

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING—MINE AND THEIRS

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THIS VOLUME OF ESSAYS ENGAGES two broad national dialogues, one concerned with assessment and its relation to learning, and a second concerned with the future of the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular. After many years of working with both these issues, I am persuaded that progress on each will depend on a fundamental recasting of our most basic organizing assumptions about what actually counts as liberal learning. We need new frameworks to characterize the main goals of a twenty-first-century liberal education¹—both to guide students in achieving a liberal and liberating education, and also, crucially, to develop meaningful assessments that speak to our most important educational goals.

In the passages that follow, I share the personal history that shaped my views on transformative liberal education: what it entails and how we can foster it for a far more inclusive array of students. And, in the end, I come back to the question that inspired this entire volume, the relationship between the assessable and the ineffable in the contexts of our students' own hopes for a better future.

It was 1976. Fresh from a highly specialized course of study in early modern history, first at Mount Holyoke College and then as a graduate student at Harvard University, I had taken a position at Chicago State University. Chicago State was at the time in the midst of fast-paced change, both in mission and in demographics. A former teachers college that was redefining itself as a regional comprehensive campus, it had become an overwhelmingly majority “minority” institution—albeit with many white faculty.

Many of the students at Chicago State had come from dismally inadequate public schools in Chicago—most as recent graduates and some, then returning to college in mid-life, many years earlier. Hired by the University for its Ford Foundation–launched “University Without Walls” (UWW) program and quickly assigned to deal with other innovative programs as well, I was working both with a cadre of very capable, but nonetheless still un-credentialed “returning adult” learners and also with a set of notably under-prepared

traditional-age college students.

I was attracted to both the challenges and the possibilities—the energy and native talent—that Chicago State students presented. Inspired like many of my age cohort by the civil rights momentum of the 1960s, I actively wanted to work with these first-generation college students.

Alas, as I soon realized, I was completely lacking in practical knowledge about how to respond to our students' educational needs. My graduate work had not included even an hour's worth of time on the real-world students I might find in my classroom, much less on the mysterious subject of "learning." Now, thanks to these suddenly glaring omissions, I found myself in uncharted waters.

With the traditional-age students, I faced the fundamental question of what it means to foster "critical inquiry" in young people who in some cases had not yet mastered the paragraph. These students were appealing and energetic and hopeful about their futures. But many of them needed fundamental writing instruction at a level that I could barely envision, much less effectively provide. A well-crafted lecture—or even a seminar—on Renaissance history was not going to do the job for students who had been searingly underserved by their previous schooling.

With the returning adult students, I faced a massive disconnect between their very practical reason for returning to college—to obtain a work-useful degree in the shortest possible amount of time—and my own commitment, supported by the mission of the UWW program, to ensure that their individualized plans of study added up to a "liberal" or "liberal arts" education.

All the UWW students already were working because concurrent job experience related to their studies was a firm requirement for admission to the program. By design, UWW built out from their actual career interests, seeking individualized ways of bringing a liberal education context to their particular educational priorities.

I loved the idea of helping students "individualize" their liberal education, which was, in fact, exactly what I had done as an undergraduate at Mount Holyoke. But very soon into my work at Chicago State I came to the uncomfortable but world-altering realization that for all the years I had spent in some of the nation's most admired "liberal arts" institutions, I had only the vaguest working conception of what I—or we in our UWW program—even meant by a "liberal" or "liberal arts" education (see fig. 1 for working definitions of these concepts).

Even less had I developed a conception of liberal education that might create common ground with the interests, inclinations, and very basic practical needs of the Chicago State students I was employed to guide and teach.

We in the UWW program were committed to providing a liberal education for our working adult students. Chicago State was committed to providing a well-rounded education, with a significant general education component, for all its students. But what exactly did that mean for our actual practice? And what did it mean for my guidance to students who shared neither my enthusiasm for liberal education nor my presuppositions about what was important to a good education?

LIBERAL EDUCATION: An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility as well as strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study (e.g., communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills), and includes a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

LIBERAL ARTS: Specific disciplines (e.g., the humanities, sciences, and social sciences).

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES: A particular institutional type—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, while grounding its curriculum in the liberal arts disciplines.

ARTES LIBERALES: Historically, the basis for the modern liberal arts: the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) and the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric).

GENERAL EDUCATION: The part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual, civic, and practical capacities. General education can take many forms, and increasingly includes both introductory and advanced levels of learning.

Fig. 1. “Guide to Frequently Confused Terms,” adapted from Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a National Goes to College* (25).

I knew, of course, that a liberal education certainly comprised critical thinking and writing, the skills so many of my traditional-age students conspicuously lacked. (The adult students’ competence level was higher, in part because the admissions process for UWW required substantial writing.) But how did one cultivate “critical thinking” in students who were still struggling with the formulation of their thoughts in standard English?

