clubs and the like) exist within a city and bring people from different backgrounds together on a regular basis. That answer, incidentally, highlights why I am calling this a program in interfaith leadership. Civic networks that bring diverse people together don't fall from the sky; they are built and maintained by leaders.

A second course would be "Case Studies in Religious Violence and Interfaith Peacebuilding." This course would present actual instances of religious diversity becoming either conflict or cooperation and analyzing the role that leaders played in either fanning the flames of conflict or building the bridges of cooperation. Texts would include the multi-volume *Fundamentalism Project* by Scott Appleby and Martin Marty, David Smock's *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, and interfaith case studies developed by Harvard University's Pluralism Project. Key leadership texts by scholars like Ronald Heifetz and Howard Gardner would also be employed.

Case studies would include everything from how Osama bin Laden mobilized a set of Muslims to build a religious extremist organization to how Martin Luther King Jr. mobilized racially and religiously diverse people to build the civil rights movement. Some cases would come right

off the front pages of the *New York Times*, and students would be asked questions like the following: if you were in Grand Island, Nebraska, when Latino and African American Christians staged a walkout of a factory because the Somali Muslims workers had recently won a schedule change to accommodate Ramadan hours, how would you lead? That question—how would you lead?—would be at the heart of all the discussions in this class. Akin to the Harvard Business School case-study model, which presents students with real-life situations faced by companies and asks them what they would do if they were in charge, this course would constantly be asking the students how they would strengthen interfaith cooperation in particular situations when diversity seems to be tending toward conflict.

A third course I would require is something along the lines of “Perspectives in Religion.” In some ways, this would be like the typical course offered in most religious studies departments on the nature of religion, with readings by Jose Casanova, Talal Assad, Clifford Geertz, Mircea Eliade, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Marshall Hodgson, Peter Berger, Rudolph Otto, Paul Tillich, Huston Smith, Stephen Prothero, and the classics—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Students would examine various theories of religion. Students would be asked to consider Otto’s notion that at the center of religion is an experience that is wholly other, something he called “the numinous,” and Tillich’s view that religion is about ultimate concerns. They’d consider Cantwell Smith’s view that religion is best understood as cumulative historical traditions, that the term “faith” is best defined as the relationship that individuals and communities have with various dimensions of that tradition, as well as Berger’s emphasis on institutions as the “plausibility structures” that create patterns of activity in human life and his key insight that modernity pluralizes—moving personal identity from fate to choice, making the internal life of human beings far more complex now than in premodern times. Students would put scholars like Huston Smith and Stephen Prothero into dialogue with each other, exploring whether religions are actually quite similar (as Smith suggests) or really very different (as Prothero writes) from one another. This course would widen perspectives and debunk common myths, like the idea that sacred scripture somehow gets up and walks

around by itself, with no assistance from human interpreters.

The final course I would require is “Theologies of Interfaith Cooperation.” Students would read theologians and ethicists from a range of faiths—including secular humanism—who advance interpretations and narratives of their traditions that speak to building positive relationships with “the other.” This would include Khaled Abou El Fadl, Farid Esack, Umar Abd-Allah, Fazlur Rahman, and Ingrid Mattson out of Islam; Jonathan Sacks, Or Rose, Marc Gopin, and Abraham Joshua Heschel out of Judaism; Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda from Hinduism; Paul Knitter and Hans Kung from Catholicism; and Miroslav Volf and Brian McLaren from Protestant Evangelical Christianity. The course would focus on the key question of how theologians from a range of traditions have stitched together interpretations of scripture, stories, heroes, and historical moments from their key sources in order to articulate a coherent narrative of positive relationship with the religious other.

The course would also explore how theologians navigate challenging and complex questions. What do Jewish theologians do with the idea of “chosenness” in relating to “the religious other”? How do Evangelicals view the idea of Christ as the exclusive path to salvation in light of admiring the spiritual example of someone like the Dalai Lama or Gandhi? The core idea here is that positive relations between those who orient around religion differently do not require leaving religion aside. Some of the greatest interfaith leaders of the twentieth century—Gandhi and King to name two obvious ones—built bridges with people of other faiths precisely because of their respective Hindu and Christian faiths, not despite them. Interfaith leaders need to be fluent in the theology of interfaith cooperation of their own tradition, and literate in such theologies in other traditions.

