CLAIMING THE NARRATIVE:
SHARING OUR STORIES

Becoming a “Bilingual” Advocate for Your Graduates
Amplifying the Value of Liberal Education
Lessons from American Universities Abroad
Liberal Education, Interfaith Literacy, and the New American Holy War
Learning from Kindergartens and Neuroscience
Interdisciplinarity as a Social Justice Portal
The very rhetoric now used to promote liberal education among students is leading predictably to a corruption of the values traditionally held to be fundamental to liberal education.

Miguel Martinez-Saenz

The Leap Challenge

CLAIMING THE NARRATIVE: SHARING OUR STORIES

Educators should be willing to step out of our institutional echo chambers, listen carefully to what others make of our work, and grab hold of the words they use to express the needs, interests, and expectations of different communities.

—Daniel J. McInerney
From 1818 R Street NW

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Preparing Students for an Unscripted Future

As students were headed back to campus this fall, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) released the findings from its latest round of employer surveys, *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work.*¹ The survey, conducted on behalf of AAC&U by Hart Research Associates, included the perspectives of both business executives and hiring managers, with the goal of assessing the extent to which each group believes that a college education is important and worthwhile, identifying the learning outcomes they believe are most important for success in today’s economy, and discerning how prepared these different audiences perceive recent college graduates to be in these outcomes.

Just prior to the release of AAC&U’s report, the Pew Research Center revealed the results of its own survey of Americans’ attitudes toward higher education.² At a time of increasing partisanship and polarization in the United States, both Democrats and Republicans agree on one thing—that higher education is headed in the wrong direction. Of the 4,587 respondents, 61 percent raise concerns about the current state of the academy. However, the nature of these concerns continues to fall along party lines. While burgeoning tuition is a shared source of skepticism among Democrats and Republicans, Democrats emphasize worry over college costs more than their Republican counterparts. Republicans, on the other hand, are focused on the belief that colleges and universities not only fail to provide students with the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace but they do so in an environment that chills the free exchange of ideas by pushing a narrow, progressive political agenda.

In AAC&U’s survey, 501 business executives and 500 hiring managers at private sector and nonprofit organizations, whose current job responsibilities include recruiting, interviewing, and hiring new employees, express higher satisfaction with colleges and universities than does the American public, as reflected in the Pew results.³ Sixty-three percent note having either “a lot of confidence” or “a great deal of confidence” in American higher education. Business executives and hiring managers also agree upon the value of college, maintaining it is an essential and worthwhile investment of time and money. In addition to the potential for increased earnings, both executives and hiring managers cite the benefits of the accumulation of knowledge, the development of critical and analytical skills, and the pursuit of goals as especially meaningful.

Moreover, consistent with findings from six earlier surveys commissioned by AAC&U as part of its ongoing Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, employers overwhelmingly endorse broad learning and cross-cutting skills as the best preparation for long-term career success. The college learning outcomes that executives and managers rate as most important are oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, written communication, and the real-world application of skills and knowledge.⁴ They give high ratings to the skills of locating, organizing, and evaluating information from multiple sources; analyzing complex problems; working with people from different backgrounds; being innovative and creative; and staying current on technologies.⁵
Internships and apprenticeships are deemed particularly valuable, with 93 percent of executives and 94 percent of hiring managers indicating that they would be more likely to hire a recent graduate who has held an internship or apprenticeship with a company or organization. Further, employers at nonprofits say they are much more likely to hire recent graduates who have community-based or service-learning experience. This is not surprising given that only 33 percent of executives and 39 percent of hiring managers believe that recent graduates are "very well prepared" to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. When it comes to evaluating job candidates, only 51 percent of executives and 48 percent of hiring managers find transcripts useful. Instead, they call for ePortfolios of recent graduates’ college work as a more reliable tool for vetting candidates.

The articles in this volume offer a response to AAC&U’s employer surveys, pointing the way forward with respect to preparing students for success in work, citizenship, and life. Despite the fact that liberal education is a distinctly American tradition, its popularity is growing around the world, even as its relevance is under attack in the United States. Understanding the foundations of this global trend, using data to tell the story of the enduring value of a pragmatic liberal education to those inside and outside of the academy, leveraging technology, and enhancing rubrics and meaningful assessment to prepare students for the future are more critical than ever. Emphasizing the importance of high-impact practices, learning by doing, and fostering creativity, innovation, and moral imagination, the authors offer insights into how institutions of all types around the world can promote student success and restore public trust in higher education. To do so requires demonstrating in a more compelling way to those outside of the academy, Democrats and Republicans alike, the extent to which we in fact are teaching students twenty-first-century skills and preparing students to solve our most pressing global, national, and local problems within the context of the workforce, not apart from it.

—LYNN PASQUERELLA

NOTES
The Tony Award–winning musical Hamilton closes with the song “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story,” which emphasizes the power and importance of storytelling. Alexander Hamilton’s narrative differed based on who told it in life and in death, and we need to harness this power of storytelling in our efforts to claim the narrative of liberal education.

Multiple voices in the media, politics, business, and education are now telling the story of liberal education. With so many different interpretations, it is critical that voices in higher education—faculty, staff, administrators, students, and alumni—are in agreement as we discuss the true value of liberal education for all students in preparation for life, work, and citizenship.

The contributing authors in this issue’s featured topic section—Daniel J. McInerney, Amy Adams and Dana Dudley, and Ted Purinton and Jennifer Skaggs—make a strong case for the wide-ranging benefits of liberal education for all students, across the world and across disciplines. They encourage institutions to demonstrate the value of liberal education to multiple audiences by telling compelling stories that resonate with these diverse audiences. They also highlight the key skills that students attain through liberal education, which prepare students for work and for life—oral and written communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings. As we find a lack of civility across campuses and communities in the United States, the skills of liberal education equip our students to engage with diverse ideas and perspectives. Applying these skills should lead students to engage in constructive conversations about complex ideas instead of developing deeper divides based on lack of contact with people with different views and perspectives. Finally, we must track the emerging trend of the global growth of colleges and universities with a liberal education foundation, and we should integrate the lessons learned from these institutions in our collective case for the advancement of liberal education.

Many thanks are due to Ben Dedman, who worked closely with this issue’s contributing authors, and Kathryn Campbell, former editor of Liberal Education, who planned this issue’s featured topic section on claiming the narrative. Kathryn’s vision, and Ben’s dedication to carrying this vision forward through his role as managing editor for this issue, ensured that this issue advances the case for liberal education in a meaningful, practical, and cohesive manner that we hope will support your efforts in your educational context.

At another crucial point in Hamilton, a select group of the Founders makes a critical decision about the location of the new national capital. In the song “The Room Where It Happens,” only a handful of people are involved in the decision, frustrating others who were not in the room. This may sometimes be why people misunderstand the value of liberal education. Some simply don’t know what liberal education is, what its value is, or what their role to advance liberal education might be. Perhaps they haven’t been involved in these conversations on campus. We must make sure we continue to engage people from all walks of life in these conversations as we communicate the value of liberal education.—DAWN MICHELE WHITEHEAD

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AAC&U invites manuscripts that promote liberal learning in a broad sense. For writers’ guidelines and other communications, see www.aacu.org/liberaleducation or contact the editor at liberaled@aacu.org.

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AAC&U Releases New Employer Research

AAC&U’s newest employer research, *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work*, summarizes selected findings from two parallel national surveys—one of 501 business executives at private sector and nonprofit organizations and another of 500 hiring managers. Both executives and hiring managers express a higher degree of confidence in colleges and universities than does the American public. They also agree upon the value of college and believe that it is both important and worth the investment of time and money. Additionally, consistent with findings from six earlier surveys commissioned by AAC&U as part of its ongoing LEAP (Liberal Education and America’s Promise) initiative, employers overwhelmingly endorse broad learning and cross-cutting skills as the best preparation for long-term career success. To learn more, visit https://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research.

**Registration Open for AAC&U’s 2019 Annual Meeting**

AAC&U’s 2019 Annual Meeting, “Raising Our Voices: Reclaiming the Narrative on the Value of Higher Education,” will be held January 23–26 in Atlanta, Georgia. The meeting will explore ways of elevating the voices of administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students in the public narrative about the value of higher education. The meeting also features the 2019 Premeeting Symposium, “Is There a Rubric for That? A Decade of VALUE and the Future of Higher Education,” and the Tenth Annual Forum on Digital Learning and ePortfolios. For more information about notable speakers and events, visit https://www.aacu.org/AM19.

**In Memoriam: L. Lee Knefelkamp**

AAC&U mourns the death of L. Lee Knefelkamp, who passed away unexpectedly on September 7, 2018. Most recently, she had been professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University and senior scholar at AAC&U. While AAC&U has benefited from the intellectual and professional contributions of many brilliant leaders in higher education, Lee influenced the direction and content of major AAC&U initiatives, meetings, and conferences longer and more profoundly than perhaps any other senior scholar. This is in part because of her ability not only to widen the intellectual horizon on educational questions but also to touch the hearts and lives of all those who worked with her. To read AAC&U’s full statement or to add your own remembrances about Lee, visit https://www.aacu.org/aacu-mourns-unexpected-passing-its-beloved-senior-scholar-l-lee-knefelkamp.

**Upcoming Meetings**

- January 23–26, 2019
  Annual Meeting: Raising Our Voices: Reclaiming the Narrative on the Value of Higher Education
  Atlanta, Georgia
- February 14–16, 2019
  Creating a 21st-Century General Education: Responding to Seismic Shifts
  San Francisco, California
- March 28–30, 2019
  Diversity, Equity, and Student Success: Engaged Inclusivity: Perceptions, Realities, and Aspirations
  Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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- ASSOC 13%
- DOC 16%
- OTHER* 19%

*Specialized schools, state systems and agencies, international affiliates, and organizational affiliates
What do key external stakeholders hear when we explain the skills students have developed through a liberal education? If a Carnegie Mellon physics department states that students will “develop, implement, and refine a plan to acquire new knowledge for specific scientific goals and in pursuit of new intellectual interests,” what might a state legislator make of the argument?1 If a sociology department at California State University–Long Beach describes a student’s ability to “demonstrate how social change factors, such as population, urbanization, or technology, affect social structure and individuals,” what might this mean to the head of a local planning commission?2 Do our words come across to audiences as a coherent and meaningful message, or as the equivalent of dolphin squeaks that remain unintelligible to nonspecialists?

This communication gap has serious implications for the way employers perceive higher education. According to Ron Painter, CEO of the National Association of Workforce Boards, the business world lacks confidence in postsecondary diplomas, failing to see the credentials as indicators of “anything that employers need.”3 In job interviews, the problem is made worse by recent graduates who bring high expectations of salaries, promotions, and perks, but a limited ability to explain what they can do with their advanced knowledge. And as Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, has commented, many higher education faculty believe that in order to hold true to our academic principles, “we shouldn’t talk about vocationalism” or find ourselves “getting cozy” with corporate needs and opportunities, a choice that often leaves students without much useful mentoring as they prepare to step outside the postsecondary world.4

Educators who recognize the need to clarify their programs’ goals have focused much effort over the past decade on learning outcome statements that summarize complex academic ideas in succinct terms. In a 2018 National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment survey, 66 percent of provosts reported that “all of their programs have learning outcome statements—a number on the rise from prior years.”5 For many faculty, such as my colleagues in history, this work has involved a major cultural change within their area of specialization, leading some—for the first time in their careers—to explain concisely to current and prospective students what their disciplines, majors, and curricula are meant to achieve.6 This effort can help learners come to a better understanding of their studies—and allow administrators to see how different fields complement one another.

Daniel J. McInerney is professor of history at Utah State University.
Faculty need to build—or revisit—the core learning goals for their disciplines and come to an agreement about what their work addresses, expects, and contributes.

Building a more compelling story of student talents

Before speaking with others, we must talk among ourselves. Faculty need to build—or revisit—the core learning goals for their disciplines or programs and come to an agreement about what their work addresses, expects, and contributes. In other words, we need to get our own story straight.

A useful question to pose to colleagues comes from the “tuning” projects that have gained prominence at US and European institutions over the last two decades. These tuning projects often ask, What should students know, understand, and be able to do after completing a major or a program of study? Anne Hyde, a historian at the University of Oklahoma who directs a tuning project for the American Historical Association (AHA), imagined a department meeting during which “no one talked about budgets, assessment, course assignments, or parking.” Instead, the discussion centered around the “disciplinary ideals [that] link us . . . and how we might best introduce those to our students.”

With a clear set of goals in hand, reach out to other educators at your institution, not just other faculty. When was the last time you brought academic advisors, career counselors, librarians, and first-year experience and campus orientation teams into your discussions? All four groups are in steady contact with students, sometimes having more frank conversations about college life than anything that takes place during a professor’s office hours. Librarians can add their voices to conversations about general education, active learning pedagogy, assignment design, scaffolding, research and digital literacy skills, and assessment. And John H. Schuh and Ann M. Gansemer-Topf remind us that student affairs practitioners can share a wide range of experience “through their knowledge of student characteristics and attitudes, through their ability to design services aligned with the academic mission of the institution, and with their understanding of student learning outside the classroom.” Talk with these colleagues about the goals of your program, and find out what words they use to describe curricula, learning, research, and life after graduation.

Alumni/ae are also a great resource, and not just for monetary contributions. In fact, make it clear that’s not the reason you contacted them. Ask instead for their help in understanding the road they traveled after graduation and the ways they can teach a new generation of learners about postcollege plans. What aspirations did they initially hold? What paths did they eventually follow? At different career points, how did they talk about their postsecondary work and credentials? Search out information about former students’ careers. Exit interviews, graduate surveys, alumni office records, local contacts, and LinkedIn profiles can help determine the types of positions students enter and the employers who commonly hire them. With a sense of where graduates work, set up a conversation with hiring firms to gain a sense of the educational background and skills they value and the expectations they hold for job applicants.

