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Liberal Arts Education and the Capacity for What's Holding Us

FEATURED TOPIC

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES can enrich an undergraduate liberal education and produce graduates who are prepared to grapple, imaginatively and responsibly, with the complex challenges they will face throughout their lives. A growing body of empirical evidence supports that contention. Yet much remains to be learned about how to lead liberal arts colleges to take seriously their obligation to educate students for effective and ethical practice in the world.

The case for an expanded understanding of student learning is even more urgent in the context of growing challenges facing a national system of higher education that many argue should be stronger. Although the critics would not agree that engaged or experiential education is the omnibus answer (or, for many, any answer), the diagnosis—lack of meaning, integration, coherence, unified goals, focus, purpose, innovation, measurable impact—resonates with the prescriptions offered by William Sullivan and Matthew Rosin (2008) in *A New Agenda for Higher Education*. That agenda would embed the goal of "critical thinking" in a broader context of "practical reasoning" within which faculty would work side by side with students, helping them learn the practice of bracketing the "critical moment" by, first, anticipating and, later, testing it against messy and real problems in the world.

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A consensus is emerging that we know a lot about how to educate college students to become "positive forces in the world . . . willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively" (Colby et al. 2003, 7); that a sizeable and growing number of American institutions, representing virtually all types, is making this goal a priority; and that a great deal more can be done to advance this goal as a national ethos for American higher education across all sectors and for all students.

The literature abounds in guidelines, principles, and best practices from dozens of case studies. Every institution is different, of course, and because educating the whole student requires a special kind of holistic learning, the most successful programs embody a learning culture seen as both pervasive within an institution and particular to it. Nevertheless, several general lessons can be learned from institutions that are striving to educate their students for lives of consequence:

- integrating effective practice as an intellectually rich subject of study in departmental and interdepartmental offerings across the undergraduate curriculum and at each stage of a student's college career
- employing "pedagogies of engagement" that connect with students both emotionally and intellectually; support complex learning of problem-solving, communication, and interpersonal skills; and enhance the likelihood that knowledge will be retained and transferred to new situations
- surrounding classroom instruction with thought-provoking cocurricular opportunities that test students' learning on real-world problems, build their confidence, and motivate reflective practice
- supporting this emphasis on education for action through recognition and incentives for faculty and staff
- reinforcing it in the campus's physical, social, and cultural environment and its institutional relationships and conduct
- championing it at the highest levels of the institution
- turning their attention to how to assess the impact of these interventions, an area that all agree needs further development

As the field drives toward consensus, the literature nonetheless fails to address three important questions. First, despite caveats about limitations in study designs and dangers

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Back?

Wellesley College

of overgeneralizing from one setting to another, the major research projects cast a wide net for maximum applicability across all types of institutions serving all types of students. This approach universalizes at the expense of particularities. Complexities in institutional cultures, governance structures, resource constraints, student demographics, and the local nature of faculty work may go a long way toward explaining why this well-lit path is not a thoroughfare. Reading the literature, one scratches one's head and wonders why everyone doesn't just do it. Could it be that it's just not that easy?

Second, what accounts for the gap between the ambitions of the "movement" (to rally support for a wider conception of liberal education) and the specific initiatives and programs being offered as testimony to its potential? If the critics are justified in their claim that undergraduate education needs to be fundamentally rethought, then developing guidelines, promoting engaged pedagogies, and encouraging civic, moral, and political education are short steps on a long journey. What's holding us back? The answer may reside in the third lingering question.

The literature includes rare cases of faculty leading new initiatives in experiential learning, and commentators pay lip service to the skepticism of mainstream faculty. But few acknowledge that if the new agenda (or any agenda) for higher education is to become a movement, it faces a double bind. Widespread faculty support is a sine qua non, and widespread faculty support is elusive at best. Our third question, then, is what would it take to win faculty allegiance to this new agenda?

Our experiences leading a faculty

We offer our own story in partial answer. When Diana Chapman Walsh arrived at Wellesley College in 1993 to lead her alma mater as president, she was met by a faculty uncertain of its ability (or resolute in its inability) to reach consensus on its educational philosophy. Consciousness of this situation, lodged in the college's culture and governance structures, was alive in the fresh memory of a debacle at the close of a high-profile planning process. The faculty had debated and rejected, seriatim, all but one minor item in a package of curricular recommendations advanced by a prestigious faculty committee.