With both sets of students, I faced the question of the relationship between liberal education and a major in one of the arts and sciences disciplines. Somewhat unthinkingly, I had absorbed from the DNA of my own educational experience the assumption that the transformative power of a liberal education was possible *only* in the arts and sciences disciplines and that a focus on some other field was a different species of learning altogether.

But almost none of my students—either the returning adults or the traditional-age students—intended to major in one of the arts and sciences. They were in college to expand their opportunities, and for most that meant studying a field whose title seemed plainly related to real-world jobs: business administration, marketing, criminal justice, education, the various health fields.

What did it mean to provide a liberal education if students were studying “non-liberal arts” subjects?

Given the students’ choice of major fields, the general education or distribution requirements appeared to loom large in the achievement of that “liberal education” signature. And, in fact, it was a degree requirement at Chicago State that all students needed to complete at least thirty hours in the humanities, the social sciences, the sciences, the arts, mathematics, and writing.

Perhaps, I mused, it was primarily general education—never seriously dis-

cussed at all, either in my undergraduate or graduate studies—that held the real key to a “liberal education.” This was an interesting possibility, especially in Chicago, where the weight of the University of Chicago’s much-celebrated “core curriculum” carried outsize influence, with faculty at least, even at a very different kind of institution.

But general education at Chicago State—and almost everywhere else—was defined in terms of a menu of “distribution categories” rather than as a focused set of core courses. And distribution requirements soon proved, in practice, to be a very weak key indeed to a liberal education. In truth, many of my students seemed to regard the general education requirements not as the key to excellence, but rather as a mystifying or even infuriating impediment to their own intended purposes.

One particularly memorable adult advisee, faced with my insistence on the “distribution requirements” that were written into the UWW program, angrily delivered her written decision to take two courses in American history “in order to fulfill the requirement that I pay money to study subjects in which I have no interest.”

We were clear at Chicago State that she had to fulfill the arts and sciences requirements. She—heading for a career in elementary teaching!—was equally clear that she could see no point to them.

These conflicts, which were frequent, pointed to the larger question: What *were* our root goals in insisting on arts and sciences general education courses as a necessary component to the degree?

And even more important, how would I transform students’ skepticism or outright resistance into something resembling the transformative learning I myself had experienced in college?

And, finally, what exactly did we mean by liberal education? In what way did we expect liberal education to be a meaningful resource for these first generation students?

Fast Forward to the Present

All these questions launched a journey of inquiry, self-reflection, and rich if decidedly “on-the-job” learning that led eventually to my current role as president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). AAC&U is the major national association working on the quality of undergraduate college learning, and our mission is to make the “aims of liberal learning a vigorous and constant influence on institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education” (*Strategic Plan*). Founded in 1915 to support the primacy of colleges of arts and sciences—both independent colleges and units within larger universities—AAC&U has evolved over the past twenty years into a “big tent” association that draws its 1,200 institutional members from all parts of postsecondary education, private, public, large, small, two-year, and four-year. Collectively, AAC&U members have embraced a call to “Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive” (*Strategic Plan*) by adapting the traditions and strengths of liberal education to twenty-first-century contexts and challenges.

Readers familiar with AAC&U’s current work on both the “aims” and “essential learning outcomes” (see fig. 2) of liberal education will see immediately that all the questions I faced as an underprepared young academic three decades ago now stand directly at the heart of AAC&U’s current signature initiative, Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP).²

LIBERAL EDUCATION: THE ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intellectual and Practical Skills, Including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

Personal and Social Responsibility, Including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative Learning, Including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

Fig. 2. “The Essential Learning Outcomes,” Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise* (3).

The LEAP initiative, launched in 2005 and designed to extend at least through 2015, explores for students and society alike the same issues I was so ill-equipped to address—either in theory or in practice—when I left graduate school and began to work with first-generation college students in all their variety, energy, hopefulness, and need. But LEAP, I hasten to say, benefits from three decades of work throughout higher education on how best to support first-generation students, and returning adults as well, as they come in ever larger numbers to higher education.

In 1976, I was tackling core questions of educational purpose and effective practice largely on my own. Today, many networks of scholars and teaching faculty are working together, with a growing sense of shared mission, on just these questions. Collectively they are building a body of evidence on “what works” in higher education, especially with students from underserved communities. And, steadily if too slowly, reformers are beginning to wield significant educational influence across all sectors in postsecondary education.

The truth is that my own experience at Chicago State, which seemed so *sui generis* at the time, was in fact a very small part of a much larger generational shift that was just starting in that era to gain momentum across higher education. Colleges and universities were opening their doors wider than ever before, self-consciously reaching out to embrace students and communities that traditionally had had very limited access or no access at all to higher education. Programs aimed at returning adults were multiplying all over the United States, and by the turn of the twenty-first century, both older students and underprepared traditional-age students would constitute an emerging majority in higher education.