From conversations with graduates, employers, and career counselors, find out how firms conduct job interviews. For faculty whose only job interviews were for on-campus positions, the realities of the process for businesses and nonprofits can be surprising. If we take seriously the responsibility to mentor students in and beyond postsecondary work, we should have some familiarity with common practices such as “behavioral interviews” organized around...
CAR (context/action/result) or STAR (situation/task/action/result) techniques for examining and evaluating job applicants. These approaches call for responses from job candidates that are brief, concise, specific, and structured—not exactly the type of answers that many faculty colleagues and I are used to delivering. Fortunately, successful CAR/STAR interviews also incorporate a compelling story, something that instructors in liberal education should be able to demonstrate effectively to our students.

Of course, our graduates have to get their feet in the door just to have the opportunity for an interview. That requires understanding the vocabulary to use when applying for job openings, writing a cover letter, building a resume, or constructing a LinkedIn page. Human resources offices making a first cut on applications might rely on “web crawler” programs to scan documents and websites for core terms that an organization identifies as critical to its hiring needs and requirements. Faculty engaged in liberal education take pride in the communication skills we help our students develop. As a practical exercise, instructors and mentors might guide students in focusing on the keywords that will make their documents stand out to potential employers.

What historians learned by listening and tuning
Understandably, some faculty in humanities fields may feel uneasy about meeting with the business community, assuming that human resources offices have their gaze fixed exclusively on STEM graduates. However, our experience in the state system of Utah, which is engaged in a tuning project across eight public institutions, revealed quite a different story. Focus group discussions with key employers of graduates from different disciplines helped faculty understand that the skills and competencies businesses valued most highly (e.g., analytical, research, and communication skills) were strikingly similar to those that faculty prized within their fields of study. Discussions with key employers helped faculty understand that the competencies that businesses valued most highly (e.g., analytical, research, and communication skills) were strikingly similar to those that faculty prized within their fields of study.

Historians in the focus group saw the need to explain traditional course exercises in terms that carried greater weight outside the academic world. For example, research assignments with archival collections, databases, and interpretive monographs became more meaningful for employers when described in different terms: as examples of work that displayed a student’s capacity “to investigate problems, identify reliable sources, analyze information, contextualize complex questions, and communicate conclusions in a clear and thoughtful manner.” Faculty incorporated these words into a history curriculum booklet intended to give our graduates a suggested “script” for possible interviews.

Just by opening the door to those outside our community of discipline specialists—and listening as they responded to our explanations of outcomes and objectives—historians working with the AHA tuning project have picked up many surprising suggestions for explaining the skills of our field to a wider audience.

David J. Trowbridge, a historian from Marshall University in West Virginia, quickly learned that conversations with employers offered a valuable service to students and faculty. Recognizing the importance that the AHA’s tuning project placed on contact with stakeholders, he set up a forum with business people in his region. The historians’ discussion focused on the problems graduates faced with job prospects and interviews. One employer, listening politely to the comments, moved the conversation in a different direction by asking a question that addressed some confusion in his own mind: What exactly is it that history students do in their courses?

The fact that a businessperson would even pose such a query might come as a surprise to many historians—who may assume everyone can figure out what specialists practice in the field. Fortunately, Trowbridge had an example at hand: a recent talk with a student examining the local history of school desegregation. The student, he acknowledged, launched into the work by assuming that desegregation proceeded fairly smoothly. Trowbridge suggested the need for a deeper, evidence-based inquiry. The student identified a group of older African American residents in the community, contacted them by phone, and conducted a series of oral interviews that revealed their difficult and painful experiences as students living through desegregation. She then appropriately revised the informing thesis of her research.
paper. Trowbridge recalled, “At that moment, an employer broke in by exclaiming, ‘Wait... your students make cold calls?’”

The phrase used by the employer surprised faculty. But the employer had simply “translated” the history skills into a term that connected with his own experience. While Trowbridge and fellow scholars were caught off-guard, they learned an important lesson about the kinds of words that “work” in the business world.

Taking a cue from tuning’s emphasis on the value of conversations with a wide range of stakeholders—particularly employers and businesspeople from diverse fields—Lendol Calder, a historian at Augustana College, recognized the need to reimagine (rather than simply rework) the arguments and approaches faculty use to communicate the value of a history degree. In his introductory history course, Calder showed a short video featuring alumni who talked about the ways they applied “historical mindedness” in the various nonhistorical jobs they held. Calder also held an office meeting with a student, helping her “translate what she did for her honors thesis into language an employer would understand and be impressed by.” The activities hardly seemed like trailblazing innovations. But Calder had not previously considered either one necessary. “Before tuning,” he wrote, “I would never have thought to do such things because I assumed the value of a history course/degree was obvious. Now I don’t. Tuning made a difference there by encouraging me to think about external stakeholders in what we do.”

Calder’s students picked up on the same strategy. One student decided to take business courses alongside his history major. During a job interview, he told a story about his senior history capstone project, describing (in employer-friendly terms) how the research demonstrated his ability to discover a workable topic, tackle a problem without clear answers, and critically examine the evidence. One interviewer, listening to the argument, placed the student’s skills in a distinctive—if unusual—context. He “suggested I shouldn’t tell people I majored in history but in ‘information analysis,’ because dealing with conflicting, uncertain information is apparently what I learned to do.” The student’s interviews led to four entry-level job offers.

In a session at the AHA annual meeting, Robert Sheets, whose work at the George Washington University Institute of Public Policy addresses workforce data systems, credentialing, and labor market planning, listened to three “core competencies” that a history major cultivates. Sheets then translated the statements to help historians communicate with outside audiences.

The first competency stated that majors understand “a wide range of historical information” and “explain continuity and change over time.” To Sheets’s ear, the argument meant that historical study develops the kind of “strategic
The second competency discussed the ability of majors to recognize the complex, problematic nature of the historical record. Sheets suggested that a history program provides training for students in the highly desired field of “information sciences,” allowing them to learn ways of “analyzing structured and unstructured information” and to “organize that information and present it for a variety of uses.”

The third learning objective focused on critical thinking and reading skills, formulating questions, and constructing well-written arguments. Sheets recognized that many fields emphasize communication skills. Perhaps the best way faculty can help students stand out is to build assignments allowing them “to demonstrate skills for their expected application domain, not yours.” Such student-centered exercises should be open to nonacademic goals, giving students “opportunities to develop evidence of writing in ways that are given high ratings for the domain of their use.” The session’s moderator, Norman Jones, summarized the takeaways from Sheets's comments: “Know your audience, understand the way that they communicate, provide evidence that you, too, can communicate in that way, and show them that your critical thinking skills are applicable to their industry.”

The conference panel with Sheets and Jones also included three recent history graduates who discussed their experiences transitioning from academic studies to careers. Each speaker stressed a different theme: selecting transformative courses, communicating the skills students build in their majors, and deciphering the interview process.

Hailey Horn received her bachelor’s in history from Marshall University in 2015. Enthusiastic and optimistic, she applied for eighty different positions and participated in seven interviews over the course of fifteen months. As she worked through the process, she recognized the scarcity of available “history” jobs, the challenge of understanding the requirements of other fields, and the problem of speaking (rather than writing) about the skills sets she had acquired.

The long quest led Horn to reflect back on her undergraduate curriculum for an experience that gave her a practical grounding in “doing” history: an internship with the Clio website, which guides the public to local historical and cultural sites. The internship integrated the knowledge and skills of classes in her major, clarifying her on-the-ground experiences “communicating with people, . . . listening to stories, being skeptical, organizing your thoughts, . . . recording every source, . . . writing something [fifty] times over because you know it isn’t good enough.” The experience led to a marketing and communications position with Service Year in Washington, DC.

Looking back over seven years of work as a fellow with Colonial Williamsburg, an aide to a member of Congress, and a government relations coordinator for Americans for the Arts, Lauren H. Cohen focused on the words that effectively conveyed the skills her historical training provided. One key was the research she had conducted as a student. The writing sample she submitted in the interview process, taken from her master’s in public history thesis, sparked both interviewers’ curiosity and admiration for her clear, compelling prose style. Equally important, the academic work framed a language of competencies that resonated with employers, allowing Cohen to discuss her “project management skills, critical thinking, and creativity.” She recognized that historical training had built within her “a no-stone-unturned mentality” geared toward “thorough research, attention to detail, and an overall sense of intellectual curiosity.”

A third panelist, Samantha Dorsey, offered the audience a reality check. A graduate of James Madison University and the Winterthur Program at the University of Delaware, Dorsey currently serves as curator of collections at George Mason’s Gunston Hall in Fairfax County, Virginia. But her career did not begin on a bright note, kicking off in 2008 at the start of the Great Recession. Each job she sought required ten to twenty-five hours of application and interview preparation, and the initial position she received came after a nine-month hiring process. The interview for that job did not simply ask for information about her interest in the job and her skills. The process also involved a behavioral examination of her responses to specific situations she had faced in the past, something she wisely anticipated, researched, and expressed in a few concise responses. Dorsey acknowledged that no single list of “buzz words” would serve job candidates well for all positions. The critical guide is the
job posting itself, she said: “Use their language in your favor.” History majors, she argued, should be able to analyze that document with the same level of precision and depth that they would apply to any archival record.

Conclusion
Students, employers, advisors, and academics outside our fields—the wide range of stakeholders in higher education—have much to teach us about the ways we can frame and articulate the knowledge and skills our programs develop for learning, careers, and civic life. Rather than assuming that the often-complicated language of faculty-speak makes sense to the rest of the world, educators should be willing to step out of our institutional echo chambers, listen carefully to what others make of our work, and grab hold of the words they use to express the needs, interests, and expectations of different communities.

Our colleagues have worked on developing learning outcomes (through approaches such as tuning, qualification frameworks, or threshold concepts) and revisiting the valuable work of the past decade to find ways to translate, decipher, and decode our campus terminology into a more widely understood lingua franca of student proficiencies. By building a “bridge” language that conveys the knowledge and abilities of college learners to the general public, we can become more effective, bilingual advocates for our graduates and our profession.

To respond to this article, email liberaled@aacu.org with the author’s name on the subject line.

NOTES


19. David J. Trowbridge, email message to author, April 6, 2018, emphasis added.


22. Competencies were drawn from “Learning Objectives,” Utah State University History Department, http://history.usu.edu/files/upload/Learning_0bjectives.pdf.


In recent years, the increasing cost of higher education has introduced a new level of scrutiny toward colleges and universities, including the concern of prospective students and their families about the return on investment (ROI) of a college education. Despite the work of many colleges and universities—particularly those with commitments to the liberal arts—to develop citizens of the future and not just workers, the demand for data-driven transparency about the cost of college prevails. Colleges are challenged by both the fiscal burden their students bear and the all-too-quick assumption that the value of a college experience can be boiled down to the starting salaries of graduates.

Since 2015, the “First-Destination Survey” from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has led the charge to establish standards and protocols for the reporting of postcollegiate success. First-destination outcomes (also referred to as postgraduation outcomes or career outcomes) indicate students’ first destinations after college, whether full- or part-time employment, graduate school, or full-time volunteer programs. NACE requires institutions to track and report on their students’ outcomes six months after graduation, and the association’s efforts have raised the bar by requiring colleges to have data on at least 60 percent of their graduates.

Colleges are investing significant resources to capture these outcomes, whether by redistributing staff hours to support research efforts or by licensing third-party vendors. There is a fiery, perhaps even dogmatic, commitment to arriving at the highest outcomes rate possible. Yet even with an increase in the outcomes data benchmark, the numbers that campuses report tell a myopic story and beg the question that families across the country still ask: Will college be worth it?

However, these data alone are like a half-constructed puzzle with several missing pieces. To produce a holistic message, narrative is necessary. It is important to recognize why stories are powerful and what they can contribute to the conversation. To begin with, our brains are hardwired for stories. Most of us have been told a story about someone we did not know, producing both an emotional and physical reaction. We cried. We laughed. We got goose bumps. Our hearts can start beating faster while listening to a story because the brain’s activity increases and a host of chemicals are released. Harnessing this power of storytelling can provide the missing pieces to tell a more complete story about the ROI of a college education.

Questions about the value of a liberal arts education are driven in part by the marketplace. Careers are no longer as linear as they once were, and what is expected of a successful employee is not as well defined. People used to go
to college, get a degree or two, and then land a job with a company they would often commit to for decades. Now, rapidly changing business processes require employees to continually evolve. A recent study shows that millennials have changed jobs three to four times in the first decade after college, more than previous generations, requiring greater nimbleness and more transferable skills. Employers, on the other hand, fight to attract and retain top talent as they are pressed to offer competitive pay, increase perks and benefits, and ensure that employees are finding meaning in their work.

Graduates are also navigating societal and internal unrest as they try to figure out their “purpose.” And there, at the intersection of personal development and societal impact, educators are challenged to not only dispense facts (we have Google for that) but also engage learners in developing skills and competencies that will outlast the jobs of today and strengthen the character and fabric of our society for generations to come.

Out of this struggle for purpose, for both students and organizations, a new message is mounting. A 2015 issue of Forbes featured this headline: “The New Golden Ticket: You Don’t Have to Code to Get Rich. How Liberal Arts Grads Are Conquering Silicon Valley.” This message of hope showcases society’s need for a new generation of graduates prepared with the outcomes of a liberal education, which are notably not limited to a particular degree. These outcomes include cognitive flexibility, nimbleness, creativity, problem solving, communication and analysis, emotional intelligence, and sound judgment. These are the characteristics of employees and leaders of the future who will be prepared to solve not-yet-discovered problems and embrace the opportunities still to come.

