

# INTRODUCTION

What do we in the higher education community know about teaching for liberal learning in higher education? If you pay attention to the mainstream media's coverage of higher education, you are likely to hear a lot about liberal education but not much about teaching itself. Championed here, embattled there, the idea of a broad-based liberal education evokes a range of aspirations and anxieties in the politically charged culture of the United States today.<sup>1</sup> Is liberal education for everyone, or is it a luxury that can be afforded only by the fortunate few? Is liberal education key to a vibrant democracy, or does it create an isolated, arrogant cultural elite? Is liberal education essential for a graduate's success in the workplace, or is it an outdated model that leads to an economic dead end? Is liberal education a public good worthy of public support, or are its benefits primarily to individuals who should bear more of the costs? And what is liberal education, anyway? Isn't the main purpose of college to graduate from a specialized program, especially one that leads directly to a good job and/or further training for a professional career?

Even in academic circles, where debates about liberal education are of a more pragmatic kind, teaching is not often high on the list. Widely valued in colleges and universities as "a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement" (AAC&U, n.d., "Liberal Education"), liberal education has long raised issues about the scope, goals, and outcomes of undergraduate education, not teaching itself. How to enhance, support, and scale up the kinds of educational experiences that contribute to liberal learning is a common concern.

Is the academic program well designed? Are the faculty qualified in their fields? Are student services sufficient? Are the facilities appropriate? Do students feel supported by family, faculty, and peers? Could a liberal education be offered at lesser cost and lower tuition?

These questions point toward an important lesson about liberal education in our colleges and universities. Whether the goal is conceived as developing students' capacities to engage in sophisticated modes of thought, or helping them gain a wide range of knowledge, skills, and values, a liberal education is not attained in a single course or specialized academic program. As suggested by AAC&U's influential statement of essential learning outcomes (AAC&U, n.d., "Essential Learning Outcomes"), a liberal education aimed at knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning must be fostered through the

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whole college experience—general as well as specialized education, out-of-class as well as in-class activities, residential as well as academic life. From this perspective, liberal education is advanced not only by well-designed curricula and cocurricular opportunities, but also by aligning the goals, work, and resources of the entire campus community (Astin 1993; Felten et al. 2016; Mayhew et al. 2016; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005).

Indeed, graduates' stories about the impact of liberal education often fix on a few key experiences and "Aha!" moments, which sometimes have occurred outside the classroom or resulted from lessons that professors don't remember teaching at all! Likewise, systematic studies of learning in college often identify the relationships students form out of class with faculty or other students, the passions they pursue, or other personal qualities such as mindset (Dweck 2006) or grit (Duckworth 2016) as the spark for cognitive and affective growth (Bain 2004, 2012; Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Cuba et al. 2016; Light 2001). Today, the power of educational experiences *out of the classroom*—including a variety of "high-impact practices" such as undergraduate research, service learning and community-based learning, internships, and study abroad (Kuh 2008)—has gained new attention and respect.

The value of this large vision of the college experience is widely appreciated in academic circles, but within (or behind) that vision lies the role of teaching to determine the quality and equity of liberal education. To be sure, some students thrive despite lackluster teaching. But re-

search strongly supports the idea that good teaching can have considerable impact on students' intellectual and ethical development, encouraging approaches to study that lead to deep understanding, and helping students develop habits of thought and feeling that prepare them for challenges that lie ahead (Beyer, Gillmore, and Fisher 2007; Freeman et al. 2014; Hattie 2009; Jankowski 2017; Kuh et al. 2010; Marton, Hounsell, and

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Entwistle 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Perry 1999; Prosser and Trigwell 1999). To cite just one example, leaders of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education conclude that "clear and organized instruction enhances not only students' general cognitive skills such as critical thinking, but also their orientation toward inquiry and continuing intellectual development" (Pascarella and Blaich 2013, 8). They also find that "students who report greater exposure to effective instructional practices are more satisfied with the collegiate experience, which in turn leads to a greater likelihood of graduating from college in four years" (Loes, An, and Pascarella 2019, Abstract).<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, this may sound like simple common sense. Of course, teaching matters to learning, and in all kinds of ways. But the importance of good teaching increasingly has become a matter of urgency because research also has shown that it can make the difference between success and failure for vulnerable students. It's no longer enough for just the brightest, most motivated, and best-prepared to attain higher levels of learning. Nor is it now

acceptable to just let students sink or swim. The financial, ethical, and social costs to students, colleges, and society of dropping out and/or leaving college with what Arum and Roksa (2010) call “limited learning” are far too high. Much of the research, experimentation, and support now devoted to improving teaching is directed at finding ways to reach and motivate a wider range of students, recognizing that to prosper today, *all* students need to reach more sophisticated levels of learning. As a recent report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences concludes, “The ideal education proposed here, supporting short-term and long-term personal and professional goals for each student, places a substantial burden on college teachers” (Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education 2017, 12).

Clearly, the time is ripe for a closer look at what is known about teaching that contributes to (or detracts from) liberal learning. Liberal learning has long been seen—in contrast, say, to purely technical training—as a liberating, or empowering, force. While a liberal *education* is the outcome of a whole college experience, liberal *learning* can—and should—be fostered in each of its parts. Regardless of the topic or role that a course or experience plays in the larger curriculum, it can be taught in ways that do (or do not) contribute to students’ “breadth of outlook, a capacity to see connections and hence, an ability to make fundamental decisions and judgments” (Rothblatt 1993, 28). The key, from this perspective, is teaching one’s subject matter—whatever the level, discipline, or specific course goals—in ways that encourage and enable students to become able and self-aware thinkers as well as active and ethical participants in the course and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Faculty need not be on their own in the search for teaching practices that advance liberal learning. Thanks to the revival of interest in college-level pedagogy over the past twenty or thirty years, an era marked by a burgeoning of research, innovation, and institutional support, there’s a growing body of work that can help faculty decide “how to engage students and what strategies will best aid learning” (Schwartz and Gurung 2012, 3). In this publication, I’ll look first at the kinds of scholarship that underlie what many now call “evidence-based teaching.” I’ll then turn to four broad lines of inquiry emerging from this work that can inspire and inform faculty who wish to explore teaching practices that can engage a broad range of students in liberal learning:

1. **How faculty teach**—What we are learning about the teaching practices faculty use, the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional teaching repertoire, and how faculty have elaborated or altered these practices to achieve particular pedagogical purposes.
2. **How students approach learning**—What we are learning about students’ approaches to learning in college, how they can be influenced by different pedagogical strategies, and how they develop during the college years.
3. **Teaching and learning in and across the disciplines**—What we are learning about helping students gain access to and mastery of disciplinary and interdisciplinary ways of knowing and expertise.
4. **Encouraging academic engagement**—What we are learning about teaching in ways that enhance students’ course and program engagement and encourage students to make connections across different aspects of their college experience.

Of course, there is specialist literature on every aspect of teaching and learning in higher education, but significant gaps exist. Thus, in the final sections of this publication, I argue for further knowledge building to map the current landscape of teaching and learning in college, explore practices that engage a wider range of students in liberal learning, and examine how innovative, evidence-based teaching can be encouraged and supported. I conclude with remarks on how attention to these questions may help address broader concerns about whether or not our colleges and universities can make good on the promise of providing high-quality liberal learning for all.