All of this has sent the academy “back to school,” so to speak, to better understand the practices that effectively foster students’ intellectual and personal development, and to invent, test, and scale up the uses of what we now call “engaged learning” to better support this increasingly significant population.

As a result, the educational practices AAC&U advances through LEAP build from the collective insights of innovative faculty and academic leaders throughout the United States—at “national institutions” and “regional institutions” alike. What is new, I believe, is the effort AAC&U is making to synthesize many different “reform agendas”—ranging from “writing across the curriculum” to diversity learning, community-based learning, undergraduate research, and the like—to provide a comprehensive “guiding vision” for higher education, for our students, and for the public at large. (See fig. 2 and note 2.)

LEAP is not launching a new direction in higher education so much as turning a spotlight on far-reaching changes that have already begun to alter our understanding of both the aims and the signature practices of a twenty-first-century liberal education. These changes are intended to serve everyone, but they have particular “compensatory” benefits, it turns out, for higher education’s “new majority students” who are very much like the students I met so long ago at Chicago State (Kuh 17-20). Today’s students work while studying; they commute rather than live on campus; they bring the world to the classroom; they often are underprepared for college; and, on every level, they challenge the academy to rethink its most basic precepts about excellence and inclusion.

Over time, if too slowly, these recently included students have forced revolutionary change both in the practice of liberal education, and now through the LEAP amplifier, in its stated purposes as well. These changes remain a work in progress, as all of us learn together how to better serve the millions of underprepared students who are now the new majority in American higher education. But, taken together, the myriad endeavors and experiments all over the United States to better serve contemporary college students from every walk of life are adding up both to a new vision for inclusive excellence in lib-

eral education and to a new era of more educationally intentional and integrative practices that can help our students make rich connections between what they learn in college and the lives they want to live.

Fulfilling the larger promise of a liberal education forces us to think much harder—and to learn from many pioneering practitioners and scholars—about the connections between knowledge and its applications, and about the way experience figures in making knowledge both illuminating and empowering.

In the pages that follow, I share some of my own “lessons learned” from this shared journey of inquiry and reflection on the aims and practices of a contemporary liberal education. And, at the end, I come back to the question that still seems to haunt entirely too many academics: Is something essential actually lost when we seek to put liberal education to work in the wider world?

As you will guess, my answer is no—not only is nothing lost, but much is gained. And, in the context of this particular set of essays, I would add that nothing is lost and much is gained when we actually hold ourselves (as faculty and institutional leaders) accountable for helping students show that they have achieved the explicit “outcomes” of liberal education. But as with all transformative insights, my answers are informed by my own experiential learning. As I believe is often the case with students, what I learned from experience helped me recognize the inadequacy of my initial assumptions about liberal learning—and also propelled me to enlarge them.

My Own Transformative Learning

Back to Chicago State in 1976 and beyond. Prompted both by populist idealism and by my increasingly urgent questions about the quality of student work, I signed up to take part in a voluntary “study group” whose members wanted to probe the usefulness of the emergent “competency movement” in higher education. Bringing together faculty from diverse institutions and a broad range of mostly liberal arts disciplines, together with a few administrators, the study group intended to assess whether there was anything of value in a competency-based approach to learning for underprepared college students.

In my view, the competency movement of that era and the learning outcomes movement in our own time have much in common, most notably the emphasis on translating the “tacit knowledge” scholars unconsciously live by into “explicit standards” that can guide faculty and students alike in the development of intellectual and practical capabilities. Defining the expected outcomes or competencies students need to achieve and making standards for their performance explicit is one feature of this approach, but this is only part of the larger task. The real pay-off in an outcomes approach comes when faculty learn how to develop sequenced assignments that enable students to practice the intended learning and when students learn to take responsibility for meeting or exceeding the expected standards of performance.

The working assumption behind this approach is that every field creates and privileges certain procedures for making an argument and/or testing a course of action, but that too often—especially in the arts and sciences—faculty have internalized this “procedural knowledge” without actually ever nam-

ing it. As a result, faculty often are hindered in helping students grasp the elements of what counts as good work and what does not. By studying examples of “good work” and “poor work,” we can give voice to our own tacit standards and, most important, provide clearer guidance and feedback to novice learners so that they can make progress toward higher levels of achievement.

Ultimately, we hope, novice learners will move beyond trying to follow “rules of good practice” to become both insightful and inventive in their deployment of these frameworks. But making standards explicit provides the needed scaffolding to at least get new learners working in a productive direction.

In effect, therefore, that informal study group became my first introduction to the whole idea of intentionality and explicit expectations as a framing “compass” that would help students navigate the mysteries of college-level work.³ The group was useful in pointing me toward the literature of competency-based learning and toward examples of competency-based programs that already were springing up at different Chicago-area colleges and universities.