NACE believes these competencies to be of such great importance that they surveyed thousands of employers to determine which traits rose to the top of the list. What will successful students and workers look like in this new normal? Are students already developing these traits, and if not, how can colleges and employers create opportunities that ensure that they do? What the research revealed was that the leading traits desired by employers were not new at all to the liberal education community: critical thinking and problem solving, oral and written communication, collaboration and teamwork, digital technology skills, leadership, professionalism and work ethic, career management, and global and intercultural fluency.

The case supporting the value of a liberal education has emerged again, with direct demand from the marketplace.

So why, in spite of the deep learning delivered by a liberal education, are we still fighting to defend its value? If those on the outside are convinced that our graduates have much to offer, how can we shift the story to demonstrate that we believe it, too?

**Telling the story about “Success After Seaver”**

Seaver College is the college of arts and sciences at Pepperdine University, a private Christian institution in Malibu, California. The college has approximately 3,500 undergraduate students and a strong emphasis on the liberal arts. For a number of years, Seaver College has been collecting data on each graduating class at the time of graduation and six months after graduation. Through these data, we hoped to discover how many students are employed and where, what graduate schools students applied to and whether they got in, and even if graduates are happy with their choice. The data we’ve collected over the past few years as part of the NACE initiative affirm that our students are successfully launching from college. In the 2017 class, 89 percent of our graduates were employed, in graduate school, or volunteering full-time within six months of graduation. Yet someone could still walk across campus and hear a faculty member worrying aloud that our students do not get jobs, or hear a board member state that our students are underemployed—a part of the “barista generation.” It became clear that our community didn’t know our story, despite the fact that we had been making our first-destination data public for several years. We produced reports and gave presentations, but the story wasn’t sticking. We decided to shift both what we communicated and how we communicated it.

This revelation inspired Seaver College’s career center leaders to examine their internal and external messages. The bulk of our advertising, posters, digital signs, and emails promoted services to current students. But we communicated far less about the results of that programming. The career center was successfully engaging two-thirds of the student population in various...
programs and services; however, the community still lacked clarity about the success of our graduates, in part because there wasn’t consistent messaging to the Pepperdine community. We most often communicated the yearly career outcomes data to administrators, while faculty, university boards, prospective students, and alumni received very little of this information. We shifted our communications and developed a dual strategy to expand our story: an external storytelling campaign targeting prospective students and university boards, and an internal campaign focused on current faculty and students.

Gathering the right data
Fortunately, Pepperdine’s practice of gathering and disaggregating data had always been central to our storytelling process. Though we consistently captured data for more than 90 percent of each class at graduation, it was difficult to gather an equally high response from students six months after commencement, a critical time for securing jobs and formulating plans. One of the opportunities that emerged when NACE established its first-destination standards was the invitation to report a “knowledge rate,” rather than simply a survey response rate. A knowledge rate combines what students report on a survey with research conducted by our career center staff. They search social media sites, gather faculty feedback, and make phone calls to graduates to capture current employment or graduate school status.

Pepperdine, like many other institutions, quickly mobilized to gather these additional data. Once given the opportunity to have a more comprehensive view of the overall class, we designated additional staff time to conduct outreach to graduates seeking information and offering support. Through these efforts, we increased our overall knowledge rate. For the class of 2017, our knowledge rate is 97 percent. This changed everything. Better data about more students amplified the confidence with which we could promote the value of our degrees.

External storytelling campaign
Armed with comprehensive data about the graduating class, we soon found an opportunity to scale our story. In early conversations about adapting the outcomes data for the college’s website and admissions presentations, a colleague named the project “Success After Seaver,” which solidified and catalyzed the campaign.

With transparency and accuracy as a goal, the team moved to establish a strong web presence featuring first-destination data and other pertinent details, including the kinds of graduate schools students attended, the correlation between internships and employment, the diverse kinds of fellowships earned, and the types of work Pepperdine graduates pursued (see fig. 1). Each element represented the different paths that Seaver College students select, the mission-centered values of graduates, the academic rigor of the community, and the importance of high-impact practices. Even at a general level, the data began to expose the unique narratives of Pepperdine students and the value of a liberal education.

As the campaign grew in visibility on the internet, it also became an asset that could be repurposed in publications, presentations, reports, and alumni newsletters. The ready-made infographics and student testimonials created a way to scale stories of student success for our community and beyond.

Figure 1. Examples of Infographics on the “Success After Seaver” Web Page
**Storytelling within Pepperdine**

Building on the look and feel of the statistics and infographics highlighted on the Success After Seaver web page, the career center began an effort to collect personal narratives from graduates. We began collecting individual stories that featured the graduate’s photo, major, career outcome, and a quote about how Pepperdine prepared him or her for this particular path. Recognizing the closeness faculty often share with students on a small campus like Pepperdine, we saw an opportunity to strengthen bridges with our academic partners by inviting them to submit names and recommendations for standout alumni in their programs. Drawing on these stories, the career center designed easy-to-access slides that we distributed across campus, along with infographics (see fig. 2) that we shared using varied media, including digital signs, posters, and large wall coverings. We targeted departments and locations where those alumni normally studied. This process gave faculty buy-in to the campaign and excited them when they saw the faces of their former students around campus.

Staff repurposed the stories for admission and administrative presentations and shared them with faculty along with disaggregated data on majors. The stories not only signaled the success of each graduate, but also affirmed the impact of faculty, staff, and the community on student success. As a result, campus community members began to perpetuate other stories of success while also gaining confidence about the role each one of us plays in supporting the career readiness of students.

**Going deeper with the data**

Putting these data to the page, sending them out on the road to admissions receptions, and sharing them with faculty, administrators, and partners certainly felt significant, not only because it demonstrated the clear value of Seaver College degrees, but also because the subsets of data prompted additional questions from distinct groups. Divisional deans wanted to compare the outcomes of their majors. Athletics, student affairs, and international student services wanted to know how their students fared in comparison to the class as a whole, and how they could enhance their students’ success.

In response to these requests, we first worked to disaggregate the data annually by each major and division (groups of similar disciplines), or by student information such as affiliation with leadership groups, scholarship programs, clubs, and organizations; racial or ethnic demographics; and status as athletes (see fig. 3). Our second goal was to make data easily accessible to those departments and later to students and prospective students via the internet. It took a few years to get this right, but as a result, every academic program webpage will soon highlight individual data by major, and, in some cases, will also feature stories of student success. What is most powerful about these data is that we get to celebrate, with faculty, the contributions made across the college to student success. Detailed data also give faculty hard facts to leverage in their assessment and program reviews, as well as career pathways to share with current students. Some faculty members have been inspired to include career readiness activities in the classroom. In essence, the data gave faculty confidence in what the college does well and illuminated opportunities to grow.

While the Pepperdine story showcases many of the opportunities unleashed through data and storytelling, it is critical to remember that every college campus is unique. Characteristics of your campus culture and values might inspire you to highlight different findings in your data. Your institution’s target market for prospective students might encourage you to position
graduate school pathways over employment, or perhaps you’re looking to inspire a connection between academic theory and high-impact practices focused on real-world experiences.

At Pepperdine, we want our students to be transformed, inside and out, to fulfill a greater purpose in the world through whatever life path they pursue. Amplifying our story through both data and narrative has empowered us to demonstrate more fully our commitment to preparing students for lives of purpose, service, and leadership. Regardless of where you or your institution are in terms of data collection, outcomes reporting, or narrative building, you have the opportunity to tell a different or better story. In fact, it is imperative that you do.

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NOTES
The news from the United States is dismal: higher education in the liberal arts is in decline. Many institutions face waning overall enrollments, resulting in significant pressure to offer the professional programs students are said to prefer. Politicians are intent on ensuring that colleges generate job skills explicitly connected to the needs of the workforce.

Viewing the situation from a wider global perspective allows for optimism, however, as the liberal arts model continues to burgeon. From Nigeria to Vietnam, Saudi Arabia to Slovakia, Mexico to Kyrgyzstan, the presence of liberal arts institutions has been growing throughout the world. Thanks to American-labeled universities (e.g., American University in Beirut, Lebanon), homegrown and locally contextualized universities (e.g., Ashesi University, Ghana), and university colleges (e.g., Leiden University College, The Hague, the Netherlands)—many of which have opened over the past few decades—the liberal arts approach to higher education is not contracting, but expanding. Although professionally oriented degree programs and career- or research-focused institutions still maintain the lead in share of total student enrollments across the globe, an education that is rich in intellectual discovery continues to hold widespread appeal.

Regardless of any criticism of—or lack of enthusiasm for—the liberal arts model in the United States, educated Americans still understand the value of the model’s foundational concepts. They continue to perceive the university experience as an opportunity for self-discovery and see cocurricular and extracurricular activities as essential to the learning experience. Indeed, most university students throughout the United States are still required to take general education courses. But in countries where higher education is divided into well-ordered categories, such as preparation for trade, research, and civil service, leading a college or university that takes a comprehensive, holistic approach requires a different kind of work.

To better understand what it means to promote the liberal arts in countries without strong liberal arts traditions, we recently asked presidents, chancellors, and provosts of some of these distinctive universities to reflect on their own leadership practices. In what follows, we provide a glimpse of the challenges involved in leading liberal arts universities around the world, drawing lessons from our recent book, American Universities Abroad: The Leadership of Independent Transnational Higher Education Institutions.1

Contributing presidents, provosts, and deans wrote about the difficulties they often face in managing productive relations with their host governments. Some described the challenges inherent in maintaining educational quality during times of political uprising; others lamented the extra burden of holding outcomes-focused US accreditation in countries that also have traditions of inspection, which rely on simplistic...
(but often paperwork-intensive) checklists and numerous personal visits. At the same time, the leaders pointed to the positive learning experiences that come from engagement with anxious parents, they indicated that the political or social instabilities of their host countries can add to students’ educational experiences, and they wrote that their alumni are in high demand by local employers.

To synthesize their messages, we have drawn four lessons from the book. We believe that these lessons can also apply at liberal arts colleges and universities within the United States.

**Lesson 1: Educate all stakeholders**

A theme running through the experiences of leaders of global liberal arts universities is the need to assess and ensure an accurate understanding of the liberal arts model among all constituents, including those who lack tacit organizational-cultural knowledge. Regardless of whether they approve of the model, Americans tend to implicitly understand the purposes of certain features of a traditional liberal arts education, such as general education requirements, cocurricular activities, and residential campuses. Dissociated from similar native or instinctive traditions, many participants in institutions located outside of the United States are unaware of how these features connect to particular educational objectives. Thus, while the liberal arts model clearly appeals to a broad range of people in host countries, institutional leaders have found that they need to deliver constant reminders about their institutions’ aims, mission, and methods to faculty, staff, students, parents, employers, and host governments.

At institutions that lack grounding in the liberal arts model, mission drift may occur, particularly in response to local competition. Most presidents who wrote for our book referred to the balancing act of keeping enrollment levels high while adhering to their core educational missions. At an organizational level, discord can occur when the desire to ensure student satisfaction clashes with the understanding that intellectual discomfort is necessary to inspire personal growth. Most staff and faculty appreciate this intent. Yet when a parent asks, “Why am I paying so much tuition for a literature class when my child wants to major in business?,” staff and faculty who are not steeped in the values of the liberal arts make microlevel decisions that cumulatively move the institution in the direction of the local competition. For example, it may be tempting to respond to student complaints by slowly removing, one at a time, certain broad, foundational requirements, only to realize eventually that the core values of the liberal arts are no longer noticeably present at the institution.

At the American University in Cairo, we have worked closely with employers and families to demonstrate the value of our science, technology, engineering, and mathematics degrees as compared to those of other local private or national public institutions. We frequently emphasize the desire employers have for engineering graduates who not only are technologically competent, but also are competent communicators of their knowledge, creative problem-solvers, and so forth. Egyptian families prioritize engineering and medical degrees, and at other institutions, students may take only those courses that directly relate to their degrees. These institutions claim that because their students focus for four years solely on the technical sides of engineering or medicine, their graduates are better engineers or doctors than ours. However, our graduates are hired first. Employers tell us they would prefer to hire engineers who still need to learn some specifics of engineering but who have the ability to think analytically, lead a team, and work creatively.

While quantitative data, such as job placement rates, is helpful in conveying the value of the degree, narratives (especially those representing student success stories) can be a more powerful means of communicating to families and students the value of our educational approach. Indeed, in the educational marketplace, the value of a liberal education is not intuitive. Higher education leaders need to communicate these messages to multiple audiences and in multiple ways.

**Lesson 2: Cultivate community broadly**

Around the globe, liberal arts institutions are often labeled as American (e.g., Lebanese American University, Lebanon; American University of Central Asia, Kyrgyz Republic). Yet even when they do not hold such labels (e.g., Effat University, Saudi Arabia; Ashesi University College, Ghana), the local community may perceive the institution as having
Such perceptions can fuel existential threats to the university. In early 2017, Central European University, an American-accredited university in Budapest with course offerings concentrated at the graduate level, faced potential closure by a populist government intent on banning foreign universities. While the university still awaits a final resolution, it continues to educate students in Budapest and has intentionally deflected offers to pick up and move entirely to Vienna, Austria.

At a subsequent meeting of presidents of American international universities, attendees discussed how institutions around the world had guarded against similar pressures. For example, despite increasing anti-American sentiment in Egypt, the American University in Cairo had maintained its reputation with the government and in society in part because of its School of Continuing Education, which provides affordable English language instruction to tens of thousands of Egyptian students every year. Similarly, the American University of Nigeria has invested the time and resources of its faculty, staff, and students in feeding tens of thousands of local refugees, displaced by the insurgent group Boko Haram, each night. As a result, despite ever-present danger in the region, the university enjoys a level of peace and security that comes from public acceptance of its existence.