After this four-course sequence, I would require two electives that could be chosen from a range of options. Some students might want to do a deeper dive into religion by taking courses in Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc. Some might want to focus on a particular region, say South Asia or the Middle East. Students would also choose between two options for their capstone projects. The first option would be to design and implement a

## The emphasis is on the public dimension of religion

local interfaith project that puts into practice key theories and skills of interfaith leadership learned through coursework. The second option would be to write a program proposal for dealing with an interfaith challenge elsewhere in the country or the world. The key requirement in both cases would be that the students make use of interfaith leaders in civil society to build pluralism out of diversity.

### The public dimension of religion

I think it is fair to say that most of the current interest in interfaith cooperation is rooted in the personal, the pastoral, and the spiritual. Questions about one's own religious or spiritual identity in relation to others are always highly salient at interfaith gatherings and in much of the literature about interfaith work. The program of study I outline above begins from a different starting place, however. It is about the civic and political more than the personal. The emphasis is on the public dimension of religion—how its narratives promote conflict or cooperation, how its social capital can be mobilized toward violence or community building. I have no doubt that people who want to reflect upon their personal spiritual journeys would find much of interest in this program, but it leans toward preparation for leadership in a world of religious diversity. It would, I believe, be good training for a range of professional paths.

In her book *The Mighty and the Almighty*, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright wrote, "When I was secretary of state, I had an entire bureau of economic experts I could turn to, and a cadre of experts on nonproliferation and arms control. . . . I did not have similar expertise available for integrating religious principles into our efforts at diplomacy" (2006, 75). It is an important reminder that, ultimately, it's not paradigms that carry out foreign policy; it's people. The State Department is one place that I think ought to be interested in hiring leaders trained in interfaith studies, but it's far from the only place. Staff of international development organizations attempting to spread polio vaccines in South Asia or anti-malarial bed nets in sub-Saharan Africa better be aware of the religious energies in those places. YMCA executive directors and school principals in inner city Minneapolis would do

well to know something about the faith practices of the Somali Muslims, Hmong Shamanists, and Native Americans of the area. City officials

in rapidly diversifying cities like Atlanta, Houston, and Birmingham should have some knowledge of the Hindu customs of their Indian populations. And it would be a double tragedy if the first time that journalists from Milwaukee news outlets visited the local Sikh temple was in the immediate aftermath of a white supremacist shooting six people there. □

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# A Plea for Civil Discourse Needed, the Academy's Leadership

ANDREA LESKES

**Civil discourse  
must be addressed  
at the heart of  
undergraduate  
education**

*A CRUCIBLE MOMENT: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, Commissioned by the US Department of Education, was published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in 2012. Representing the work of the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012), the report builds a strong case for higher education's responsibility, in collaboration with the larger society, for assuring that all students have the skills and knowledge they need to become informed, civically engaged citizens. This article is intended to complement *A Crucible Moment* by focusing in greater depth on civil discourse and the crucial need for colleges and universities to commit strongly to its survival.

My decision to write was born from a visceral and gripping fear that the current breakdown in public discourse is eating away at the very core of US democracy, thereby also undermining the climate a great academic community needs to thrive. Further, I fear that the failure of politicians and the general public to seek compromise threatens the prestige of participatory democracy itself and the position of the United States as its advocate. How credible is the

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ANDREA LESKES is senior fellow, past vice president, and former director of the Greater Expectations initiative at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (1999–2006). She retired as president of the Institute for American Universities in Aix-en-Provence, France, in 2011.

country as a model of true democratic processes if the public arena is dysfunctional? If during a major televised address to Congress, a Representative shouts out “you lie” to the president, disrespecting the office as well as the incumbent? If, inflamed by hate speech, a partisan shoots an elected official (and receives plaudits for doing so)? Isn't now the moment, when fault lines among worldviews are reordering on a global scale, to show the great strengths of democracy rather than elements of its decline? The world is watching.

The United States of America—that inspiring experiment in democratic government—was founded on compromise; the Constitution, one of the greatest give-and-take documents, describes a government with multiple loci of power. The bicameral makeup of Congress ensures the rights of small and large states alike, a solution reached during the republic's creation. The United States came into existence because of religious and heritage plurality. The country's plurality in the twenty-first century includes an entire spectrum of skin colors, ethnic groups, beliefs, languages, and cultures. In a pluralistic society, people hold varying views, and that very diversity is an inherent strength. In a country anchored in compromise and diversity, discourse among people of good faith should flourish.

Many individuals and groups, including those from both sides of the political aisle, publicly deplore the virulence and personal attacks heard daily in US politics, barbs that



aim more to destroy credibility and undermine the power of dissenters than to advance any common good. Decrying the “lost art of democratic argument” (Sandel 2011), various observers have noted the “nastiness, name-calling, and negativity” (Allegheny College 2010), calling it “raw and bitter and dangerous” (Noonan 2010) and labeling ours a “rude democracy” (Herbst 2010), a “place where bipartisanship and compromise are dirty words” (Baker 2012).