What stands out for me now, however, from that 1976 effort to better respond to the needs of my actual students, is the vigorous debate over the very concept of “competencies” that broke out on the first evening that the study group convened. We were all curious about the entire idea of competency-based learning. But many were far from convinced.

“The most important forms of learning in the liberal arts are ineffable!” contended one young faculty member who was then teaching in the Chicago community college system. I listened with interest since this scholar came from my own graduate program at Harvard. He had been working with underprepared graduates from the Chicago public schools somewhat longer than I. Had he found some way to sustain our ivy-infused values and teach his students successfully at the same time?

“The whole idea of breaking history or literature down into ‘competencies’ is repugnant,” he continued with vigor. “It distorts and destroys the very things that are most valuable to our students!” “What we really need to do,” others agreed, “is help students see what is so exciting about our disciplines. We have to model, in our own teaching and style, the passion and excitement we ourselves feel for our subjects.”

Having tried this strategy already, I was skeptical. And I was not alone.

“We need to make our subjects accessible to the actual students we have,” protested others. “We can’t just tell them that the liberal arts are valuable for reasons that are beyond explanation. We have to somehow connect our subjects to the things the students themselves consider important. We have to break through our own mystique.”

“Our students seek jobs and career advancement,” others chimed in. “How do we make the liberal arts relevant to those goals?”

The debate raged on—in that forum and countless others like it—and still does today, in college and university contexts all across the nation. Even as I have been writing this essay, there has been a new national furor over whether the humanities are and should be “use-less,” or whether it is (finally) time to better explain and make good on their real-world significance.

For me, however, that informal study group clarified the core question at stake—demystification—and set me off on a course I have pursued for over three decades: the effort to break out of “my discipline” as a self-contained and self-referential scholarly community and to think much harder about the ways in which I hoped the insights of this discipline would actually be used by students in their lives beyond the classroom and beyond the academy.

I was willing to concede, for the sake of argument, that some of the pleasures of a liberal education really are ineffable: personal, interior, spontaneous, exhilarating. But those moments do not come at the beginning, and they are not likely to come at all if novice learners end up viewing the arts and sciences mainly as a set of barriers they need to get “out of the way” as soon as possible before proceeding to the “real point” of college.

The challenge, I came to believe, is not one of “getting students excited” by how well we perform in their presence but, rather, of creating opportunities to help students see more in their own questions and explorations than they could have discovered on their own. Our task as educators, I now think, is to give our students a motivating reason to invest themselves in the project of developing those habits of mind and heart that characterize a liberally educated person (see fig. 2).

In this context, the skills developed through liberal education are a means to an end rather than ends in themselves. The ultimate goal is to foster students’ own growing capacity to work productively on projects and problems that they themselves want to address.

Prompted by this insight, I began to reflect on how I myself had “gotten hooked” on scholarly inquiry and what light that might shed on how to help my students toward the illuminating power of a liberal education.

The love of learning that a scholar gains (and uses to make a living) comes with an acquired ability to “make a discovery,” whether that discovery is one of flashing insight, new connections between elements previously seen as separate, or the pleasure that comes when painstaking work actually begins to take form and even significance.

How had I developed that inclination myself? How, in particular, did I move from my high school standing as a young person willing to work extremely hard on subjects I hated, simply because I wanted a good grade, to someone who found learning illuminating and, in a profound sense, necessary?

Miss Brock

Those reflections, all prompted by my Chicago State students and that informal Chicago study group, led me back in turn to Miss Brock, the faculty member who taught both semesters of my required year-long “baby English” course at Mount Holyoke. Prior to my arrival at Chicago State, I had come to think of myself as a budding scholar, someone who wanted to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in early modern history. But now I reached back to my initial year of college, when I was not a professed future scholar at all, but rather a somewhat confused young woman who was trying to figure out what was expected of her at Mount Holyoke College.

I had my own “transformative experience” in that initial year of college, a set of catalytic events that made me genuinely interested in learning and the light it might cast—not on the world’s understanding and certainly not on the advancement of scholarship, but rather on my own actual decisions and choices. What were those experiences? Looking back, I thought with new attentiveness about the role Miss Brock, my first year English professor, had played in that transformative experience and what her example might mean for the very different kind of students I was working with at Chicago State.

Praised as a strong writer all the way through high school, I had not wanted to take the two-semester required “baby English” course at all. To earn exemption, I had taken an optional reading and writing take-home examination over the summer. (I failed.) Once enrolled, I did not find Miss Brock’s teaching particularly compelling. Fascinated with iconography and metaphysical poetry, she often left me absolutely clueless as to what she was talking about. She had brilliant students with whom she was constantly in dialogue during class meetings. I was not one of them.

Miss Brock put me forever in her debt, however, by the way she approached our research papers, which were required in both semesters of baby English. Painstakingly, she took the time to call in each one of her students for a separate discussion about the possible topic for our initial research. And in that conversation, she asked me to identify “a real question; something you really want to know the answer to; something whose answer is important to you.”