Both in the United States and abroad, liberal arts institutions are often perceived as places only for the elite and wealthy. But when these colleges and universities break down barriers between themselves and their communities and deploy their rich intellectual resources to
address local problems, they can become accepted and beloved in their host countries, perceived as community educators and ambassadors of goodwill. Many leaders of global liberal arts institutions portrayed this aspect of leadership as essential to their work.

**Lesson 3: Keep up with trends**

The community of advocates, scholars, and leaders in liberal arts higher education is active and ambitious, envisioning and enacting change in areas ranging from advances in service learning to interdisciplinary degree structures. In the United States, it can be relatively easy to keep up with higher education trends, because most universities have nearby peer institutions with which they collaborate and communicate. An abundant supply of conferences and workshops, as well as graduate degree programs in higher education leadership, also support cross-institutional exchange. Outside the United States, however, where access to such resources is more limited, it is easy to fall behind in relation to models that are quickly evolving.

When the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA) opened in 2006, founding rector Samuel Abrahám knew that a mission drift toward the region’s traditional educational approaches, which are based on lecture and memorization, was highly likely. Many of the faculty came from the host country, Slovakia, and he had few resources to provide them with extensive professional development in the evolving American liberal arts tradition. Knowing that the institution could not afford to establish a mentoring program in partnership with a US institution, Rector Abrahám chose instead to develop a culture of peer mediation within BISLA. He encouraged faculty members to support one another as they explored different methods of teaching and learning—ideas as simple as slowing down the curriculum to ensure that students have time to engage in discussion about the material, a practice that was strikingly different from the faculty’s traditional approach in their courses.
Another increasingly important tactic to ensure fidelity to the core values of liberal education and alignment with current trends is pursuing and maintaining accreditation with one of the regional accrediting bodies in the United States. John Cabot University in Rome has found that despite the difficulties of the accreditation process, the rigor needed to achieve accreditation from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is worth pursuing. Regional US accreditation sets the university apart from institutions based on national models because it signals both internally and externally that the university values a distinct knowledge base for higher education rooted primarily in liberal arts traditions. Accreditation also gives the university an incentive to stay up-to-date on trends occurring in the United States.

Lesson 4: Implement for lasting impact
There is a risk to trying to keep up with trends in relative isolation from peer institutions in similar contexts: the danger of implementing light or cheap facsimiles of the trends. Institutions abroad may embrace ideas from the United States with little thought given to their local contexts and implications. This is a certain path to failure for programs that have the potential to be positive and effective. Although common threads will run throughout the wide variety of institutions around the globe, the approaches used in one place are not plug-and-play features that apply in all situations. Successful programs rise out of specific historic, social, and economic contexts. For programs, methods, and trends to have an impact, educational leaders must examine and evaluate the unique contexts of their own institutions.

One impressive example of success comes from Effat University in Saudi Arabia, a liberal arts college for women. Effat faculty have worked to ensure that their approach to education is grounded in Islamic traditions and teachings. While the institution’s practices may look quite different from those of liberal arts institutions in the United States, both approaches are formulated around core ideals of inquiry, self-expression, creativity, and debate. But at Effat University, these ideals find support in an underlying imperative: IQRA, the first word of the Quran, which means “read,” or gain understanding from as broad a level as possible. The university articulates clearly its values and interpretations of the Quran in light of its approach to broad-based education. President Haifa Reda Jamal Al-Lail reminds staff, faculty, students, and parents of the connections between the university model and their own faith values. This allows the university to maintain its fidelity to the liberal arts, despite pressures to move toward a more labor-oriented academic approach.

Leading the liberal arts across the globe
Unquestionably, leading a liberal arts institution in the United States is a tough and often thankless job. But in countries where the very concept of a liberal education is not understood—or worse, where the values associated with such education are completely disregarded—leadership requires a new level of skill. We see the presidents, provosts, and deans of liberal arts institutions around the world as ambassadors of a holistic view of learning, growth, and inquiry.

As criticism of liberal arts education in the United States continues, this type of education is increasingly popular globally, eagerly sought out due to its value in developing human capital. Too often, though, liberal arts institutions around the world are isolated from their peers, attempting to advance liberal arts education without even the level of public and private support available in the United States.

We urge American liberal arts institutions to consider reaching out to their counterparts around the world to explore potential partnerships or exchange programs. Such partnerships can be mutually beneficial, as there is much to learn from these institutions that have found unique ways to succeed against odds that are, in many cases, far more challenging than those in the United States.

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NOTE
Liberal education is in a prime position to lead an effort toward an interfaith literacy that can offer reconciliation and justice to a divided nation.

On January 27, 2017, I saw America in split screen. That evening, I arrived at Atlanta’s Hartsfield Jackson airport and saw people with signs that said, “Muslims Welcome.” I turned on my iPhone to learn that while I had been in the air, the Trump administration had announced a wide-ranging ban on Muslims entering the United States. I was witnessing the first demonstrations against that act.

I went from the airport to a gathering of college student leaders, where I delivered my prepared talk on the inspiring power of past American movements for interfaith civic cooperation. I made little reference to the recently announced Muslim ban, or to the Trump administration more widely.

Many of the students of color in the audience were not having it. They spoke passionately about how violated they felt watching a man who had campaigned on bigotry get elected to the Oval Office and immediately appoint proud white supremacists to senior roles in his administration. Now those people were enshrining their discriminatory views into American policy. Why was I offering the weak tea of interfaith civic cooperation when I should have been rallying a movement of young people to storm the barracks?

As I listened to the students in Atlanta advocate for their view of interfaith social justice (one that I resonated with deeply), I flashed back to the place where I had begun the day. It was at a hotel in Washington, DC, where I had given a talk to the presidents of the Consortium of Christian Colleges and Universities. Over breakfast that morning, I had seen groups of high school and college students gather excitedly around pancakes and omelets, some with Bibles in hand. They wore T-shirts advertising their various faith communities—Mormon, Evangelical, and Catholic. All of them, so far as I could tell, were white. Finally, my curiosity got the better of me, and I approached one of the tables to ask what was going on.

“We’re here for the most important March for Life in history,” one of them told me.

“This is the first time a sitting vice president is addressing the event.”

As I listened to the students in Atlanta speak to me about the need for interfaith social justice in opposing the Muslim ban, I couldn’t help but think that those students that I’d seen in Washington, DC, likely also viewed themselves as engaging in interfaith social justice work. I may well have had more personal resonance with the way the students in Atlanta connected their diverse faith identities to the political act of opposing the Muslim ban, but the students in DC were connecting their faith identities with...
politics as well. And I know enough about American history and comparative theology to understand that it is a significant achievement to build solidarity among Evangelical, Latter Day Saints, and Catholic communities.

The more I thought about this split screen, the more I considered a different question: How much conversation and cross-pollination existed between the Atlanta gathering and the DC group?

Interestingly enough, if you looked at this from the perspective of religious values, you could easily imagine students heading from the pro-life rally to the airport to protest the Muslim ban based on the principle of religious freedom, an ethic that white religious conservatives have advanced for years. Students of color, for their part, often belong to theological communities that lean toward the conservative end of the spectrum on the issue of abortion, meaning that at least some of the Muslims and African American Christians organizing the protest against the Muslim ban in Atlanta that evening could hold doctrinal views that might have nudged them toward the pro-life event that morning.

But I don’t think the kind of religious values I mention above were front and center for most of the students. My hunch is that there was very little conversation between the communities that the DC gathering and the Atlanta group represented. I believe that on January 27, 2017, I witnessed American tribalism in miniature.

The two flags of tribalism
There has been no shortage of journalistic and scholarly treatments on tribalism of late. We’ve learned, for example, that fans of different sports teams describe the very same plays from the same game very differently. And it doesn’t take much for someone to declare that this group of people is “our team” and those others constitute the enemy. Such solidarities can be determined by matters as thin as favorite colors. And, once we are told who our team is, we appear to enjoy punishing the other team even more than we enjoy winning gains for our own.

Humans are, of course, tribal by nature, but tribalism in contemporary America is taking a particularly dangerous turn. Increasingly, we live in a nation under two flags: one America flies the Flag of Christian Identity, and the other the Flag of Marginalized Minorities. Both sides are imbuing their flags with religious meaning and symbolism. One side views Trump as a savior, and was able to mobilize 80 percent of white evangelicals as proof of their effectiveness. The other side views Trump with equal potency, and also with a religious feeling, namely defilement. One side wraps the cross in the flag, the other forms the flag into a Muslim headscarf and places it on the head of a steely-eyed female protestor. We are sacralizing our tribal divide. Our culture war has become a holy war.

I believe this holy war is doing great damage to both sides, and to the underlying democracy that currently serves as their battlefield. The Flag of Christian Identity is, in too many cases, a thin veil for white supremacy and a naked cover for actions that violate common decency. We routinely witness egregious actions by men who carry the cross and call themselves patriots that intentionally harm the most vulnerable people in our society. Such behavior will not be soon forgotten by the people targeted, and it is unlikely to be forgiven by the children of those inflicting the pain.

With respect to the side that I sympathize with more, marginalized minorities, I am increasingly concerned that we speak in a rhetoric that actively strives to be oppositional. There are too many progressives who aggressively tag any attempt to find common ground with the other side as treasonous. Many more will simply not try to reach out at all.

To illustrate, on a recent speaking visit to the University of Tennessee, I heard the inspiring story of a large rally against local white supremacists who had scrawled ugly slurs in a central location on campus. One of the organizers confessed something to me in a closed-door meeting the next morning: the protest against white supremacy had indeed drawn several hundred people, but you could count the number of white male students on two hands.

Either one concludes that the several thousand white male undergraduates at the University of Tennessee are budding white supremacists, or we recognize that there is something about the rhetoric we use to organize events for marginalized minorities that isn’t compelling to a wider circle.

To say that I am not neutral between these sides is simply to recognize that our current tribalism is not just the result of different groups with equally valid views. Rather, it is at least...
partly the product of long histories of injustice, the desire of the people on the receiving end of that injustice for a measure of fairness, and plots by unscrupulous people on the other side to maintain positions of power. It is also a sign of my high regard for the Christian tradition, as represented by figures like Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

And yet, holy wars spare no one. Worse, they destroy the battlefield on which they are waged—in this case, the precious territory of American ideals and institutions. Paradigms do not only describe the world, they reproduce it. The more we insist on reading the world through the lens of Christian Identity versus Marginalized Minorities, the more we instinctively divide those we do not know into opposing camps based on geography or religion or race or political affiliation, the more gas we give to a fire that may one day engulf us all.

I have no easy solution to the problem that we currently face, but I do have a great deal of hope in the enterprise of liberal education. Liberal education specializes in nurturing empathetic imaginations, in teaching humanizing language, in creating new paradigms, and in preparing citizens to engage with unscripted problems. Liberal education provides the best opportunity to help us find ways to speak of marginalization without exacerbating polarization, to speak of polarization without papering over marginalization, and to do both in a way that recognizes that we will always have to balance legitimate disagreements among different groups in a diverse democracy.

As I suggested earlier, I think a big part of our current problem is how we have sacralized our tribal divide. Consequently, an important part of the solution is a different way of thinking about religion, diversity, and the nation. I believe liberal education is in a prime position to lead an effort toward an interfaith literacy that can offer reconciliation and justice to a divided nation.

The religious history of liberal education
Higher education in the United States began with the opening of Harvard College in 1636, founded because the Puritans were concerned about leaving “an illiterate ministry to the Churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.”8

Holy wars spare no one. Worse, they destroy the battlefield on which they are waged—in this case, the precious territory of American ideals and institutions

Interfaith Youth Core
Over the course of history, religious involvement in the founding of American colleges would prove to be more the rule than the exception. In *The Soul of the American University*, George M. Marsden emphasizes that many of the colleges built in the late nineteenth century were founded by “men who came of age during the earthshaking national conflict and who inherited a sense of calling to serve God and nation in a cultural mission. . . . Typically they did not abandon the Christian idealism of that heritage but rather adjusted it to accommodate their commitments to modernity.”

In a related article, Marsden notes that while religion is too frequently sidelined as an area of inquiry and reflection in many American universities, higher education still holds a great deal of promise as a sector for promoting what he terms “an inclusive pluralism,” one that involves religious identity amid other important dimensions of diversity.

**Thinking through religious identity in a diverse democracy**

Much of the most profound thinking on how to build a healthy diverse democracy comes from intellectuals in the liberal education tradition who are contemplating religion or are deeply formed by it. Michael Walzer cogently expresses the challenge before us in the form of a question: “How are we in the United States to embrace difference and maintain a common life?”

From the great Jesuit political philosopher John Courtney Murray, we learn that the definition of civilization is people living together and talking together. A diverse democracy is a type of civilization in which the political community holds the divergent views of diverse groups. We should never forget that this presupposes the strength of the underlying political community.

A democracy, Harvard University’s Danielle Allen teaches us, is a society that requires people to build trust with, and thus talk to, strangers. In fact, the more willing you are to talk to strangers, the more powerful you show yourself to be. Children are told not to talk to strangers, a sign of the need adults feel to protect them. Presidents, on the other hand, happily talk to strangers, and look them in the eye when they do. Talking to strangers, Allen says, is “a way to claim your political majority.”

In a diverse society, Allen insists, the strangers you talk to will likely be different from you. Such a society ought not to strive for “oneness.” Allen explains, “The effort to make the people ‘one’ cultivates in the citizenry a desire for homogeneity, for that is the aspiration taught to citizens by the meaning of the word ‘one’ itself. In contrast, an effort to make the people ‘whole’ might cultivate an aspiration to the coherence and integrity of a consolidated but complex, intricate, and differentiated body.”