To neutralize feelings of defeat and polarization, the newly appointed dean, Nancy Kolodny, set out to lead her faculty colleagues in a restructuring of the curriculum. She orchestrated a complicated and high-stakes curriculum review that became a major focus of the first three years of the Walsh presidency: the main event at all faculty meetings and a subject of discussion at every meeting of the trustees. At the outset, many faculty resisted the idea of another potentially divisive effort to air and argue their differences about the essential elements of the college's educational program. Sweeping curricular changes were rare and required ratification by a two-thirds majority vote. Individual courses and departmental offerings were refreshed constantly, but these local adjustments could be effected privately or collegially, outside of the formal rules-making processes. Innovation germinated locally, in the imaginations of inventive teachers, stimulated by the curiosity of students, and in the creativity of departments dissatisfied with the status quo. While this process continuously revitalized course and departmental offerings, it left unaddressed the coherence of the overall student experience and the faculty's collective responsibility for the quality of every student's education.

So the rookie president lent the weight of her new office to the dean's effort to muster the faculty behind a process they were inventing on the fly. And she created a second associate deanship to focus on curricular renewal, a position to which she and the dean recruited Lee Cuba. The deans enlisted over 160 volunteers (from a faculty of 225) to work for two years on five task forces, and then drew from the task forces a working group to spend a summer synthesizing recommendations and thrashing out priorities.

The third academic year opened with the synthesis report as the object of extensive discussion among all constituencies and in all relevant standing committees of governance. Faculty were splintered, and the odds of reaching a consensus seemed small. The deans were listening to many voices, modifying the proposals, and titrating when to exert pressure and when to pull back. In the end, the faculty approved, by a solid margin, a new quantitative reasoning requirement, entirely revamped distribution requirements, and the option of half-unit courses. This third provision, deceptively innocuous, was a foot in the door for new kinds of teaching and learning, including courses focusing on experiential learning. Beyond these changes to the curriculum, the three-year conversation had stimulated the faculty's thinking about pedagogy, the quality of intellectual life, and the aims of a Wellesley education—big topics we revisited repeatedly over subsequent years. We convened working groups and task forces and commissioned in-depth studies to review many aspects of the college experience, among these "global education," the advising system and the first-year experience, the evaluation of faculty teaching and student learning, technology-assisted learning, interdisciplinary research and teaching, the role of the department chair, the state of the honor code, the contributions of diversity to educational excellence, and the role of experiential learning at Wellesley.

Building structures for experiential learning

Immediately on the heels of the curriculum review, Walsh commissioned a working group on experiential education cochaired by Cuba and the director of the Center for Work and Service, an administrative department that had recently been created by merging a long-standing career services office with a newer center for community service. The dual chairmanship of the working group was intended to bridge the gap between the administrative units responsible for academic life and student life and to forge stronger links between faculty and administrators. We also wanted to encourage a more comprehensive perspective on how to help students weave together disparate elements of their college careers.

The group's 1996 report, "Translating the Liberal Arts Experience into Action," put forth

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a rationale and a strategy for expanding service and experiential learning. Citing 1994 data that indicated a relatively high level of participation by Wellesley students in internships and other forms of experiential learning (45 percent of graduating seniors, compared to a median of 31 percent among thirty-one comparison schools), the group noted that opportunities for students "to tie their internship and service experiences to their classroom learning are informal and idiosyncratic, leaving undeveloped a fertile area pedagogically."

Granting that its plan would "require a considerable shift in perceptions and attitudes on the part of faculty members … [and] a considerable process of learning," the working group proposed a systems-change approach. The report called for the creation of faculty fellowships, faculty workshops and seminars, and a fund for course development, as well as supportive administrative structures and practices, all of which were implemented. The fellows produced working papers on aspects of experiential learning, acted as consultants to the campus community on issues of learning and teaching, facilitated integration and advocacy of the new programs, and became change agents. And the working group report fed directly into our thinking for a comprehensive fundraising campaign.

