The Currency of the Liberal Arts and Sciences: Rethinking Liberal Education in Wisconsin

Why an Initiative on the Currency of the Liberal Arts and Sciences Now?

Rationale and Definitions

White Paper on Liberal Education by Rebecca Karoff, Office of Academic and Student Services, UW System (November 2003)

To focus on the liberal arts and sciences at this moment in the history of American higher education allows for a reevaluation of who our students are, and of what they need to know to live ably and meaningfully in a society that is rapidly changing, increasingly diverse, technologically dependent, and extends globally in its reach. Such a focus calls for a reexamination of what and how we, as purveyors of higher education in Wisconsin, should teach our students and prepare them to take their places as citizens in an increasingly complex political, economic, and civil society. In doing so, we seek to restore a stronger sense of purpose to higher education, and a more coherent and practical meaning to the pursuit of liberal education in America.

By design, the title of the initiative has multiple meanings. By currency we mean, of course, economic value. How do we best demonstrate that a liberal arts education has economic value, and translates into successful job preparation for graduates? While recognizing that such a case can be made, might we also question the extent to which liberal education should serve a solely economic purpose? Cannot a liberal arts education, in its pursuit to better understand the human condition, be an end in and of itself? This latter question positions the title of the initiative as a polemic, one that invites debate. A good liberal arts education teaches students to negotiate the world around them through the development of communication, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, a sense of ethical and civic engagement, and a host of core competencies (including cross-cultural, technological, and scientific). These features of a liberal arts education have another kind of currency, then, in terms of being relevant, of societal value, and necessary to being a productive and ethical member of American democratic society in the early 21st century.

In September 2002, the American Association of Colleges and Universities issued a report and launched a national initiative called “Greater Expectations: A Nation Goes to College” (to see the report, go to http://www.aacu.edu.org/gex/index.cfm). The Report argues for a reclamation of liberal education that is directed at 21st-century students and the institutions of higher learning that serve them. Filled with current data on who is going to college, and what their needs are for liberal learning that will engage them as citizens of the world and produce a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce for the 21st century, the report asks colleges and universities across the nation to join the AAC&U in dialogues that reinvigorate the idea and the practice of liberal education.

The Currency of the Liberal Arts and Sciences is the University of Wisconsin System’s response to AAC&U’s call for reclaiming liberal education.

Why do we need to undertake this initiative now, during a time of fiscal crisis and declining state support for public higher education? Now more than ever, we need to be able to articulate for
ourselves and our multiple constituencies the value, the currency, and the purpose of liberal education. The budget context demands that we clarify, respond to, and defend, if necessary, the public’s questioning of our mission, our practice, and our product.

What do we mean by the liberal arts and sciences?

The liberal arts and sciences have provided the foundation of American higher education since its origins in the late 18th century. The liberal arts and sciences form the academic core of the UW System and, with the exception of UW-Extension, all of the UW institutions view the teaching of the liberal arts as central to their missions. Traditionally grouped around the physical and natural sciences, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities, the liberal arts and sciences form the basis of all our educational programs. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, the boundaries of the liberal arts and sciences have expanded in response to changing needs of American society and populations, resulting in interdisciplinary fields such as women’s studies and environmental studies. At the core of a liberal arts degree are certain educational outcomes that promote inquiry, critical thinking, and deeper understanding of subject matter that allow for the transfer and application of knowledge from one area to another.

What do we mean by liberal education?

Liberal education encompasses the liberal arts and sciences and is an essential part of the American higher education enterprise. Liberal education is not exclusive to the liberal arts and sciences. While the liberal arts and sciences provide the foundation for a liberal education, liberal education extends across undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools and colleges. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) gives the following definition of liberal education:

_A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. Characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than specific content, liberal education can occur at all types of colleges and universities._

(http://www.aacu-edu.org/gex/index.cfm)

What are the expected outcomes of a liberal arts degree? That is to say, what will a student know and be able to do upon graduation with a liberal arts degree?

The outcomes are many. They involve higher order thinking but they are also deeply practical and include the following abilities and competencies:

1. Effectively communicate orally, visually, in writing, and, ideally, in a second language;
2. Understand and employ quantitative and qualitative analysis to solve problems;
3. Interpret and evaluate information from a variety of sources;
4. Make complex connections across the borders of traditional and emerging disciplines, subject areas, cultures, institutions and structures of power;
5. Transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action;
6. Understand and work within complex systems and with diverse groups;
7. Demonstrate intellectual agility and the ability to manage change and ambiguity;
8. Discern the ethical consequences of decisions and actions;
9. Acquire a deep understanding of one’s self and respect for the complex identities of
others, their histories, and their cultures;
10. Actively participate as a citizen of a multifaceted democracy and a globally connected
society.