John Inazu, the Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University in St. Louis, points out that not only will the strangers you talk to be different, they will likely disagree with you on significant matters, especially those that deal with religion. We need to cultivate what he terms “a modest unity” amid these deep disagreements and create a civic life that allows for dissent.

Princeton’s Jeffrey Stout says that managing disagreement is the defining quality of our society. He writes, “Democracy takes for granted that reasonable people will differ in their conceptions of piety, in their grounds for hope, in their ultimate concerns, and in their speculations about salvation. Yet it holds that people who differ on such matters can still exchange reasons with one another, and do both of these things without compromising their integrity.”

Jane Addams, the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, reminds us that engaging proactively with those with whom we disagree serves to enlarge us in the end. “We know instinctively that if we grow contemptuous of our fellows and consciously limit our intercourse to certain kinds of people whom we have previously decided to respect, we not only tremendously circumscribe our range of life, but limit the scope of our ethics.”

**Writing the next chapter of the American religious story**

Of all the various forms of diversity that we speak of these days (race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, etc.), religious diversity may be the one that the Founders came closest to getting right. These (generally) wealthy, (loosely) Christian, (presumably) straight, (most assuredly) white male slaveholders managed to create a constitutional system that protected freedom of religion, barred the federal government from establishing a single church, prevented religious tests for those running for political office, and penned more than a few poetic lines about building a religiously diverse democracy.
The Founders’ ideal made its way from pen to parchment more easily than from parchment to reality. For that, it took interfaith leaders and civic institutions—people like Jane Addams and organizations like Hull House and the National Conference of Christians and Jews (the NCCJ)—to coax a society that had long protected its white Protestant identity (often violently) to welcome the symbols and contributions of mid-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants, largely Catholics and Jews. In this way, America moved closer to the ideal articulated by our Founders.

The new religious diversity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries requires us to write the next chapter in this great story, to move from Judeo-Christian America to Interfaith America. Learning how far we have come by diving into the history sketched above can inspire today’s students to be the authors of that next chapter.

The power of religious language
Religious language has special resources to call us to justice, reconciliation, and community, simultaneously.

When Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” he responds with a story that elevates a man from a rival religion to a position of moral leadership. Jesus exhorts his own community to follow the Samaritan’s display of kindness and compassion.

Gandhi, drawing on the spiritual resources of his Hindu faith, emerges from a South African jail with a gift of handmade sandals for the man who had imprisoned him, Prime Minister Jan Smuts.

Muhammad, when asked to resolve a dispute between different Meccan clans about who would have the privilege of placing the holy stone into the Ka’aba, suggests that they put the stone on a blanket and insert it into the shrine collectively, thus allowing each clan to claim credit while encouraging cooperation along the way.

Religious traditions teem with wisdom, resources, and language like this, and American heroes have often drawn on such wisdom in inspiring ways.

Lincoln’s second inaugural address, for example, highlights the deep offense against God and humanity that slavery is, recognizes it as one of the central causes of the Civil War, and yet ends with a call for all of us to move forward together: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Colleges as laboratories for diverse democracy
One of the most remarkable qualities of liberal education institutions is that they bring students from a range of identities, worldviews, and experiences together in an intense community during a formative period of their lives. The students celebrating Vice President Mike Pence’s appearance at the March for Life in Washington, DC; the students organizing protests against the Muslim ban at the airport in Atlanta; and many more are sitting side by side listening to a lecture in Political Science 101 even as you read this essay.

Many political philosophers, including the ones quoted above, viewed college campuses as laboratories for diverse democracy. John Courtney Murray said that campuses ought to be places where “creeds (can be) at war intelligibly.” Alasdair Maclntyre highlighted that colleges are institutions where young people can be formally initiated into conflict and where arguments ought to be conducted at such a level of excellence that the broader society learns from the campus how to order its own discussions. Danielle Allen writes in the Washington Post, “Our civic culture is badly debilitated. Colleges and universities need to replenish their capacity to defend the intellectual life of democracies.” She emphasizes that democracies and academies rise together and maintains that a central responsibility of a citizen is to prove oneself trustworthy to other citizens. Campuses provide the perfect opportunity for people to practice this essential craft.

Since interfaith literacy (which I define as the knowledge and skills needed to negotiate a religiously diverse democracy) is a requirement of an educated citizenry, how should campuses accomplish the ambitious program of interfaith literacy I sketch above? I think the organizing principle should be reaching every student. Leaders in liberal education take pride in nurturing a
certain set of intellectual qualities in their students, along with conveying key content. We would be embarrassed if any of our students were unable to write a clear paragraph or to recognize the significance of, say, Frederick Douglass or Seneca Falls. The same should go for interfaith literacy.

This means that interfaith literacy must be woven into the core components of campus life, from first-year orientation to general education, from service-learning projects to diversity programs. It should be an essential part of the college experience and part of the definition of being an educated person. A college administrator should be able to shake the hand of a graduating senior on her campus and have a reasonable degree of confidence that, as a result of spending four years on this campus, that student has acquired at least a passable facility in the dimensions of interfaith literacy outlined above.

In closing, I want to emphasize that liberal education has long understood its core mission to be strengthening democracy, and our democracy is in a moment of grave crisis. As much as we ever did, we need liberal education institutions to prepare the kind of leaders who can coax out of the angry cacophony of our society the finer music that Zadie Smith referred to in a speech she gave in Germany while accepting the 2016 Welt Literature Prize: Individual citizens are internally plural: they have within them the full range of behavioral possibilities. They are like complex musical scores from which certain melodies can be teased out and others ignored or suppressed, depending, at least in part, on who is doing the conducting. At this moment, all over the world—and most recently in America—the conductors standing in front of this human orchestra have only the meanest and most banal melodies in mind. Here in Germany you will remember these martial songs; they are not a very distant memory. But there is no place on earth where they have not been played at one time or another. Those of us who remember, too, a finer music must try now to play it, and encourage others, if we can, to sing along.21

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NOTES


18. Murray and Lawler, We Hold These Truths.


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PERSPECTIVES

How can America’s colleges and universities be redesigned to enhance creative outcomes and educate students to be innovative? In an era where educational “success” has been too connected to standardized tests and the development of narrowly focused skills in preparation for particular jobs, how can we prepare our graduates to respond creatively to the complexities of the modern world? Every individual is capable of creativity, and in every discipline—even in our daily lives—we face choices where we can “break out of the mold” and do something different. These creative actions may be small, but with similar contributions from others, they can lead to real change. In the words of Maya Angelou, “You can’t use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.”

What is creativity?
When we hear the word “creative,” many people naturally think about the arts: a painter or sculptor who “creates” physical objects, or a music composer or writer of poetry or fiction. Clearly, the concept of creativity can extend to performance: an actor, working with a skilled director, who brings a stage role to life, or an orchestra under the direction of a conductor. But creativity can be found in many areas outside the arts.

Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, and Leonardo da Vinci (to name three individuals whose superb biographies Walter Isaacson wrote in recent years) are creative geniuses in different domains. People at that highest level are born to be creative, and perhaps the best thing society can do is stay out of their way and let them follow their passion.

Is creativity limited, though, to a small number of truly exceptional individuals? What about a scientist who improves an existing experimental device to make new and important measurements? Can a lawyer who devises a new strategy to win a class of court cases be described as “creative”? This essay argues for the broadest use of this term, encompassing the widest range of human activities on which new ideas, approaches, and inspiration can be brought to bear.

Others have adopted a narrower definition of creativity. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi notes that “most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the results of creativity.” He identified and interviewed ninety-one “exceptional individuals” (based on awards like the Nobel Prize and similar recognition) in order to explore factors that were common in their backgrounds. He defines creative people as individuals who changed an entire domain through their work and have been publicly validated by experts as having done so. In his model, “creativity cannot be separated from its recognition.” So, for example, the painter Raphael “was creative in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries but not in between or afterward” because his reputation fluctuated along with historical art scholarship. In Why: What Makes Us Curious, Mario Livio also focuses on distinguished historical figures, such as Leonardo and Richard Feynman, and interviews highly accomplished and creative living artists, scientists, and others. He emphasizes curiosity and asking questions as a key to creativity.

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DAVID W. OXTOBY

The Creative College

What Higher Education Can Learn from Kindergartens and Neuroscience

DAVID W. OXTOBY

is a visiting scholar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and president emeritus of Pomona College.
2. **Construct a Narrative Arc**

Think about the bigger picture. Consider these questions:

- What themes do people keep returning to?
- What are the recurring patterns?
- What quotes don’t fit this pattern? Outliers should not be discarded; they should be explored.
- Every good story has a conflict, a tension, a turning point. Where is yours?

Challenges:

- Overwhelmed relationships
- Pre-
The criteria above apply to what Howard Gardner and Emily Weinstein call “big C” creativity, a peak attained only by a very small number of individuals.4 In this essay, I focus instead on what they term “little c” creativity and, most profoundly, on their suggestion that “collaboration, not the individual mind, underlies creativity.” This approach views creativity as shared by all to varying degrees. Recent studies based in cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, and paleontology—including Edward O. Wilson’s The Origins of Creativity—explore creativity as a distinctively human trait, its connection to the evolution and structure of our brains, and its relationship to changes in human social organization.5 Another quirky and fascinating study by Stephen Asma on The Evolution of Imagination is built around the central theme of improvisation; he shows how this human activity lies at the center of imaginative advances in fields from jazz to science to business.6

**The creative brain**

We have come a long way from the pop psychology trope that the right brain is the source of creativity. A more nuanced view, based on science, suggests that the two sides of the brain are indeed different, but that both are important for creativity.7 The left hemisphere controls words, numbers, logic, and analysis, while the right hemisphere interprets size, shape, spatial relationships, and rhythm. The left hemisphere is best at focusing on details, while the right looks more at the big picture and builds connections to other areas. Creativity involves constantly connecting and shifting back and forth between convergent thinking (analysis, left brain) and divergent thinking (synthesis, right brain).

A significant observation from modern neuroscience is that the brains of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds (the traditional age range for college students) are highly plastic.8 Of course, connections between synapses are made throughout childhood, but changes continue to occur through the adolescent and college years and beyond, especially in the critical prefrontal cortex that plays a major role in making complex decisions and in regulating social behavior. Synapses can change from firing in bursts to firing more regularly, and existing pathways of connection in the brain can be developed or can waste away.

Animal studies have shown that rats raised in environments with extensive and varied sensory input have larger brains with more highly connected networks of neurons. Marilee J. Bresciani Ludvik reports an interesting study comparing the brains of London taxi and bus drivers.9 The former must pass tests to demonstrate knowledge of the very complex geography of the city (with numerous streets, routes, squares, and buildings), while the latter need only learn to drive a single route day after day. The brains of the taxi drivers show significant growth in certain regions, while those of bus drivers show no such effect.

New techniques of functional magnetic resonance imaging now allow scientists to follow the activity of the brain in real time while undertaking creative tasks such as reading or looking at works of art. This allows probing of brain regions that contribute to creativity. The Nobel Prize–winning neuroscientist Eric Kandel has been intrigued for many years by how we perceive art, as well as by the relationship between brain science and creativity. He describes studies that show activity in a particular part of the right hemisphere immediately before a creative insight emerges as part of an “Aha!” moment. He points out that such creative moments often come when the mind is distracted by other tasks, or while relaxing or dreaming.10

**Kindergarten to college**

If learning changes the brain, how can we redesign higher education to enhance the creative capabilities of young people? Csikszentmihalyi argues that children “cannot be creative because creativity involves changing a way of doing things, or a way of thinking, and that in turn requires having mastered the old ways of doing or thinking.”11 I would say exactly the opposite and point out that children are constantly asking questions, connecting disparate topics to one another, exploring their environment, and solving problems in novel ways: all key signs of creativity.

Mitchel Resnick has proposed that kindergarten is “the greatest invention of the previous thousand years” and suggests that it is “a good model for learners of all ages.” He writes of the “creative learning spiral” fostered by a good
kindergarten, in which children imagine, create, play, share, reflect, and once again imagine, and his book focuses on how creativity can be enhanced through “projects, passion, peers, and play.” He shows how teenagers and graduate students can benefit from the same lessons.12

The best early childhood education is built on a foundation of “learning by doing” that was articulated over one hundred years ago by John Dewey.13 Philosophies of education associated with the names Montessori, Waldorf, or Reggio Emilia have in common a child-centered approach, in which the teacher guides rather than controls, eliciting ideas and encouraging children to decorate their space, to tell stories, and to make things. In The Gardener and the Carpenter, Alison Gopnik describes experiments in which children discover more about a new toy on their own than they do under direct guidance from a teacher.14 The children are empowered to explore their environment and develop their own projects.

Sadly, such creative preschool programs are under attack. Nursery schools and kindergartens face pressures to teach rote skills to accelerate readiness for the next grades. Play and creativity are being forced out and replaced by testing even for the youngest children. Erika Christakis worries that “our current priorities in early education are designed to stifle the kind of creativity and quick-footedness that future generations will need in order to solve their problems.”15

The situation only gets worse as students move through the education system and are increasingly discouraged from owning their learning. Teachers become the “experts” who tell rather than ask, and classes are controlled exercises in conveying information. By the time they reach college, many students are adept at fitting into a system where they listen to the “sage on the stage” and regurgitate the information on papers and exams. In such classes, creativity is a disruptive force that is suppressed rather than encouraged.
How can colleges restructure curricula and classrooms to help students develop creative skills? And what can we learn from neuroscience research and early childhood educators?