Initially I was puzzled; this kind of exchange was completely new in my experience. But finally, a bit reluctantly, I told her my “big question.” What I most wanted to know, I explained, was whether miracles in fact “proved” that the Roman Catholic Church was really the One True Church, as I had been taught and raised to believe.

To her enormous credit, Miss Brock did not laugh, or frown, or even allow a small sliver of a smile. (You, dear reader, may have done less well.) Instead, she nodded affirmatively; thought for a couple of minutes and then suggested that I would find it “profitable” to do my paper on mystical experience, both Christian and non-Christian. She suggested a couple of books to get me started; she warmly encouraged me to look into some of the great mystical poets. She invited me to come back in to see her as my work progressed.

And off I went, on what turned into one of the great investigations of my life. Or so, in my own mind, I considered it. In truth, as she probably surmised, I was reconsidering my relationship (privately) to my religious upbringing. The reading, thinking, and writing I did for that paper was transformative in myriad ways. It changed the way I thought about religion, my own choices, my own interests. It “hooked” me on scholarship as a source of insight and power.

It was Mount Holyoke’s practice to retain copies of all the first-year papers students wrote in baby English and to return those collected papers to us when we graduated as seniors. When I received this collected set in my last week of college, I reached eagerly for that initial research paper on mystical experience.

What I found was a paper that was stunningly naïve in its framing and

utterly hesitant in its conclusions, which were shyly advanced only in the final two pages. Mostly the paper was descriptive rather than analytical as I struggled to describe a different order of experience from anything I had previously encountered and to somehow connect these experiences to my own questions about the standing of Catholic doctrine.

And yet, naïve and novice though it was, this was the paper and this was the work that had launched my own commitment to scholarship—and more fundamentally, to the value and significance of a liberal education.

The key, I am persuaded, was the original question—and especially the generosity with which my teacher received my original “big question.” I really wanted to know whether the Catholic Church was the One True Church, and the power of what was going on in my mind, in my own private thoughts as I approached this topic, vastly exceeded the actual sophistication of the written work itself. In my own mind, that investigation into a different realm of religious experience was world-enhancing. And so, in truth, it was.

Reflecting on all this, I began to put similar insights to work with my own students. In a variety of different ways, I set out to get them to tell me their own “significant questions” and I looked for ways to connect those questions with their assignments in my courses. I did not anticipate that any of them would choose a career in scholarship, but I did expect them to take seriously their own questions, and to put pen to paper in the exploration of those questions, using evidence, using sources, making an argument, developing a case.

Mount Holyoke was, of course, a small liberal arts college. The programs I led at Chicago State similarly were small programs, serving a few hundred students, rather than thousands.

Is it feasible to imagine that this kind of strategy can be used on a broader scale, for example, in the general education courses that are required almost everywhere?

One answer to this is that almost every college, university, and community college now teaches at least one writing-intensive course in a small-class context. Sometimes the class is basic composition; sometimes it comes in the form of a topically organized “inquiry” seminar. Some institutions also provide “first-year experiences” that include small-class workshops and seminars designed to teach students how to navigate the college or university environment.

Just as Miss Brock used “baby English” at Mount Holyoke, either context could be used to provide students with both opportunity and incentive to research their own “big questions”—and to discover, as I did, that scholarly work can make a difference in one’s own life, as well as in the life of our society.

The most important challenge we face in fostering transformative learning is not the absence of contexts in which it could feasibly be attempted. Rather, it is our willingness to accept a state of affairs—endemic throughout higher education—in which some students benefit from the best that a liberal education can offer, while millions of others, typically students from less advantaged backgrounds, are steered toward narrow training and less ambitious goals for their own college learning.

So, Is Liberal Education “Ineffable?” And Can It Be Assessed?

Clearly, something happened in my own experience at Mount Holyoke that was personal as well as powerful. And similarly, I believe, when that “light goes on” for our students, it goes on for an individual, helping that particular student make sense of his or her own very particular questions, interests, concerns, or commitments.

But knowing how personal a liberating experience really is not does release us from a foundational responsibility. Through guided practice, feedback, and assistance, we still need to help students develop the analytical and investigative tools they need in order to get beyond the initial question—however naive or instrumental or relentlessly “practical” it may be—and to explore the implications of their question, to develop an argument, to use evidence, to consider the alternatives, and to be able to explain what they have concluded and why.

As my vignette makes clear, Miss Brock had three goals in mind (at least) for my assignments. The first was that I should care about the work I was doing, and take it seriously. The second was that I should expand beyond the boundaries of my initial knowledge and experience. Hearing my question, she did not hesitate to send me off on a topic that I did not even know existed—the realm of mystical experience, non-Christian as well as Christian.