Under the daily barrage of invective, we may sometimes believe that confrontation and rancor are products of the modern era. But this would be a simplification of history; there was never a “true ‘golden age’ of purely constructive discourse” (Herbst 2011, 8). Democracy is messy, and controversial issues have always generated strong feelings. The time of the early republic, for example, was a highly combative era. During the presidential campaign of 1800, Jefferson’s supporters accused the incumbent John Adams of being “a hideously hermaphroditical character.” Adams’s partisans countered: “Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will all be openly taught and practiced [during a Jefferson presidency] . . . the soil will be soaked with blood.” The year 1804 witnessed one of

## What is civil discourse?

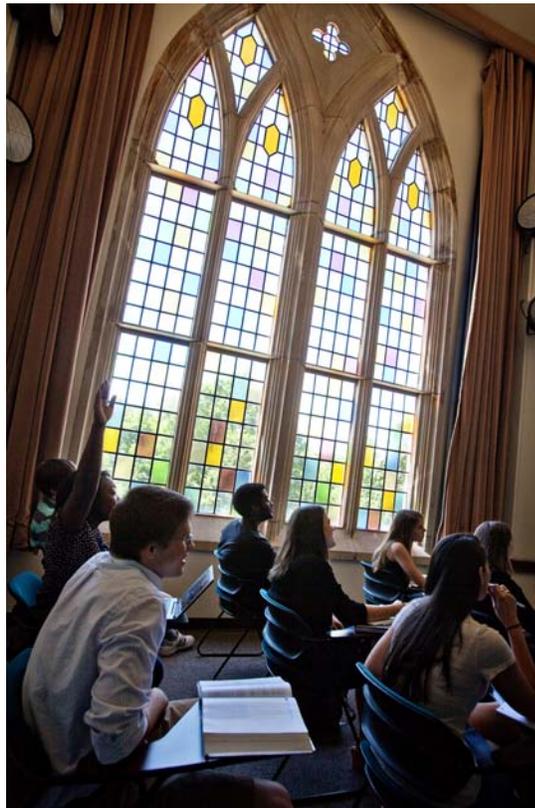
the most heinous outcomes of political enmity when Aaron Burr shot and killed Alexander Hamilton. During the acrimonious pre-Civil War period, screaming and beatings were commonplace on the floor of the Congress (Herbst 2011).

While some scholars describe the United States as always having been rough and tumble, with today no worse than before, for many observers (including journalists) the situation is out of hand, the mood hysterical. Presidential contenders who decry compromise or promise dogmatic firmness encourage the public to applaud and emulate such intransigence; yet “public decision-making does not lend itself to certitude” (Leach 2011). The difference from earlier periods, and what makes the problem more pervasive, is the fact that “everyone has a megaphone” (Shuster 2013) and all opinions can reach massive audiences instantaneously. Winograd and Hais, in *Millennial Makeover*, suggest that, while members of the Millennial generation are more interested in working with peers toward a win-win solution than Baby Boomers, the opinion of each group member carries equal weight. The sound bites of ubiquitous Tweets, blogs, and online reader comments require no knowledge of the issue at hand; error or disinformation incur no consequences.

What I hope to add to the conversation about civility in political and social discourse is a charge to the academy to commit itself strenuously and immediately to improving civil discourse as a tool of democracy, most importantly in the next generation of college graduates but also in the public at large. According to a poll (Allegheny College 2010), 44 percent of the 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed identified higher education as the most pivotal player to restore civility (30 percent of those above age 65 agreed).

### Defining civil discourse

What is civil discourse? A 2011 conversation among national leaders from many fields, held at the US Supreme Court, defined civil discourse as “robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest” (Brosseau 2011). James Calvin Davis, in his book *In Defense of Civility*, proposes “the exercise of patience, integrity, humility and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (or especially) with those with whom we disagree” (2010, 159). National Public Radio journalist Diane Rehm, during an



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event at Oberlin College, said simply: our ability to have conversation about topics about which we disagree, and our ability to listen to each other's perspectives (Choby 2011).

For the purposes of this article, discourse that is civil means that those involved

- undertake a serious exchange of views;
- focus on the issues rather than on the individual(s) espousing them;
- defend their interpretations using verified information;
- thoughtfully listen to what others say;
- seek the sources of disagreements and points of common purpose;
- embody open-mindedness and a willingness change their minds;
- assume they will need to compromise and are willing to do so;
- treat the ideas of others with respect;
- avoid violence (physical, emotional, and verbal).