**Liberal arts curricula.** Neuroscience experiments on rats and other animals show that their brains can be trained to accomplish a variety of very specific tasks. The same is true of students! Performance on multiple-choice tests or in solving particular types of problems can be improved by practice, becoming almost automatic upon repetition. Our brains can be trained on linear and logical problems (which are also the easiest to teach and to test), helping us to develop certain neural connections more strongly than others. But creativity—the “Aha!” insights that can lead to real breakthroughs—rely on the integrative and synthesizing parts of the brain. Rote learning will do nothing to develop these capacities. Rather, by taking courses across multiple disciplines, a linear thinker can develop the ability to make leaps of insight.

Students whom I advised at Pomona College often entered college with a clear plan for exactly what they wanted to study and how they would fit in the necessary requirements. I always encouraged them to take courses far from their comfort zone because that would be the best way to stretch their brains and make new neural connections. For a student accomplished at writing papers and solving math problems, I might suggest a dance class if that was something they had never tried before. A liberal education, not one aimed at a narrow training for a particular job, is the best preparation for a creative future.

**Active learning.** Outstanding preschool classrooms are models of active learning, in which children, under the guidance of skilled teachers, choose activities to take part in, collaborate in groups with other children, and (especially in the Reggio Emilia model) actively document the projects to which they have contributed.16 If five-year-olds can have this much autonomy, and if their schools can emphasize children’s rights rather than needs, why can’t this be extended to college students? Many studies show how much more students learn when they are active participants in class instead of passive recipients of information. “Flipping the classroom,” breaking into small groups to solve problems together, and creating classroom debates are examples of techniques that have proven their value in helping students to learn and to retain what they have learned. James E. Zull has written about a surprising result from neuroscience: the small but highly connected cerebellum, thought to be associated with subconscious processes, is also activated by saying verbs and words of action out loud.17 Getting students talking in class has multiple advantages!

**Concrete metaphors for abstract concepts.** Abstract concepts are processed in the right hemisphere of the brain, while specific examples are analyzed in the left hemisphere.18 Words are controlled on the left, maps and spatial images on the right. Engaging multiple parts of the brain in teaching and learning helps to deepen understanding and aid retention. “A picture is worth a thousand words” summarizes the value of engaging visual systems of the brain in conveying an idea. The concept of “metaphor” is also useful here. Its Greek root means “carrying across,” and in a broad sense it is connected to interdisciplinary work, in which concepts from one field are carried over into another. Metaphors can be useful devices in the college classroom. As Zull says, “Metaphors are sets of neuronal networks that possess specific physical relationships to each other in the brain and thus embody the concept of the relationship itself. . . . This is why metaphors, parables, and stories are so powerful when we want to teach a concept.”19 Chemist Theodore Brown argues that metaphor is vital for science education: to make science compelling to young people, it needs to connect to real-life experience through metaphor.20

**Collaborative creativity**

So far, this article’s suggestions to enhance creative skills in college have fit within the framework of changes to existing curricula or courses. What about more dramatic and fundamental changes? As in our earlier preschool connection, is there a way to bring the spirit of play, improvisation, storytelling, and sharing time to our campuses? Could we create spaces with a certain degree of chaos, in which students throw out ideas, make things, and put them up on the walls? Could we bring fun to our colleges?

Exactly this is happening at the Rick and Susan Sontag Center for Collaborative Creativity, a joint program of the five undergraduate Claremont Colleges. Established in 2015 and
housed in a repurposed library building on the Pomona College campus, it is also known as the “Hive” to reflect the buzz of activity that takes place and the cross-fertilization it creates among the five colleges. Enter the center and you will see many of the supplies of a good kindergarten: colored paper, pipe cleaners, Post-It Notes, and building blocks. Of course, there are also toys aimed at older students: woodworking tools, a drafting table, and a silk-screening machine. There are plenty of places to sit on the floor, but also moveable chairs and tables (in addition to a chair and table attached bizarrely to the wall to create a sense of disorientation about what is up and what is down). A balcony serves as a launching pad for paper airplanes.

Play and pretending have great educational benefits. In her thoughtful chapter on “The Work of Play,” Gopnik writes mostly about young children, but much of what she says would apply to college students as well. She points out that the brains of rats that play are more plastic and can “do many things in a more flexible, varied way.” She goes on to say that “pretending is closely related to another distinctively human ability, hypothetical or counterfactual thinking—that is, the ability to consider alternative ways that the world might be. And that, in turn, is central to our powerful human learning abilities.” Pretending can be practice for how scientists come up with new hypotheses. “Thinking counterfactually in this way is a tremendously useful skill for adult human beings. It’s what we mean when we talk about the power of imagination and creativity. . . . But counterfactual thinking is also crucial if we want to change the world.” Finally, she points out that “the very silliness of play, the apparently random weirdness of it all, is what makes it so effective.”

The serious purpose of the Sontag Center is for students to learn about creativity as a fundamentally collaborative process. Although there are plenty of examples of isolated geniuses who are highly creative, groups of diverse individuals can be creative in an even more
powerful way. A Harvey Mudd College engineering student might join a team with a Scripps College English major and a Pitzer College psychology student to make something or to work on a problem together. An early example was making a shoe with masking tape: not something of any value in itself, but a useful activity to learn how to collaborate as a team. More extended projects involved coming up with ways to rethink spaces in the Claremont Colleges Library and a project sponsored by a nonprofit seeking to increase sign-ups for organ donors.

The Sontag Center is not the only such effort at colleges and universities around the country. Its structure was influenced by the Stanford d.school, though that pioneering effort is more focused at the graduate and professional student level. Other examples are Harvard’s i-lab, Arizona State University’s Herberger Institute, and Boise State University’s College of Innovation and Design (though the latter two are actual degree-granting entities). A common term used to describe these initiatives is “design thinking”: using techniques that might be associated with design and architecture to approach a wide range of problems. These centers differ somewhat from what might be considered more traditional innovation and entrepreneurship centers. While there would be no objection to a start-up company or nonprofit organization emerging from such a center, that is not their main purpose: it is better for students to try their hands at many different projects (and learn to fail—a useful skill in the real world) than to devote a lot of time to a single effort.

The Sontag Center provides spaces for faculty who want to hold their classes in a flexible and creative setting, and it regularly offers a course in human-centered design. Most of the activity, though, consists of workshops and extended projects that it houses, supports, and facilitates. Some are suggested and run by faculty, many others by students.

Students graduating from college in the twenty-first century will be working in very different environments from the highly structured,
hierarchical companies of the past. They will work on diverse teams and in flexible spaces, and will likely change jobs many times in their lifetime. Creative capacity fostered by such efforts as the Sontag Center will be critically important to their success. They will enter a world where technology has broken down barriers and where collaboration and communication take place across the world.

The story of Jorge Odón, published in the New York Times, illustrates the power of creativity in today’s world.23 Odón was an Argentine car mechanic who developed a new device to save babies stuck in the birth canal during difficult births. How did he come up with this idea? He had watched a YouTube video about how to extract a lost cork from inside a wine bottle using a plastic bag. While sleeping that night, “his unconscious made the leap” to the conclusion that a similar approach could help extract a stuck baby. Having tested the idea using a glass jar and doll, he spoke with an obstetrician at a hospital in Buenos Aires, who in turn put him in touch with a friend at the World Health Organization (WHO). That led to a meeting in Buenos Aires between the car mechanic and the head of the WHO program for maternal and postnatal health, and since then the device has gone through laboratory development, a New Jersey company has begun to manufacture it, and it is undergoing testing in Argentina and elsewhere.

Everyone can be creative, as the story of the Argentine car mechanic illustrates. With information so widely available, ideas can move quickly to reach people with the power to put them into effect (though the network of personal contacts in the Odón device story and the persistence of Mr. Odón were critical to his ultimate success). Let’s encourage our colleges to be creative in the new, twenty-first century world where technology has broken down barriers and where collaboration and communication take place across the world.

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NOTES

1. Maya Angelou and Jeffrey M. Elliot, Conversations with Maya Angelou (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).


11. Csikszentmihalyi, Creativity.


To meet the rising expectations of accrediting organizations, colleges and universities are being urged to produce data on student learning outcomes. If faculty and administrators are to add assessment design and implementation to our many responsibilities, however, we need to see assessment as a worthwhile intellectual enterprise, not as a form of surveillance or reductive quantification of knowledge. How will the assessment process make us better teachers and our students better learners? And how can it possibly be compatible with, much less enhance, our work as scholars?

Here, we report on the results of a three-year study we conducted on assessment practices in general education courses at Duke University as part of a three-institution (Duke, the University of Kansas, and the University of Nebraska) research project funded by the Spencer Foundation. At all three institutions, researchers asked: Are data from the assessment process being communicated and acted on as they should? Above all, what might make the data gathered in the assessment process more likely to produce meaningful change? Our study addressed these questions, but our results spoke also to the concerns of many faculty about assessment’s intellectual rigor and its efficacy as a tool for better teaching. How can assessment be relevant, and even contribute in some way, to faculty members’ work as scholars in their disciplines?

The investigators began by acknowledging that many faculty remain alienated from and by assessment—a legacy of the top-down manner in which the assessment process started at most institutions, which continues to affect how data are gathered and reported. This top-down model persists despite considerable evidence that meaningful faculty participation is vital to the success of assessment processes. Our joint investigation addressed this problem by putting the focus on instructors in the classroom. The project asked: What happens when individual faculty not only determine what they want to learn from any assessment they conduct, but even anticipate what they might learn in order to make their assessment tools more robust and the likelihood of using the information greater? And what happens if they are invited to themselves draw meaning out of data from their courses? In short, what happens when faculty “close the loop” by drawing conclusions from their own data and then offering their conclusions to administrators?

At Duke, the study focused on the Writing-in-the-Disciplines (WID) requirement—a general education objective from the College of Arts and Sciences. We—the two faculty who ran...
Those responsible for applying the data should be involved in making meaning out of them—in asking the questions that will generate them, in grappling with their implications, and in anticipating their uses

the Duke study—are a historian and a cultural anthropologist who came to this project after having taken leadership roles in a university committee tasked with ensuring departments’ compliance in college-wide assessment used for accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges—outward-facing assessment, in short. We were tapped for that assignment because we had been leaders in developing assessment protocols in our own departments (history and the Thompson Writing Program). In those roles, we had discovered firsthand the gap that has developed between compliance with demands for assessment, on the one hand, and subsequent use of assessment data for real educational improvement on the other. That disconnect was more obvious to us than it was to the other faculty who served alongside us because the two of us had also worked side by side as directors of the college’s interdisciplinary academic writing program. There, we treated assessment as an imperative partly because the writing program—which teaches every incoming student—has to justify its existence and compete for resources more energetically than does a conventional department.

In the writing program, we also treat assessment as an integral part of teaching; we train new postdocs in teaching writing in their disciplines, with the expectation that they will engage in self-reflection and use their experience and data to spur improvement. Thus, we treat teaching as an exercise in evidence-based inquiry. That culture—one that treats assessment not grudgingly as a fact of life but as an indispensable part of teaching that lies completely within the competence and purview of each faculty member—makes us outliers among our peers at Duke and ideally placed to lead other faculty in investigating their own teaching from that stance.

Study design
This study’s design assumes that decision making can be understood as “sense making,” a reiterative social process that involves framing, interpretation, argumentation, and persuasion.1 One of the implications of this framework is that those who will use the data (i.e., faculty and administrators) need to be involved in designing the assessment and interpreting the findings. In other words, those responsible for applying the data should be involved in making meaning out of them—in asking the questions that will generate them, in grappling with their implications, and in anticipating their uses. Thus the research question driving this study was as follows:

Does participation in a sense-making simulation exercise improve the use of data to inform educational decisions and improve learning?2

To answer this question, the study followed a common protocol in all three institutions. It included a series of surveys designed to measure whether and to what extent the use of student assessment in academic decisions (the independent variable) was affected by any of four dependent variables: (1) personal characteristics, including knowledge of and disposition toward assessment; (2) organizational context, including institutional support for assessment; (3) information characteristics, including quality of data and compatibility with expectations; and (4) participation in the sense-making process.

At Duke, we offered a small stipend ($1,000 to $1,500) to faculty across campus who were then teaching writing-intensive courses and invited them to participate in either the control group ($1,000) or the experiment group ($1,500). Faculty in the control group received a rubric that they could choose to modify, and which they would then use to assess a writing assignment at the start of the semester and another at the semester’s end. They then reported on their experience of using the rubric and briefly reflected, in writing, on how that experience might inform their future teaching and/or assessment practices. The experiment group, identified in the study as the “simulation group,” participated in two meaning-making workshops bookending the semester. In the first, we gave faculty an overview of the study and led them through a series of brainstorming exercises and discussions aimed at helping them identify learning goals for their courses—not only for their students but, most importantly, for themselves.

Due to the small sample size at Duke, our survey results were inconclusive, but the qualitative data we gathered from participants, particularly in the experiment group, offered valuable insight into their experiences—especially those related to the fourth variable above, referred to in the study as “sense making.”
Experiment group: qualitative findings

In the first of the two workshops, we asked participants in the experiment group: What frustrated them about how students have responded to their assignments in the past, and how had they addressed it? What did they want to know about how students process and respond to their assignments, and about the roadblocks students may encounter?

A public policy professor wondered how she could get her students to “embrace risk” in their writing. A philosophy professor asked herself how she could help her students “think like philosophers.” A sociology professor wanted her students to frame good research questions. And an English professor wanted to pinpoint exactly what she found off-putting about her students’ personal essays. For some faculty, like the philosopher, the exercise in identifying the features they were looking for in their students’ written work was their first experience of naming the analytical or interpretive moves essential to their discipline. Some, like the English professor, needed first to attend to what was not working in students’ writing to move further.

Faculty shared their thoughts about issues they wished to assess in their respective courses, then discussed how they might assess those issues. Would they revise the language in their course materials? Create new assignments or adapt existing ones? Rethink their assignment sequencing? Would they use a grading or an evaluating rubric, and would they share it with their students? Using a workbook designed specifically for the workshop, participants then devised a plan for revising their course materials and created a rubric for assessing the learning goals they had identified.