In June of 1998, we took the trustees on a retreat to review a proposed table of needs for a future campaign. In a background paper for the retreat, Walsh noted that the campaign could begin to resolve "tensions between the liberal arts and the new competencies, [and] between knowledge and service." If somewhat obliquely, she had put experiential learning on the table for the campaign. The trustees set a $400 million campaign goal, including $20 million for internships and experiential learning. Donors were asked to support the college's efforts to "provide an innovative and integrated educational experience that extends from the classroom, to the campus, to the world." The goal of ensuring that students make vital connections—"between thought and action" and "between the college's history of privilege and its ethic of service"—resonated powerfully with donors who responded generously with endowment gifts for internships.

The college went on to endow two all-day campuswide conferences, each in a different way training a spotlight on the fruits of a liberal arts education. Emphasizing students' scholarly work, the Ruhlman Conference (begun in 1996) reflected the faculty's desire to break down barriers to interdisciplinary teaching and learning and to strengthen intellectual life on campus, two persistent themes from the curriculum review. "Ruhlman" was such a success that, five years later, the vice chair of the board worked with Cuba to design the Tanner Conference in an attempt to break down barriers between curricular and cocurricular learning and to integrate students' education with real problems "outside the bubble."

The two conferences brought into the public sphere activities that tend to be private. Both required student participants to enlist a faculty adviser, emphasizing that vital partnership; both stressed community, collaboration, and the enactment of the ideal of living a life of learning. The Tanner Conference echoed and extended themes developed by the working group on experiential learning. It provided a venue for the exchange of insights from off-campus experiences, showcased the learning that occurred in a wide range of practical settings, brought recent graduates back to campus to discuss the lasting impact of these experiences, and demonstrated compellingly a wider range of possibilities for learning by doing and serving.

An important meta-level question was ever present: how to support faculty engagement in a process of continuous improvement. Faculty time was our most valuable asset, and we wanted to use it wisely. That meant using data creatively and asking the right questions (a skill at which we improved). It also meant listening to faculty voices for their worries and insights about where our vulnerabilities were.

What we didn't do was mobilize the faculty to hammer out a unified philosophy of education, much less one that centered on an active pedagogy that would have challenged beliefs about the autonomy of faculty to define what constitutes effective teaching in their own classrooms. We were clear that our overriding goal was to continue improving the quality of what was, by all standard metrics, an excellent education. We did persistently advance the goal of asking hard questions and assembling increasingly rich empirical data to inform our

understanding of our educational strengths and weaknesses. We did cultivate a "culture of evidence."

Lessons learned

We offer this brief case study to suggest the complexity of leading a faculty through a process of institutional change. From the outset, we supported faculty who were willing to experiment with modes of active learning, faculty who were reaching outside the classroom to engage students in the problems of the world around them. We wanted to move the center of gravity gradually in the direction of Dewey's pragmatic engagement, adding to the college's tradition of closed classroom learning more community and service learning, moving from primarily discipline-based to more problem-based learning, and, especially, moving from individual to collaborative study. We believed that these transitions could be supported, in part, by the creative use of instructional technology and more careful assessment of learning outcomes. We wanted to be sure that Wellesley was participating in these debates and was self-consciously positioned within what we saw as a growing movement in higher education, even if we found ourselves standing at times in reasoned opposition to elements of it.

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In retrospect, what did we accomplish? The systems-change approach advocated in the 1996 report on experiential learning did influence the faculty, in part because we were strategic in the faculty fellows we enlisted, in part because we avoided further faculty votes, and in part because we were fortunate to secure extensive donor support. We worked to build meaningful faculty engagement, and we learned from experience that the faculty would not be engaged directly. We learned that the only available recourse was a different strategy, a growth strategy, working by indirection, slowly building alliances, learning along the way. We made small inroads that gradually opened wider pathways.

In general, our approach facilitated innovation by faculty members inclined toward experiential learning, but left a less visible imprint on the entire faculty than would have been made by an initiative more deeply planted in the classroom and the academic year. The incentives for new course development must have been inadequate in amount or design; very few Wellesley courses have a service-learning component. While the college has devoted significant resources to providing high-quality experiential opportunities for large numbers of students, and while many of these opportunities are directly connected to the curriculum (international study and undergraduate research in particular), many others (notably internships and service opportunities) are not, leaving students on their own—with the notable exception of the annual Tanner Conference—to connect what they are learning on campus to their extracurricular work.