While some consider politeness and good behavior as essential to civil discourse, Ahrens (2009) argues that civil discourse must accommodate offensive expression, with the latter term capturing the harshness of many public debate conflicts. Leach (2011) says that civility "is not simply or principally about manners. It doesn't mean that spirited advocacy is to be avoided. Indeed, argumentation is a social good. Without [it] there is a tendency to dogmatism, even tyranny." Herbst (2010, 148) suggests that "even some incivility can move a policy debate along. Creating a culture of argument, and the thick skin that goes along with it, are long-term projects that will serve democracy well." One should not expect civil discourse to create a feeling of comfort; discord causes uneasiness, and a challenge to deeply held opinions induces pain.

Wegge (2013) distinguishes two elements in civil discourse: (1) the emotive, as expressed through manners and norms of behavior (moderating or failing to moderate self-control), and (2) "constructive confrontation" or civility demonstrated through argument and deliberation. In any case, civil discourse goes beyond courtesy. It involves committing to an informed, frank exchange of ideas, along with an understanding of complexity and ambiguity. Koegler (2012) clarifies that "civil" refers not to mannered conduct but to membership in a civil society. He suggests that civil discourse has both a process ("a pragmatic and open dialogue of the

issues themselves, based on evidence and argument, coupled with the willingness to learn from the other") and content ("serious conversation about public matters of common concern").

As used here, the term civil discourse includes speaking or writing knowledgeably about a topic and harkens back to the definition of discourse as the process or power of reasoning. It is this basis in reasoned inquiry that affords one essential hook for holding higher education accountable.

### **Civil discourse in civic learning**

*A Crucible Moment* advocates for adding to college study a third nationwide educational priority, complementing those of increased access and career preparation: the graduation of responsibly engaged citizens. These graduates will need to be informed through knowledge, including knowledge of the political process and the major issues of current and former times. They will also need to be empowered by possessing a range of intellectual and practical skills. Civil discourse, a central skill of such civic learning, itself rests on core intellectual abilities at the very heart of powerful education:

- critical inquiry
- analysis and reasoning
- information retrieval and evaluation
- effective written communication
- effective oral communication that includes listening as well as speaking
- an understanding of one's own perspectives and their limitations
- the ability to interact constructively with a diverse group of individuals holding conflicting views

Civil discourse also embodies the very values of civic learning: open-mindedness, compromise, and mutual respect.

Participants in civil discourse need to learn about the issue at hand, critically weigh the information's veracity and validity, build a logical argument, and present it in a convincing but nondoctrinaire manner to individuals who might not share the same views. They need to be respectfully attentive to alternative interpretations—weighing them, too, analytically—and be willing to alter positions based on convincing argument and evidence.

Educators will recognize these skills and values as those of any serious intellectual undertaking, which is why civil discourse is not limited to

political science or the political arena. It figures as centrally in any field with controversies—science or art or philosophy, for example—and, therefore, can be learned and practiced in most disciplines. Just like the core intellectual and practical abilities of liberal learning, civil discourse is transferable across disciplines and outside the academy, to the workplace and civic life. While concern about the harsh tenor of interchanges in the political arena catalyzed this article, as a democratic approach to handling controversy, civil discourse has broad applicability. Referencing Diane Rehm again, civil dialogue and discourse begin at home.

#### **Promoting civil discourse in undergraduate education**

Once we accept that students need to become adept civil discourses—for their own and democracy’s good—how can college education foster this important skill?

First, civil discourse must be addressed at the heart of undergraduate education. It cannot be relegated to student affairs or simply embodied in codes of conduct or speech, nor can it remain the purview of a department of politics or communications. Civil discourse needs to be addressed in general education for all students and embraced by the various majors, across the curriculum. Given the swirl of many students among institutions, commitment will be needed in all colleges and universities.

Second, students need to be taught (and not simply exposed to or asked to use) civil discourse, which means giving them both a theoretical basis of the concept and practical tools for using it. Theory could include, for example, definitions and rules, cultural variations and norms, plus analysis of the consequences of dogmatism. Practical tools might involve applying to contentious issues skills learned elsewhere in the curriculum: active listening, debating techniques, public speaking, as well as the basics of persuasive writing (turning opinions into arguments, refuting the arguments of others). Pedagogy is at least as

### **Students need to be taught (and not simply exposed to or asked to use) civil discourse**

important here as curricular design. Useful non-subject-specific classroom practices (discussed by Shuster but applicable to the university level) include intentionally teaching controversy or turning classroom discussion into a pedagogical strategy: consciously attending to the conduct of discussions, setting goals, having students summarize discussions, and requiring meta-analysis.