Finally, she expected me to write a documented research paper, and to show that I was using my sources in answering my question. When I handed in the paper, she undoubtedly saw—as I saw, four years later—that my first research paper was written in very broad strokes, long on description, short on evaluative interpretation. When we met during the second semester about my second research paper, she suggested that I write on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. At the time, I thought she was pointing me toward a poet who himself was struggling with religious doubt and passion, a point of reference for my own implicit quest.

Hopkins’ religious struggles undoubtedly were the reason Miss Brock chose that particular poet. But now, looking back over the years, I suspect that she also wanted me to work in a more focused way on “close reading” of carefully constructed poetic texts. In that second paper, far more than in the first, I began to ground my claims in textual analysis; to read at a deeper level; to develop an argument that took seriously the words and the textual structure so carefully created by the artist.

In other words, still honoring my own significant questions and commitments, Miss Brock strategically linked those questions to the intellectual tasks of both “close reading” and evidence-based argument. What she gave me was the best of two worlds: serious attention to my own questions, which were anything but “scholarly,” and serious guided practice in developing much better analytical skills than I had brought with me to college.

This distinction can help us, I believe, differentiate between those aspects of liberal education that really are “ineffable”—or at least highly interior and personal—and those that lend themselves directly to meaningful assessment. The assessment questions pertain not to the conclusion I reached in my exploration of religious and mystical experience, but rather to whether I was able to

examine different positions on my topic, consider evidence in support of those positions, and develop an evidence-based position of my own. I did not, in fact, do that particularly well in my first research paper for Miss Brock. But, by the end of my initial year in college, I had acquired the concept of “close reading” and had started to develop some facility in connecting my argument to textual evidence. The skills required to make an evidence-based argument can—and should—be both practiced and assessed not once, but again and again, from early courses to culminating capstone experiences. The focus on constant practice, at increasingly higher levels of expectation and achievement, is a necessary part of an empowering liberal education.

I was fortunate that “baby English” was a two-semester course, taught by the same instructor each time. She saw where I needed to improve, given my work in the first semester, and she deliberately gave me assignments that would help me improve in the second semester.

For today’s students, electronic technology offers new ways to achieve the same kind of effect. As colleges and universities begin to adopt electronic portfolios to capture student work, it becomes possible for any faculty member to peruse a student’s written work and discern whether that student is actually making progress in the development of analytical and interpretive skills, or just repeating the same weak techniques again and again. It becomes possible—at least potentially—to give students assignments that build from their strengths and help them correct their weaknesses. In principle, we could do today, for all students, what Miss Brock did so brilliantly for me. But to make full use of this potential, we would have to move beyond the idea that the professor’s task is to profess. We would have to insist, instead, that the professor’s real task is to assess where students currently are in their development of key intellectual capacities and, building from that assessment, to help students move to a higher level of both effort and achievement.

Similarly, electronic technology gives us the power to see whether students seem to pursue particular “big questions” or issues over time, or whether they are just producing assignments because they have to. Is the student’s learning starting to “come together” in transformative ways, across different courses and experiences? Does her portfolio show that she is probing particular issues and themes? Making connections across both courses and disciplines, and between her lived experiences and her studies? If yes, what catalysts might take the student’s integration of learning to an even higher level? If not, what is standing in the way? How can the student’s academic work become a more powerful resource, both for integrative learning and for the goals that brought her to college in the first place?

The students’ own work over time provides insights into all these questions. We need to take seriously the evidence of that work, and, as faculty, provide both guidance and structure to help students take their capacities—and their questions—to a higher and fuller level.

Liberal Education and America’s Promise

What then of the questions I began to raise about liberal education back

at Chicago State? What do we mean, or rather, what should we mean when we advocate liberal education for today's students, most of whom have come to college expecting that college will prepare them not to be scholars, but for opportunity and success in the world of work?

I have already indicated that I believe liberal education begins by taking seriously the issues and questions in the students' own minds. But what if the question they most want to pursue is how to do well in their jobs? Does that automatically put them beyond the true sphere of the liberal arts, except of course for the requisite dollop of general education courses necessary (on most campuses) to earn the degree?

In 1976, I believed that a liberal education could—and should—be transformative because college had been so illuminating and life-enhancing for me and most of my friends. Today, drawing on work being carried out across the United States, I am even more persuaded of the value and power of a liberal education, both for individual students and for a society that depends entirely on human capability for its economic future and its civic vitality.

To sustain that conviction, however, I have had to break free of some of the most fundamental assumptions I had previously held about liberal education—especially the idea that it can (and should) occur exclusively through the study of arts and sciences disciplines. The twentieth-century ideas about liberal education—which confined it to selected institutions, to selected disciplines, or to general education primarily—are no longer helpful to the larger cause of providing a life-enhancing education to all our students, especially all those “recently included” students who, only a few decades ago, would not have been in college at all.

Yes, our students have largely come to college because they want to earn a good living. But these motivations are not an impenetrable obstacle to their liberal learning. Rather, their motivations should be seen as an opportunity for expanding their understanding of what they want to accomplish through their work and of the connections between their intended work and the larger society of which they are a part.