After using their newly designed criteria to rate a set of early-semester and another set of late-semester student writing, faculty gathered for a second workshop to make meaning of their findings, reflect on what they had learned, and consider the implications of their data for future iterations of their courses. Not all participants generated numerical data, but they unanimously found the exercise useful in making their goals more evident to themselves and their expectations clearer to students. More importantly, faculty used their findings to set new learning goals, rethink their course materials, and continue reflecting on their teaching.

The key factor here is that faculty weren’t told what to assess, nor were they given a ready-made rubric to apply; their questions arose from their own curiosity and reflection, as prompted by the questions we posed for them and which they answered in writing. The sense-making meetings were structured by and around worksheets that each faculty member completed. Those are interesting documents because they tracked and revealed faculty thinking processes. This was by design: the
questions to which faculty responded in each workshop overlapped, leading them to revisit what they most value in their courses for students, how best to elicit student success, and how to observe that success or failure. Both worksheets prompted them to anticipate how they would revise their goals for students based on what constructing the rubric had helped them see about what they value. In short, faculty learning about their own goals for students was iterative by nature. Thus, the process of identifying goals, crafting assignments to foster student learning, and collecting information about student success ended, even in the second workshop, in the presumption that it was necessary to start again with restated, reimagined goals.

Not surprisingly, in both the first and second sessions, faculty members’ worksheet responses alternated between overly general goals or grandiose claims about what “success” would look like and specific lists detailing what moves they could take that would be the building blocks of that success. For example, one public policy professor answered the (deliberately mixed, compound) question—“How will I know that learning outcomes have been achieved? How will these be assessed? How will I gather information about student learning?”—with only a forceful description of what high-quality work should display: “Students will build their own argument by fully engaging with relevant existing research and integrating it with their own reasoning.” In the drafted rubric, however, the professor anticipates what analytical and argumentative moves are necessary to build such a successful piece of writing.

Particularly helpful for many participants was the section of the worksheet that asked them to identify the “mechanisms of effect” likely to influence their students’ ability to learn. Mechanisms of effect include both “mediators” of learning—emotional, motivational, and cognitive qualities or dispositions, as well as prior knowledge—that would facilitate learning as well as “moderators”—other knowledge, qualities, or dispositions likely to impede learning in the given course. The worksheet required a detailed process of reflection, and faculty named mediators and moderators in each of five categories: prior knowledge, beliefs, emotional processes, cognitive processes, and motivational processes. Key here was the fine-grained approach that forced faculty to slow down and consider students as learners. This process enabled faculty to identify not merely potential problems but also potential student strengths as they affected learning in the teacher’s actual course. Thus, faculty were given a chance to think about precisely what cognitive processes, what kinds of reasoning and learning, students actually do in their courses. This enabled them to move more effectively into designing rubrics to guide themselves as they fashion assignments and measure student learning.

Conclusions
Our study confirms the importance of faculty defining their own goals, designing their own assessment strategies, and discussing their goals and findings with others. Our analysis suggests that, despite associated challenges, the process of creating reliable and informative rubrics—especially in a collaborative and multidisciplinary context—provides faculty with the self-assessment and metacognitive awareness crucial for student learning and for their own satisfaction as instructors. The workshop format gave faculty a space in which to take risks themselves—to be learners rather than experts. Articulating concerns about student learning and describing the epistemology of one’s discipline takes intellectual work. It is this kind of work, especially when done in dialogue with scholars across disciplines, that makes visible our own personal
and disciplinary assumptions. When the particularities of our disciplines become evident by comparison, we become, collectively, more than inter- or multidisciplinary; we gain a metadisciplinary awareness that we can then share with our students. It surfaces in our assignments and in the ways we communicate our expectations to students, and it helps them develop their own metacognition, which we know to be important for learning and transfer.

In a research article published in 2014, the principal investigators at the three participating universities argued that when we seek to determine why assessment data are not being used for educational improvement, we need above all to rethink and broaden our notion of what “use” means. Among other things, they argued, individual faculty and their departments need a longer time window than current assessment-for-accreditation protocols allow to interpret assessment data, much less implement changes in how courses are taught. More importantly, “use” can and often does mean changing how faculty identify goals for students or craft and evaluate coursework and assignments to attain those goals. In short, conceptual change is a form of usefulness that goes unrecorded and undervalued in conventional assessment processes.

In our research project with Duke faculty, we explored how working with writing fosters conceptual change in faculty. Grappling with student writing and planning rubrics to guide both students and faculty leads faculty to a greater meta-awareness of thinking processes in their disciplines, and thus to a greater ability to guide students through those processes. Engaging faculty in thoughtful practices surrounding the teaching of writing is thus one model for showing why conceptual change matters and how to effectuate it.

The research we conducted also created a protected space for faculty that is hard to come by, especially at a research university such as Duke. This space permitted attention to holistic questions about teaching and learning (rather than problem solving) and about the making of disciplinary knowledge, unfettered by institutional goals. It was a space we were willing to construct because it served one of the goals of the writing program: to support faculty across the university who teach writing-intensive courses. Our process of working with faculty in this research project was successful, in turn, because it mimicked what we have found successful in training new instructors in the writing program: the attention to identifying disciplinary values and translating those values into goals for students to reach through their writing. The workshops convened for the study mirrored the multidisciplinary nature of our program, pushing participants to make explicit their own epistemological frameworks. But perhaps more importantly, we asked faculty to do their thinking through writing—reflecting not only what they would be asking of their students, but what is, after all, arguably the main mode of intellectual engagement and of “doing” scholarship in academia.

Our work with faculty on planning assessment in their courses and making meaning out of the information they glean has demonstrated to us how revolutionizing it is to put faculty at the center of this process. This means that to carry out assessment that succeeds in seeding improvement—assessment that closes the loop—we must democratize it and make it a more collaborative venture. Most important, it is clear to us now that assessment is potentially much more than a mode of accountability; if done correctly and collectively, it can be a powerful tool in our professional development as teachers and as intellectuals, a thinking process that has the potential to be attractive and productive, and not a burden, to faculty themselves.

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The best college teachers think in terms of how their students will learn rather than what they, as instructors, will teach. Indeed, literature on higher education overwhelmingly advocates the idea of student-centered learning. However, institutions, particularly large research universities such as the University of California (UC), face numerous challenges in supporting faculty efforts to develop student-centered approaches. Enter the Provost Hybrid Course Award (PHCA) program at UC Davis. By sponsoring faculty through a technologically challenging and professionally supported workshop to hybridize one of their courses (through both online and in-class components), UC Davis provided an avenue for participants to develop empathy for the students they teach. That newfound empathy helped faculty participants identify and clearly state objectives, design appropriate learning modules, and build assessments that supported their goals. Empathy allowed them to center the work on their students.

The divide between faculty members’ positions as teachers and students’ positions as learners can be challenging to see, much less overcome. As experts, faculty may fail to provide appropriate entry points or convey specific goals, even when they think they are succeeding in these areas. Because they are rooted in their experience of teaching something over which they have mastery, they may not empathize with the student experience of learning the material fresh. Faculty may not even realize until assignments are graded that a significant distance exists between what they are asking of students and what students are able to do. This disconnect is problematic. Even faculty who are intentional in their teaching and dedicated to their students may lack opportunities to develop an empathetic approach that can support students’ academic success.

At UC Davis, we found an opportunity to overcome the disconnect and maximize learner-centered teaching in an unexpected place: a learning community designed to teach faculty to hybridize their courses. In hybrid courses, material that traditionally would be covered in class is delivered online, but the course still meets in person, albeit for a reduced amount of time. Hybrid (and online-only) courses are often understood as a means to address infrastructural concerns like limited classroom space, create more flexible learning and scheduling options for students, and support more interactive learning spaces. In addition, these forms of teaching should be investigated as powerful facilitators of mind-set change that lead faculty to create more student-centered learning experiences in person and online.
In this article, we explore four elements of the UC Davis PHCA program that contributed to participants’ ability to (re)design courses so they truly centered on students. First, faculty connected to each other as student-centered individuals within a community of practice. Second, through learning new technological tools in order to teach familiar material, faculty developed learner-centered thinking that changed how they approached teaching. Third, faculty developed greater intentionality about their learning goals for students. Lastly, faculty developed new empathy for students’ experiences by thinking through the technology involved in hybridizing course material within a supported and immersive environment. In spite of many faculty members’ concerns that online teaching would ultimately distance them from their students, participants frequently completed the PHCA program feeling more connected with their students and better equipped to teach.

Community of practice model
The provost’s office offered the PHCA program from 2010 to 2015. Each cohort had roughly five to seven participants, the majority of whom had limited prior experience using educational technologies in the classroom. For this study, we conducted one-on-one interviews and focus groups with twelve faculty participants from the 2013–14 and 2014–15 cohorts. All twelve shared the core experience: they met weekly as a group during one quarter and consulted individually as needed with pedagogy and instructional design consultants over the following quarter. They also could participate in monthly informal meetings after completing the program as they worked through designing their courses. Faculty who completed both the seminar and the course design received a stipend of $12,500 to cover costs associated with additional technology services, graduate student assistance, and other areas of support.

At its heart, the PHCA program was a “community of practice” where faculty developed a course in which students would learn material using educational technologies outside of the classroom, with the intent of enabling discussions and extensions of that material inside the classroom. The program offered an environment where faculty learned alongside peers from different departments. Experts in their own disciplines, they became novices as they struggled to learn new technologies and design a course in a foreign format. However, they didn’t struggle alone. Two experts from the UC Davis teaching and technology units guided participants as they developed learning activities and assessments aligned with student outcomes. Perhaps even more importantly, the faculty had opportunities to learn from each other.

Several participants noted that in ten years of teaching on campus, they had “never felt this kind of community.” For one, “just hearing from each other and seeing what everyone else was doing and what they were struggling with” was what brought her back week after week.
As another put it, “there aren’t a lot of opportunities to work collectively on teaching,” because for new professors who have been assigned a course, “it’s easy to kind of do it on autopilot.” Faculty rarely have the opportunity to reflect on goals and approaches, and typically are not encouraged to really take a course apart and rethink it “from its foundation.” For participants, even after the fact, there was a palpable sense that these sessions sparked a connection among faculty and a respect for one another’s way of thinking, even though the disciplines that were represented ranged from the humanities to veterinary medicine. “I don’t think a single day went by that I didn’t think, oh wow, that’s so smart,” remembered one participant. For many, this was the first time they had connected intensively with others who cared deeply about instruction.

This connection is at the core of what makes communities of practice valuable, especially at research universities where opportunities to deepen one’s understanding of teaching in community are rare. Such communities of practice transform teaching from a solitary exercise that receives few overt rewards into a research-based collective endeavor supported by staff and funding.

The PHCA cohort was united in the desire to experiment with a teaching method that might improve the effectiveness of the course learning experience for a new generation of
students. Some found it a “waste of everybody’s time” to lecture about materials when students could just as easily watch a video on their phones. Some found that they themselves could no longer pay attention to lecturers for lengthy periods of time, so weren’t sure why they would expect students to do so. Some simply felt that the world had changed and they should change with it. When one faculty member was on maternity leave, she found an “incredibly compelling” online application for language learning, something she’d previously done face-to-face. The experience made her want to modernize her classroom approach: “Why not try something different? The ways we were taught to learn are not the ways they [students] were.”

**Learning to learn through technology**

The PHCA group had specific tasks each week. These included defining learning outcomes for a course, designing an assignment, and learning specific technological tools that students could use to engage with course material. Participants especially remembered the last of these as bonding the group. With two exceptions, faculty in the PHCA program had little to no prior experience with the educational technologies introduced through the program. One recalled that in the beginning “we were all very enthusiastic” about learning the tools and options, but as they turned from ideas to hands-on learning, many were intimidated. One participant even characterized the PHCA community as a “support group” where everyone was “in it together,” sharing an environment where expert teachers became novice students.

The majority of participants described their low points in the PHCA program as those when they were overwhelmed by technological tools. Many found it frustrating that the program’s staff would not simply tell them which tools would be best for their projects. One week, for example, faculty were told to select an online tool from a long list of possibilities, determine through trial and error how it could be used to support learning in their class, and share the opportunities and challenges the tool presented. Speed-dating style, they then had to present the results of their experimentation to their colleagues. “It was generally presented to us that if you have X problem or X goal, there are four or five different programs that you could use and this one’s free and this is not very expensive and this works well and you guys can play around with it,” one participant explained. This wasn’t a message that he liked: “I work at a university because I like environments in which you get taught stuff, not, like, go experiment—be a free spirit.”

There were two levels of challenge. In the first, participants had to discern which tools fit what course activity. In the second, they had to try to make the tools work. “Oh, Adobe Connect,” recalled one faculty participant, “I thought I was going to pass out with Adobe Connect.” The phrase “pass out,” while an exaggeration, does reflect the purposeful gap PHCA staff created between their guidance and faculty mastery. Developing scripts, recording raw footage, reviewing and preparing footage for editing, embedding quizzes or mapping tools on interactive platforms—all these activities consumed more time than any participant expected.
For some participants, the time they dedicated to course-making encroached on time for research and writing. As one faculty participant explained, “I realized I had signed on for a tremendous time commitment . . . [and] I recognize the system won’t reward me for it.”

These comments raise the question: Why did participants keep coming to class? Part of the motivation was practical, as faculty were required to complete the course in order to receive in-kind or direct funding, which they could use to hire a graduate assistant or pay for technologies. At the same time, none of the faculty were required to complete the course by their colleagues or the university. After seeing how much time and effort were involved in learning the technological tools and building each course component, they could have walked away. Yet all participants completed the class, and most who participated in this study characterized the experience as rewarding. One professor, who was asked by his department to participate, noted that “I did not want to do it. I’m a very busy guy”; afterward, however, he reported that the experience “was so worthwhile.” Evidence suggests that much of that reward came in the form of a dramatic shift in mind-set about teaching.