Third, we know from much formal research and informal observation that deep learning occurs cumulatively and progressively, whether the learning is of information or of skills. One-time exposure only initiates the process. Learners also progress better when exposed to multiple modalities, including active involvement. Therefore, college curricula and cocurricula should provide students the opportunity to study about, reflect on, and practice civil discourse in a purposeful manner at several points and in increasingly sophisticated ways. The process might start in a first-year seminar, continue in an introduction to the major where civil discourse could be applied to the controversies of the field, and form part of a senior seminar or thesis defense.

Fourth, as with any important learning outcome, the ability to engage in civil discourse needs to be assessed at least at the individual student and the program levels, formatively and summatively. How well do students understand the concept? How skillfully do they practice discourse that is effective and responsible? How successfully does the program (be it for a degree or not) meet its objectives and in what ways can it be improved? For such assessment, rubrics for civil discourse would need to be developed.

Fifth, given that the ability to engage in civil discourse has rarely figured as an institutional learning outcome (Roger Williams University is one notable exception), most professors will be ignorant of ways to include it in their courses—or even how to model it. Therefore, faculty development will be vital; fortunately, most campuses have internal expertise upon which to draw (e.g., their own political

#### **GOOD PRACTICE**

At Franklin Pierce University, public deliberation and sustained dialogue are an integral part of the required first-year seminar. Students learn theory—including the ground rules for civil discourse and techniques for moderating conversation—and then practice by developing briefs or role-playing. Links to co- and extra-curricular activities build bridges between the classroom and students’ wider lives.

scientists, linguists, philosophers, debate coaches, rhetoric teachers, and those from any field who teach controversy in the classroom).

How far has the academy progressed? Examples of civil discourse in general education or taught coherently across the curriculum, across the institution, or across a state system are difficult to find. They are yet to come. However, as a result of attention over many years to the civic engagement of college students, an excellent foundation exists for assuring that civically aware and informed graduates are also skilled in civil discourse. Some components of ongoing efforts could be part of a more comprehensive approach in undergraduate education.

At Roger Williams University, for example, where promoting civil discourse is a widely disseminated core value, numerous elements are in place. Students are expected to use open-minded interchanges effectively to present their positions on important topics. An array of initiatives turns the concept into a lived reality. The university's statement on civility is right at the front of the student handbook. Course syllabi identify relevant outcomes that—in biology, the science core, and business, among others—include civil discourse about the course content. A civil discourse lecture series features distinguished speakers, the journal *Reason and Respect* publishes the diverse viewpoints of campus community members, and graduating seniors who best demonstrate university values, including civil discourse, receive the Presidential Core Values Medallion.

Another commendable example is the Tulane Debate Education Society, an English Department service-learning project designed to catalyze a debate renaissance in New Orleans. Tulane undergraduates use principles of classical rhetoric to promote civil discourse and critical reasoning among middle school students, with special attention to disadvantaged youths. From debate teams at three original partner schools, the society has grown to twelve.

### **Robust engagement with difficult ideas is the basic tenet of academic freedom**

At the University of St. Thomas, the College of Arts and Sciences articulates its mission and vision as including the promotion of “civil discourse though . . . curricular and cocurricular offer-

ings.” To further its goal, the college created a Civil Discourse Lecture Series at which a prominent national or international figure models effective, responsible discussion. And at the University of Puget Sound, faculty members have developed guidelines for civil discourse that inform classroom and campus practice.

### **Promoting civil discourse in research and service**

Lee Bollinger (2005) said it eloquently (and I paraphrase): in addition to the central mission of transmitting to the next generation as much as it can of human understanding, the academic community adds new knowledge to the existing store. It also serves the local and broader communities through its impact on the world of thought (Sexton 2005) and as a site for engaging in serious conversation. Robust engagement with difficult ideas is the basic tenet of academic freedom, a concept that underlies all three elements of the academy's mission. Since colleges and universities thrive on reflection, nuance, and complexity, attention to civil discourse is not just possible but essential throughout their activities.