My own education gave me, as I have tried to make clear, a set of tools that I could use to enlarge my own worldview and pursue my own significant interests. And that, I am persuaded, is what a liberal education needs to do for all our students, especially those who come to college convinced that the only point of their studies is to prepare for a job.

A student who comes to college, for example, seeking to move from sales to marketing, or from bookkeeping to accounting, is no more beyond the pale than I was at eighteen, with my shallow conviction that the magic of miracles could “prove” fundamental points about divine intention and religious obligation. Miss Brock made my initial questions a point of departure for further study and, by taking my actual questions seriously, she helped me to enlarge them. Something similar is possible for all our students, but only if we are willing to start with their actual mindset, which is so often very specific, very literal, and very practical.

One way to better appreciate our students' job concerns, I suspect, is to think harder about the connection between our students' obsession with "getting a job" and the journeys we ourselves have traversed toward professional competence. As a moment's reflection makes clear, after all, the problem I myself was facing in my initial year at Chicago State was that I was completely underprepared for the job I actually had. It is ironic that my Harvard credential opened the door to an appointment at Chicago State even though Harvard had not provided me with even a moment's rehearsal about how to connect my learning with my job.

My graduate program preferred to prepare me for work I might do—path-breaking scholarship—rather than for the work I almost certainly would do—teaching novice students who, like most graduates of our nation's public schools, need a huge amount of help to reap the full benefit of college. Nor was I alone. Even today, the most elite graduate programs remain largely indifferent to the actual work their students will do as faculty members, as campus leaders, or, increasingly often, in jobs beyond the academy.⁴

The questions I faced at Chicago State emerged not because I was especially philosophical, and certainly not because I was interested in defining liberal education for its own sake. They emerged because I was negotiating daily between my students' own priorities and the stated intention of our program to give them a liberal education.

I went off on the intellectual journey I pursued because I was working, and because I wanted to do a good job—not only for my students but also for myself. My notions of the goal at hand were rooted in my own experiences of transformative learning, but it was extremely clear to me that, given my students' very different experience of college (non-resident, working while learning, often much older, etc.), I would have to find different points of connection between their priorities and the realm of the liberal arts.

Over time, I have come to believe that the root problem I confronted was the liberal arts' self-imposed identity as "non-vocational." The roots of this identity are worth pursuing; they go back to the twining of the liberal arts tradition with religious institutions, as well as to the embrace of ancient Greek philosophy. But that is a topic for a different essay.

Here, I want to make the point that the positioning of liberal education as the opposite of vocational preparation is both willfully deceitful and foolishly self-defeating. It is deceitful because the actual outcomes of a liberal education (see fig. 2) are in fact a powerful form of preparation, not just for a particular job, but for the larger project of navigating a complex and fast-changing economy in which the typical college graduate will hold many jobs, in different industries, under different employers.

As my own saga shows, I had the skills I needed to "figure out" what I needed to do as a teacher and educator, and perhaps equally important, I had internalized a notion—from home and college—that if I was doing something I ought to do it as well as possible. It would have been better if I had had some preparation in connecting my schooling with my work, but even without that desirable apprenticeship, I at least had the intellectual skills and the sense

of personal and social responsibility to seek out help and eventually chart a productive course of action. I had acquired, in other words, the essential outcomes of a liberal education (see fig. 2). And these intellectual skills were, as they must be, initiatory rather than final; they created the context for continuing learning, much of which would be job-related.

And, of course, my experience is replicated millions of times over in the work histories of all the graduates who also translate their arts and sciences studies into successful careers in every possible endeavor and every part of the globe. They may struggle initially to get onto a good career path. But once launched, they both contribute and succeed.

So it is in fact misleading to assure college students that the liberal arts and sciences are “non-vocational.” But it is also profoundly irresponsible—a willful renunciation of our responsibility—not to think carefully about the kind of influence educators and scholars actually hold within the wider world.

The fact of the matter is that most high school graduates will embark on postsecondary education, and most of those who enter college will work for all or a significant portion of their lives. We have an opportunity, therefore, to make the liberal arts and sciences a powerful resource, not just for an individual, but for the world our graduates create through the work they do and the values they bring with them to that work.

When we self-segregate the liberal arts and sciences from this wider world—insisting firmly on the value of learning for its own sake rather than for any vocational or instrumental purpose—we surrender the opportunity to examine with care how the values of the arts and sciences play out in the world of action, and how they might play out if we brought more mindfulness to these connections.

After I left Chicago State, I went to the University of Chicago, where the dean of my division assured me cheerfully: “We take great pride here in teaching absolutely nothing useful.” I felt a chill when he said this and I find that sentiment, which is held firmly by many humanists (and recently promulgated widely by Stanley Fish in *The New York Times*⁵), chilling still.