In conclusion, we note that our story unfolded in a tiny corner of the nation's vast and varied higher education establishment. The residential liberal arts college, although a "distinctively American" symbol of the very idea of "college" (Koblik and Graubard 2000), accounts for less than 1 percent of enrolled undergraduates. Yet highly selective residential liberal arts colleges are, in many ways, the institutions best suited to take up the cause of producing graduates who will, as so many of their mission statements promise, not only make a difference in the world but make a better world. The emphasis these schools place on teaching; their intimacy of scale; the dedication and quality of their faculty, staff, and trustees; and the support they enjoy from generations of loyal graduates are great assets. So too is the general feeling that, at heart, what they are (or should be) doing is transforming young people into responsible and caring adults with the reasoning skills and the courage to defend the ethical distinctions and judgments that will inform their decisions through lives of learning in the service of causes larger than themselves.

But it cannot be said that these institutions, as a group, are in the vanguard of the movement to broaden the aims of an excellent liberal education. Nor, as a whole, are the most selective research universities. Would it matter if they were out front leading the charge? We think it might, but we see serious obstacles to this leadership in the structures of

these colleges and universities and, specifically, in faculty dynamics. The structural barriers are by no means unique to the top-ranked institutions, but they are most clearly visible there—not because their faculty are uniquely difficult, but because they are uniquely powerful.

In the top research universities, first of all, efforts to align teaching with pedagogies of effective practice do not "count" in the metrics that matter to faculty. In a system that disproportionately rewards research over teaching, few incentives encourage faculty seeking tenure to commit the time needed to design and incorporate new pedagogies into their courses. At liberal arts colleges—where good teaching is expected and rewarded—many faculty remain concerned about the extra time necessary to develop courses that contain meaningful field components. Senior faculty will openly say that they felt free to teach community-based learning courses only after they were tenured; some counsel junior colleagues to steer clear of this distraction until they have cleared the tenure bar.

Second, because many believe that pedagogies of effective practice are discipline-specific, they respond to calls for reform with the rejoinder, "that's not what I do." For faculty working within the scholarly traditions of laboratory science or social science fieldwork, hands-on learning has a practical and historical resonance. For faculty in other fields, however, new pedagogies focusing on student experience outside the classroom may seem inappropriate and disconnected from the methodological traditions in which they work. Humanists who teach close readings of texts or close encounters with works of art may feel that their forms of learning ("experiential" in their own way) are being devalued, and for those who by training and practice engage their research subjects individually, it's not obvious how to collaborate with undergraduate students on research projects.

Faculty are naturally most skeptical of experiential opportunities they see as least closely aligned with a traditional liberal arts education and least relevant to the curriculum. While study at another academic institution or undergraduate research opportunities are relatively unobjectionable, educational experiences that take students out of the classroom for significant periods in an educational calendar perceived as a zero-sum game can provoke disagreements over how undergraduates should allocate their time and what constitutes "knowledge," "learning," or an "educational experience."

While debates about the essence of a meaningful liberal arts curriculum are healthy and necessary for every college and university, too often they fail to address the pointed questions that might promote a more nuanced understanding of how and what students are learning: In what specific ways can active learning experiences enhance students' learning? What institutional goals do these approaches address? What coherence, if any, is there among the varieties of experiential opportunities students are being offered? What is the relationship between traditional classroom learning and experiential learning opportunities? How should various experiences be sequenced through a student's college "career"? Are there developmental stages at which particular experiences might be most beneficial, and how do the answers vary—by types of students, by disciplines, by other factors? How do students understand the place of individual experiential learning offerings in their overall education? How well-aligned are students' goals with those of the institution?

Engaging faculty in useful conversations that will foster innovations in experiential learning will take time. Creative, patient, and persistent senior administrative teams will adroitly have to guide institutions of "higher learning" to themselves become "learning organizations," advancing what Derek Bok (2006, 333) calls "a campuswide process of renewal and improvement." We can only hope they can move fast enough to keep up with the pace of change. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

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