A scan of the enterprise reveals commitments that extend beyond educating undergraduates. For example, Allegheny College both contributes to new knowledge and provides a public service. Its Center for Political Participation conducts

national surveys on civility and compromise. The 2010 poll (Allegheny 2010) discloses that while 95 percent of responders believed civility in politics to be essential for a healthy democracy and 87 percent agreed that respectful discussion of political issues was possible, in reality people reported observing intolerance and hostility. Allegheny has a Prize for Civility in Public Life and sponsors Pathway to Civility, a gathering of more than two hundred national student leaders to discuss and practice civil dialogue. The center helped

### **GOOD PRACTICE**

Emory University's Center for Faculty Development and Excellence sponsored a series of workshops about civil discourse that included panel presentations, case studies, and participant discussions. Follow-up podcasts about civil discourse in the humanities and the health sciences gave professors ideas and tools for fostering, across difference, intellectual community in their disciplines.

develop a toolkit for citizens to use in order to deconstruct the tone and rhetoric of political campaigns, while joint Young Democrat and Republican projects on campus set a high bar for the respectful exchange of ideas.

In 2011, the University of Arizona created the National Institute for Civil Discourse, a nonpartisan center for advocacy, research, and policy regarding discourse consistent with First Amendment principles. The institute publishes a newsletter (*Frankly Speaking*), holds research forums that include students, and, among many other activities, convenes Arizona groups committed to advancing civil dialogue and public engagement.

Arizona State University's Morrison Institute for Public Policy and its College for Public Programs, as well as the Maricopa County Colleges Center for Civic Participation, partner with the Arizona Humanities Council in Project Civil Discourse. Created in 2008, this state-wide initiative fosters respectful dialogue by assembling diverse groups—totaling more than 2,500 individuals to date—in town hall meetings to apply proven skills of collaborative problem solving to important societal issues.

Campuses have been spurred to action and encouraged in their commitment to civil discourse by Jim Leach, a former Republican congressman appointed by Democratic President Obama to chair the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Leach interprets the public humanities mission of the endowment as compelling attention to the serious lack of mutual respect across the partisan divide. During a fifty-state “civility tour,” he spoke about the common good and constructive ways to disagree.

In 2012, inspired by Leach's message, the University of Massachusetts Boston created a Center for Civil Discourse. A large audience of students, scholars, and community members attended a forum on civility, while hundreds of others—including students from nine partner schools—watched online. Panels addressed civility in history, morality, culture, and

## A world-class academic community depends on an open society to thrive

the media. Washington State University's Foley Institute held one of four public forums, Civility and Democracy in America, supported by the NEH's Bridging Cultures Initiative. Washington State also houses the Ruckelshaus Center that, among other public discourse activities, supports research.

More campuses need to follow these leaders in advancing civil discourse in the areas of scholarship and community service. Additional effective means include sponsoring special grants for faculty or dissertation research; earmarking funds for scholarship on teaching and learning including course development or changes in classroom practice; and encouraging faculty members and administrators to write blogs, newspaper articles, or thought pieces about civil discourse, then recognizing these efforts during performance evaluations.

### Promoting civil discourse to preserve the academy and democracy

A world-class academic community depends on an open society to thrive; it also models an ideal culture of discourse. Questioning and argument, weighing evidence and analyzing alternative interpretations—such values are at the core of teaching and scholarship. Professors help students recognize gaps in available information, see when conclusions drawn rest on incomplete data, and tolerate ambiguity (Bain 2004). These very elements of civil discourse make its mastery requisite for success in classes. Faculty research, which proceeds through the “offer and demand for argument and evidence” (Sexton 2005), shapes the debate of a generation's most crucial issues.

Bollinger (2005) suggests that of all the qualities of mind valued by the academy, exploring the full complexity of a subject and considering simultaneously multiple angles of perception are the most esteemed. This extreme openness, that invites challenges to a single point of view, relies on both daily exercise and a community of people keeping it alive. The pervasive dogmatism, close-mindedness, and “discourse by slogan”

### GOOD PRACTICE

To promote critical thinking and tolerance, the Loyola University New Orleans Society of Civil Discourse circulates the *Journal of Civil Discourse*, featuring articles from students and professionals who represent a range of political opinions. The journal also relies on submissions from the Civil Discourse class, which undertakes academic discussion with social, political, and religious merit.

(Sexton 2005) favored today by the public arena risks marginalizing the distinctive open character of universities. The responsibility falls to each and every faculty member and administrator to do his or her part in resisting the “allure of certitude” (Bollinger 2005). It is such certitude about one’s own viewpoints, along with intolerance of others, that public intellectuals like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Hannah Arendt identify as central causes of democratic failure.