Students who major in arts and sciences fields deserve to believe that they are pursuing studies that are intensely useful. And they need opportunities to connect their learning with the world of action, whether through internships, field-based projects, service learning, or the jobs so many of them already hold. They should not have to wait until they are out of college and on the job to think through the connections between their chosen fields and the work they will actually do. The connections will be there. The campus should play a role in illuminating and enriching them.

The majority of American college students do not, however, major in the arts and sciences at all. Like my students at Chicago State, they are choosing fields of study that are more transparently connected to the world of work. On campuses where this is the pattern, we have a double challenge. The first is to recognize that the outcomes of a liberal education (see fig. 2) both can and should be addressed in professional and career fields. Whatever the field, it requires its own version of the intellectual and practical skills that are neces-

sary elements in successful practice; it depends for its integrity on the sense of personal and social responsibility—the examined choices—its practitioners enact; and it faces its own “big questions” about its role in the wider world. Broad knowledge, advanced skills, ethical and civic responsibility, the ability to integrate one’s learning in new contexts: these are the hallmarks of a liberal education, and these are also the prerequisites for productive practice in every sphere of endeavor.

The second challenge for campuses where arts and sciences majors are less commonly chosen is to tear down the silos that too often segregate the “true liberal arts” from professional and career fields. There are extraordinary opportunities both for scholarship and for creative teaching when faculty come together, across disciplinary boundaries, to link the insights of the arts and sciences with the challenges that face real-world practitioners in every sphere: health, business, government, public policy, technology, education. Big questions and significant opportunities for shared work abound in every field of endeavor. And arts and sciences faculty can play a strategic role in helping practitioners see those questions in new contexts and with much deeper insight. Conversely, the liberal arts have much to gain from studying the work of faculty who take seriously their role in the formation of professionals, in preparing graduates to work and contribute, ethically and creatively, to their chosen fields and through their work, to their communities.

Fulfilling the promise of a liberal education—for our time and our students—calls on us to approach our disciplines and our teaching in new ways and with a new concentration on the world of action. Our students need this from us. And so does our society.

NOTES

- 1 The vocabulary surrounding liberal education and liberal arts education is confused—and confusing. To cut through the thicket, the association I lead has developed a “Guide to Frequently Confused Terms.” See fig. 1.
- 2 Readers can learn more about LEAP by visiting AAC&U’s website. The signature report from the LEAP initiative is *College Learning for the New Global Century*, published by AAC&U in 2007, which outlines goals for a twenty-first-century college education, presents principles of excellence that build from best practice in higher education, and argues that the aims of liberal education should apply to all fields of college study, including professional and career fields. In 2008, the LEAP initiative released a study by George Kuh, *High-Impact Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, which provides evidence that engaged or high-effort educational practices—e.g., learning communities, undergraduate research, capstone experiences—have “compensatory” benefits for students who start farther behind academically and for students from groups with high college drop-out rates. The LEAP initiative provides numerous resources to campus leaders and faculty working to create a more purposeful and empower-

- ing educational experience for today's students.
- 3 *Give Students a Compass* is one of the LEAP "Principles of Excellence" and is also the title of a multi-state AAC&U LEAP project, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, State Farm Companies Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation for Education, to map expected outcomes for liberal education across the college curriculum.
- 4 From 1989 to 2003, AAC&U worked directly with graduate schools and some of their departments on new designs to prepare graduate students for their roles in teaching and academic leadership. The initial work was funded by a pilot grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). From 1993 to 2003, this work was expanded through major grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the National Science Foundation, and Atlantic Philanthropic Services. Over time, AAC&U and its partner organization, the Council of Graduate Schools, worked directly with more than forty graduate universities to broaden their approach to graduate student preparation. While this work, and comparable efforts by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, was valuable to those influenced by it, the gap between graduate education and the needs of today's undergraduates remains wide indeed. Moreover, the average new PhD is as ignorant today as I was in 1976 about the traditions of liberal education and their meaning in society.
- 5 See, for example, "Will the Humanities Save Us?" where Fish writes that "to the question 'of what use are the humanities?', the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject."

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BIOGRAPHY

Carol Geary Schneider has been President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) since 1998. With a membership of 1,200 institutions, including colleges and universities of all types and sizes, AAC&U is the leading national organization devoted to advancing and strengthening undergraduate liberal education. Since becoming President, she has initiated several major initiatives, including *Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)*, a ten-year public advocacy and campus action initiative designed to engage students and the public with what really matters in a college education for the twenty-first century. The LEAP campaign builds on AAC&U's previous major effort, *Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College*, a multi-year initiative designed to articulate the aims of a twenty-first-century liberal education and to identify comprehensive, innovative models that improve learning for all undergraduate students. Under her leadership, AAC&U has also expanded its work on diversity, launched several new projects on civic engagement and the disciplines, and deepened its capacity to support campuses working on educational change.