“It forces you to be precise”
Participants frequently talked about the PHCA program inviting them to fundamentally re-think their approach to student learning. Several, including senior faculty, shared that they had never previously been trained to teach or thought much about how to present information to students. “The hybrid model is a fundamental radical change that just invites reconsideration of everything you’re doing,” explained one participant. A particularly large
part of that radical thinking was developing learner-centeredness: figuring out what they really wanted students to learn.

Faculty working on hybrid courses have to be very clear about what they want students to learn in each segment of their online materials. Part of this is practical: a great deal of work goes into producing and captioning short videos, for example, or creating specific texts to annotate. Each element of an online course has to be produced, often by the faculty themselves, and no one wants to have to recreate materials. Additionally, while a typical lecture might be an hour, a typical segment is five to six minutes—so one can’t approach online and in-person materials in the same way. Selecting and producing materials for short, time-limited segments involves a level of intentional thought that could be missing in a typical lecture.

Several participants mentioned that the PHCA program helped them develop “more clearly articulated purposes” or more “course objectives.” One senior faculty member, who saw the PHCA program as the first time he had thought about teaching “carefully,” reported not knowing that before creating a course, one should establish objectives that guide what one includes. Program participation invited many faculty to fundamentally rethink what they were covering and how—an experience that some found liberating. One participant from economics recalled realizing that once she looked at her assignments and thought about her overall learning outcomes, she could make changes. “Oh my gosh,” she recalled thinking, “I can get rid of two assignments that I don’t like and keep the one I’m interested in.”

Focusing on course objectives not only changed how participants approached the material they taught, but also shaped the kind of testing they used. One participant who had routinely tested students to make sure they did the reading found that he wanted instead to assess the overall learning objectives, making sure students “understand what are the important things.” Another completely jettisoned her exams after she tried to convert them to the online format and link them directly to her learning outcomes: “I don’t think that’s a useful sort of testing for the thing I want them to do.” None of these decisions depended on the community format of the PHCA program or staff guidance; certainly, faculty could have made these changes on their own. However, the PHCA program’s unique combination of support, challenge, limited space and time, and encouragement to connect course products to clear learning aims enabled faculty to change their mind-sets and practices. Recalling that some participants were senior faculty members who had had decades to rethink their teaching, it seems that something uniquely advantageous occurred frequently in the PHCA program that did not happen without it.

**Developing greater empathy for students**

Before entering the PHCA program, most participants expected that they could form deeper connections to students by hybridizing their courses. What they meant by this, however, was that they expected to benefit from increased time for face-to-face in-class interaction as they moved their lecture materials online. Interestingly, many also found that they connected imaginatively to students through the process of putting material online. Ultimately, the PHCA program seems to have helped many faculty members acquire a new sense of how students thought—an almost an empathy for student learners—that they had not previously experienced.

One reason for this was the format itself. Participants realized quickly that they could not simply video record their lectures; as one put it, “It really is not engaging to watch someone talk for an hour.” Once they realized this, participants had to think in new ways about how to make material accessible, how to decide what could best be done in person and online, how to present information online (including length and format of segments), and what information to present given time limits. Making these decisions required them to put themselves in their students’ shoes. According to one participant, “You have to imagine your learner constantly, and you are working through these technologies too.”

Faculty and staff both cited an increase in empathy for students—the ability to think from a student perspective about teaching—as a key takeaway from the workshops. PHCA coordinators noted that while they initially prompted faculty to think about how students needed to learn rather than how they wanted to teach, participants soon took this approach on their own. “By workshop five [they] are asking
each other, ‘But how will that tool promote student engagement?’ I don’t even have to ask,” a coordinator recalled. Evidence suggests this was not a small shift, but rather one that took consistent personal and emotional reframing. “In the end, you need to feel their pain,” explained one participant; “you need to empathize with them.” Another recalled one of the coordinators “saying, ‘This is not about you. This is about the students.’ [P]utting your thumb exactly on how the students will receive this is extremely difficult, and you do have to filter through all the different technologies and all of the ways in which they can interact with the material in order to pick the best way. That was my scary moment.”

Indeed, it can be scary for faculty to put aside the ways they present information to students and dig in—class by class, concept by concept—to how students experience that information and ultimately learn. The PHCA program, by design, gives research faculty a place to express and overcome that fear. And the rewards are significant. As one faculty member put it, “I like to think I’m in the business of touching people’s lives with information. I’ve entertained them, because they rate me very well as an instructor, but that’s different from giving them information that touches their lives.” When done right, hybrid and online learning can enhance the ability of faculty to touch students’ lives in this way. With the right guidance and collaboration, faculty can use what some might see as “distancing” technologies to develop precision and empathy in their approaches to teaching, enhancing their connections with students even with limited face-to-face contact. “My whole approach is different,” concluded a senior faculty member. “It’s now what can I do as a professor to give them opportunities to learn.”

This was ultimately our most surprising and exciting finding when exploring the PHCA program’s impact on faculty. Faculty who went through the experience ended up thinking differently about students. Their mind-sets changed. Instead of considering chiefly what they wanted to teach, they found themselves thinking increasingly about what students needed in order to learn—a distinction that scholars of education argue is key for successful teaching. This shift toward greater empathy with student learners is not usually associated with hybrid or online learning. More often than not, these platforms are regarded by suspicious faculty as a means of minimizing contact with students in the name of profit or convenience. Our findings challenge that assumption. By asking participants to break down what they are doing in lecture, work through technological platforms they do not know, and take on the role of student, hybrid course learning communities “graduate” faculty who can see their subject matter from a student’s point of view.

Creating academic environments in which all students, regardless of background, can succeed will continue to be a chief challenge for higher education. We cannot address this challenge without greater learner-centered empathy, especially among faculty. For this reason, if for no other, course-building opportunities like the PHCA program should thrive.

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NOTES

2. Susan Ambrose, Michael Bridges, and Martha Lovett, How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 98.
Interdisciplinarity as a Where History and Writing Can Offer Sanctuary

KRISTIN VAN TASSEL AND THOMAS F. JORSCH

“The wool over my eyes had been removed,” wrote one student in spring 2017 when reflecting on our team-taught course, We All Have a Dream: Searching for Social Justice. This is the type of reaction—the “Aha!” moment—instructors hope to elicit from students, but it can be difficult to achieve. Having taught this general education course twice at the time of this writing, we have discovered a strategy for encouraging students with diverse backgrounds, skill sets, and interest levels not only to take the subject matter seriously, but to engage in the coursework in ways that are often deeply personal. Our observations and students’ written responses at the end of the course have indicated that when engaging with controversial topics like social justice, students need lower-stakes spaces to think—and history and writing, together, can provide these needed spaces. When taught in combination, these two subject areas can prompt engagement and self-reflection, with results that we did not fully anticipate but that changed how we understood the relationship between our subject areas. In sum, we found that a personal sanctuary for students emerged from the interdisciplinary synergy.

Most students arrived on the first day of class as unwilling participants seeking to fulfill the writing-intensive requirement for the interdisciplinary core curriculum at Bethany College, Kansas. The course combined the fields of English and history in an exploration of American social justice issues regarding race, class, and gender. As is often the case for general education courses, students enrolled primarily to check off a box at a time that worked for their schedules. We designed the course with the goal of achieving early buy-in among a group of students that was diverse in terms of race, gender, sexuality, nation of birth, politics, and writing ability. Our aim was to establish a classroom atmosphere that allowed students to overcome shyness and negotiate controversial topics, while accounting for additional dynamics related to our positions as two middle-class, white professors sympathetic to the topic.

Informal and formal writing

We began the course by inviting students to make the topic their own. For the second class meeting, we asked students to bring a three-hundred-word statement on what social justice meant to them; for the following class period, we asked that they bring another three-hundred-word essay identifying intersections between their definition of social justice and the language of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document we chose because it offered a chance for students to encounter unfamiliar ideas or consider why other ideas were left out. Both of these assignments were ungraded, so students received credit solely for completion.

Initially, we integrated these low-stakes tasks into the course because we wanted students to practice writing as a means of thinking through new ideas without becoming mired in worries about form. This strategy also prepared students for discussion; when they arrived in class with writing in hand, they had something to say. In fact, even in the first week of classes, we found that students were willing to describe issues that concerned them, from the immigration ban to gun rights, from Black Lives Matter to gay and transgender rights—as well as skepticism about whether social justice

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Social Justice Portal
The formal writing assignment that emerged from the historical readings forced students to identify with someone whose circumstances they could not have experienced themselves.

The first essay cycle drew on historical material from the nineteenth century. We assigned readings of varying lengths that covered the Declaration of Independence, slavery, the market revolution, and the nineteenth-century women’s movement. The second essay focused on contemporary America, and students read Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* as background material.¹ For the last essay, we asked students to propose a vision of social justice for their generation, drawing on Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* along with texts of their choosing we had studied at some point in the semester.²

**Past and present**

The first time we taught the course, we chose the sequence described above because starting with material that provided historical context made sense to us. But we didn’t consider the effect of starting the exploration of potentially uncomfortable social justice topics in the safety of the distant past. This strategy allowed students to begin with shared assumptions (*of course* slavery is unjust, *of course* it’s ridiculous that women couldn’t vote or own property) while also seeing how contested these assumptions once were. By considering abolitionists Frederick Douglass and David Walker in conversation with suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, labor activist Orestes Brownson, and slavery apologist George Fitzhugh, students came to see that there has never been consensus about what constitutes social justice in the United States.³ Moreover, by challenging students to seriously consider the arguments of an avowed racist like Fitzhugh and a radical feminist like Stanton, we required them to explore important ideas related to race and gender without taking political positions.

Importantly, the formal writing assignment that emerged from the historical readings forced students to identify with someone whose circumstances they could not have experienced themselves. In the first essay prompt, we asked students to write from the perspective of a single, literate, enslaved woman living in the 1840s who had family members sold away and often traveled with her owner to textile mills in the North. Students were tasked with integrating at least three readings from class while exploring what social justice—or injustice—meant from the perspective of this woman. Students had a lot of leeway in how to approach this essay, including narrative voice (they could write as her or as her advocate), focus (they could choose which parts of her identity to emphasize), and creative license (they could generate details about her life to develop their arguments). That is, they were not bound to the standards of thesis-driven academic analysis, though they did need to reach a conclusion about the nature of social justice.

The results were encouraging. Not only did students discover creative approaches, but they also grappled with weighty issues in a thoughtful manner. Some students focused on how the women in their narratives—the enslaved woman, the plantation mistress, and the Northern mill girls—shared the injustice of dependency based on their sex; others wrote that even though the mill girls were exploited, they enjoyed a freedom that the enslaved woman did not. Writing these first essays also helped students identify for themselves what aspects of social justice mattered most to them, and these became reference points when they tackled the contemporary world in the second half of the class. Furthermore, that first history-focused essay gave students experience in writing about race, gender, or class. It allowed them to practice negotiating a controversial topic without worrying about offending their classmates. Hence, the skills and confidence they learned or enhanced during this first essay cycle—empathy, integrating sources, developing an idea, defining social justice, and others—helped them succeed in the next two essay cycles.
when the stakes were raised through their focus on the contemporary world.

**Sanctuary and empathy**

We came to see the historical component of the course as essential to entering the social justice topic. Once students had advocated from the perspective of a historical character whose life was very different from their own, they were more receptive to considering the experiences of those whose contemporary life circumstances differed from theirs. With that empathy, they also became more liberated to change their minds. Perhaps the most striking example of this occurred in the student who initially associated social justice with mean-spirited liberal hysteria. Near the end of the course, in an informal response paper synthesizing Alexander and Ehrenreich, he confessed that although he initially felt defensive in response to Alexander’s critique of law enforcement because his father was a police officer, he found her examples and evidence persuasive. And after placing her argument alongside that of Ehrenreich, whose narrative recalled his own negative experiences in the service industry, he reevaluated his earlier negative view of what social justice meant and decided social justice issues were worth investigating. In other words, he announced firmly and without prompting that he had changed his mind. This capacity to rethink a position in the face of new evidence is an essential component of social justice.

While we had approached the course with the assumption that writing is a form of thinking as well as communicating, and while we had emphasized writing as a process that begins with the attempt to understand and respond to ideas that, through plenty of drafting, develop into an evidence-supported argument, the possibility that writing could be a source of sanctuary had never occurred to us. Students in Bethany College’s writing-intensive interdisciplinary courses are often intimidated by the workload; even the stronger, more confident writers fulfill many tasks with a grim sense of duty rather than enthusiasm. So at the end of the semester, we were genuinely surprised when, in their end-of-year reflections, many students expressed gratitude for the writing assignments because they offered a safe place to figure things out. They also seemed to feel that writing gave them control over how they engaged with the topic, both because they had several options for each assignment and because they could test their responses in what one student called “a semi-private way,” without the stress involved with articulating a position quickly and openly in class discussion. Thus, writing became a valuable tool for negotiating difficult topics rather than merely a task to complete. As another student explained, “I got to look at the issues I felt.” By literally looking at social justice issues in the form of writing, students began to identify patterns that changed their perceptions of their immediate and larger worlds. As a student wrote in her reflection, “There are so many unjust things that happen on a daily basis” which mostly “go unnoticed (small and large).” The writing kept reminding her.

The writing assignments offered an important space for students to piece together and make sense of the readings, the discussions,
By the end of the semester, then, students seemed to see that social justice has implications—that a socially just system both includes them and requires something of them.

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