Jim Leach has come forward as an eloquent and tireless proponent of greater civility in public discourse. It is time now for the higher education community—collectively and through its individual campuses, associations, and funders—to step up as visible and effective advocates. The academy, as an enterprise, has started embracing its responsibility for educating the next generation of leaders and citizens for a diverse democracy. To ensure their own survival (Sexton 2005), as well as the survival of US democracy, universities must now be at the forefront of advocating for—and of comprehensively modeling—rigorous civil dialogue. The academic community is, in sum, an essential actor—Sexton says the last real hope—in assuring that the current climate of anger, mistrust, prejudice, intolerance, and hatred does not prevail in the wonderful, though still imperfect, democratic experiment that is the United States. □

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author’s name on the subject line.

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# Thoughts on a “Liberating” Education

ROBERT A. SCOTT

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF COLLEGE? I believe undergraduate education is and must be as much about character and citizenship as about careers and commerce. In addition to majoring in a particular subject, and in order to fulfill the purpose of a university education, undergraduate students must learn about and consider the natural world we meet upon birth, the world we make, and the means by which we mediate between the world we meet and the world we make.

Further, I do not think of ours as the “information age,” but rather as the “imagination age.” We live in a time that requires creative approaches to solving problems. In this context, the three most important aspects of learning are history, imagination, and compassion.

## MY VIEW

**Students must learn about and consider the natural world we meet upon birth, the world we make, and the means by which we mediate between the world we meet and the world we make**

### Three key aspects of learning

One way to think about the question of what to study is to reflect on contemporary issues and ask what lessons we have learned. A quick survey of the past several years would show that too many people, even those in sophisticated roles, lacked knowledge of history, lacked context. This was particularly evident in the financial and real estate arenas. History is an essential subject, especially if we are to understand the different ways people come to “know” the truth—by evidence, by epiphany, by emotion—and how they challenge assumptions and validate assertions. Without this background knowledge, one cannot distinguish Kant from Kant, or between and among issues of law, morality, and ethics.

The second area to develop is that of the imagination. The exercise of the imagination permits us to see patterns, to see where they diverge and when they converge. It requires us to listen, to understand, to tolerate the silence, and to comprehend before we respond. As recent and ongoing political and financial crises demonstrate, many high-profile people confront new problems without the ability to see the connections between different variables; they cannot visualize or forecast directions, cannot approach issues creatively. They can look and not perceive, hear and not know, understand a thing and be completely ignorant of it.

The third area to develop is that of compassion—the ability to listen, truly hear, and comprehend another person’s perspective and also to be fair and just. The skills and abilities needed in the world today are not only knowledge of balance sheets and how to analyze them, but also the ability to understand cultural dynamics and how people interact. Too many adults seem to lack self-awareness and any preparation in critical reflection and thinking: they are those for whom answers hide questions, both about themselves and about others. This is why, for example, the study of literature and history is so important. It helps us see the questions and assumptions so often hidden by answers, helps us develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Often, when someone proposes a solution, I will say, “That’s

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ROBERT A. SCOTT is president of Adelphi University.



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an answer, what's the question?" Remember the wise one who asked his child each day not "What did you learn today?" but "What questions did you ask today?"

### A liberating education

Many academic programs tied to particular professions focus on *how to do* things—training—rather than on *how to analyze, comprehend, and communicate about* things, which is the purpose of education. They focus on how to engage in a transaction, whether a stock sale or a real estate acquisition, instead of on transformation—that is, turning different pieces and parts into something new by finding a synthesis of existing ideas or by elevating one's thinking beyond the immediate to the more universal. The more universal approach includes preparation for a full, well-rounded life as a professional, citizen, and family member as well as for work that has meaning and provides fulfillment.

What I call a liberating education fosters the ability to distinguish between what is true and what is false, and it involves a number of

different analytical perspectives: the scientific, the artistic, the humanistic, the quantitative, the qualitative. It helps students understand that to measure something indicates it is valued, but that not everything of value can be measured. The liberating curriculum is a program for citizenship. It is liberal in its form of inquiry; it honors not revealed truth but intellectual growth. This curriculum is a preparation for living, for wondering why. It purports not just to teach one how to earn a living, but also how to live. It offers instruction and experience in both technique and vision—the ultimate combination in education.

A liberating education has surprisingly diverse attributes. From it, students gain the confidence needed to take initiative, solve problems, and formulate ideas. They develop skills in language, learning, and leadership. They also learn about domestic and foreign cultures, history, mathematics, science, and technology. This broad approach emphasizes reasoning in different modes; clear and graceful expression in written, oral, and visual communication;



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organizational ability; tolerance and flexibility; creativity; and sensitivity to the concerns of others and to ethical and aesthetic values.

A liberating education aspires to teach students to be cultured people; to develop in students the capacity to check assumptions and to understand the value-laden choices that await them as consumers, decision makers, and arbiters of ethical choices at home, at work, and at the ballot box; to help students understand and build a civilization compatible with the nature and aspirations of human beings and the limitations of the environment. These ideals are not the province of a particular department or school, but rather they inform the entire curriculum.

Such a curriculum does not just happen, however; it must be intentionally designed. It is a means, and its ends or purposes must be considered as part of the basic design. Simplicity must be foremost, humane values must transcend technological values, and democratic values must overcome the desire for exclusivity. These are the benefits of an education that liberates students from their provincial origins and from prejudices masquerading as principles, no matter what their nationality, socioeconomic status, age, or religion.

Students should know about other cultures and be competent in communicating with other people. The goal is an education that leads to global understanding and competence. In the twenty-first century, citizens cannot be fully responsible unless they are knowledgeable about and sensitive to cultural differences.

After graduation, our students will work with individual entrepreneurs, small business owners, and corporate executives. Many will be involved in setting up businesses in other countries, selling in foreign markets, importing goods and materials, gaining access to foreign capital, and entering into joint ventures of one kind or another. The imperatives for global education include issues of national security; peaceful, respectful relations between and among peoples and nations; economic competition and cooperation; environmental interdependence; diversity in our midst; international trade and currency. Our graduates will supervise or be supervised by people of different ethnic, national, or racial backgrounds. They will inevitably live in neighborhoods affected by

**The transformative experience of a truly liberating undergraduate education requires a faculty member and a student engaged in learning together**

international influences, including population, products, petroleum, prices, and peace. For these reasons, cross-cultural, international perspectives must be incorporated into virtually all areas of the curriculum, including the humanities, sciences, social sciences, arts, business, and other professional fields.

Far more than language competency, global education includes cultural awareness, social knowledge, geography, economics, and history.

Moreover, the transformative experience of a truly liberating undergraduate education requires a faculty member and a student engaged in learning together. I call such an approach the “curriculum as covenant.” This commitment does not preclude the use of technology; online learning tools can provide new sources of supplementary expertise. We can gain a “sage on the stage” through technology, but we do not give up our role as the “guide on the side” for instruction and advising.



Adelphi University

**An ideal curricular approach**

There have been many attempts to define the optimal general education program. After years of experience and consideration, I have formulated my own ideal approach. It consists of three clusters of topics to be addressed in the first year of college study and then extended over the four years as part of the general education curriculum.

The first cluster, called “The World We Meet,” would focus on the natural world and would include study of biology, chemistry, physics, and all else subsumed by these subjects. The second cluster, “The World We Make,” would focus on cultural and creative endeavors and would include study of history, literature, sociology, international relations, business, technology, and economics. This second cluster would also introduce students to the different forms of scholarly endeavor, including discovery or pure basic research, applied research, integrative approaches combining the results of different fields, and pedagogy. Finally, the third cluster would focus on the systems of thought by which we mediate between the world we meet and the world we make. Through this cluster, students would examine the methods by which we make moral choices, reach ethical decisions, form general judgments, and determine compassionate responses. It would include study of philosophy, religion, and psychology.

The cluster related to the natural world would engage faculty in the sciences who are prepared for interdisciplinary teaching. Likewise, the cluster of courses related to culture would provide an interdisciplinary approach such as that developed by programs of international studies or public health. Finally, the

**While we cannot teach everything, we can prepare students to learn almost anything**

cluster related to mediation would call upon faculty in philosophy, ethics, and religious studies as well as others who use literary, historical, and philosophical perspectives, depending upon their expertise and interest, to address questions of law, morality, and ethics.

A general education curriculum organized around these three clusters would require extensive reading, writing, listening, and oral presentations as well as the use of technology. Such a program would acknowledge that, while we cannot teach everything, we can prepare students to learn almost anything. Moreover, the three clusters would be complemented by cocurricular experiences—clubs, organizations, teams, internships, volunteer activities, service learning—that provide students with opportunities to apply their learning, learn from additional sources, deepen their knowledge, develop their skills and abilities, and refine a set of values.

This, I believe, is the way we should be preparing students for the world they will enter upon graduation. We want them to study what they are passionate about, as that is most likely to lead to success. But we also have an obligation to organize and support internships, service learning opportunities, and other experiences beyond the campus that foster learning by doing, learning from doing, and encourage a lifetime of engagement with the broader society. After all, our mission is as much about the development of good character and the encouragement of engaged citizenship as it is preparation for careers and commerce. □

*To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author's name on the subject line.*

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