

The Currency of the Liberal Arts Rethinking Liberal Education in Wisconsin

The Currency of the Liberal Arts is an initiative sponsored by the UW System Office of the President and the Office of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs. The initiative invites the participation of UW System students, Regents, faculty and staff, parents and families, local communities, PK-12 educators, private colleges and universities in Wisconsin, and political, media, and business leaders to embark on a reconsideration of the value and purpose of the liberal arts degree and liberal education in the early 21st century.

What do we mean by the liberal arts?

The liberal arts have provided the foundation of American higher education since its origins in the late 18th century. The liberal arts 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 form the basis of all our educational programs. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, the boundaries of the liberal arts 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 is an essential part of the American higher education enterprise. Liberal education is not exclusive to the liberal arts. While the liberal arts provide the foundation for a liberal education, liberal education extends across undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools and colleges. In 1998, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published the following statement on liberal education that resonates deeply with the missions of UW System institutions:

A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions.

(The entire statement may be found at http://www.aacu-edu.org/About/liberal_learning.cfmp)

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 and can be articulated in many ways. They involve higher order thinking but they are also deeply practical and may include the following abilities and competencies:

- Effectively communicate orally, visually, in writing, and, ideally, in a second language;
- Understand and employ quantitative and qualitative analysis to solve problems;
- Interpret and evaluate information from a variety of sources;
- Make complex connections across the borders of traditional and emerging disciplines, subject areas, cultures, institutions and structures of power;
- Transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action;

- Understand and work within complex systems and with diverse groups;
- Demonstrate intellectual agility and the ability to manage change and ambiguity;
- Discern the ethical consequences of decisions and actions;
- Acquire a deep understanding of one's self and respect for the complex identities of others, their histories, and their cultures;
- Actively participate as a citizen of a multifaceted democracy and a globally connected society.

The Currency of the Liberal Arts is an initiative that seeks to achieve the following goals:

1. Increase the visibility and understanding of the purpose, the goals, the outcomes, and the value of liberal arts education for UW System students and the tax-paying citizens who support public higher education in Wisconsin.
2. Ensure that students graduating from the UW System with degrees in the liberal arts are able to articulate for themselves, their families, and the public (i.e., future employers, their communities back home) the value and currency of their degree.
3. Instill in all students graduating from the UW System an understanding of the meaning and value of liberal education.
4. Initiate dialogue between UW System institutions and the communities of which they are a part on the role of public higher education in the early 21st century.
5. Disseminate and replicate best practices in effective liberal arts pedagogy.
6. Promote outreach activities that bring the liberal arts into the community, and the community into the liberal arts.

Phase I of the Initiative: Fall 2003

- ❖ Meet with the L & S Deans, 10/2/03;
- ❖ Economic Summit IV Panel on *The Currency of the Liberal Arts: Preparing Students for the New Economy* with Chancellor Julius Erlenback, Interim Chancellor Bob Greenstreet, Regent Emerita JoAnne Brandes, and UW-Fox Valley Dean and CEO Jim Perry, 10/27/03;
- ❖ *Why Undergraduate Liberal Arts Education is so Important to a Public University at a Scary Time in the History of the World*, a lecture by Stanley Katz, Professor at the Woodrow Wilson School and Director of the Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies at Princeton University. The lecture will be delivered to the UW System Provosts and others on 11/14/03. It is being co-sponsored by the UW System Office of the President and UW-Madison's WISCAPE, the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Post-Secondary Education;
- ❖ Announce initiative to the Board of Regents, November, 2003.

Phase II of the Initiative: Spring 2004 and beyond (tentative)

- ❖ Create a UW System Working Group, with representation from among Chancellors, Provosts, Deans, faculty and staff, and students, to determine next steps;
- ❖ Provide System funding for several regional, campus-community dialogues, hosted by one or more UW System institutions;
- ❖ Develop a grant proposal and seek external funding focused on a particular aspect of liberal arts education (e.g., general education), in partnership between System Administration and one or more UW System institutions.
- ❖ Invite Carol Geary Schneider, President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, to address the Board of Regents on changes impacting how and to whom liberal education is delivered in American higher education.

Why Now?

To focus on the liberal arts 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*** is the University of Wisconsin System’s response to AAC&U’s call for reclaiming liberal education.

The impetus for the initiative finds voice elsewhere as well. The national press, for example, is filled with articles addressing the purpose and relevance of the liberal arts. In an article entitled “A Liberal Education is not a Luxury,” Marshall Gregory, a Professor of English, Liberal Education, and Pedagogy at Butler University, writes of the “trivialization of higher education,” in the face of marketplace pressures, practices and values which view liberal education as a luxury opposed to the “necessity” of getting students jobs. He calls upon fellow educators to make the case that liberal education is “the pursuit of human excellence, not the pursuit of excellent salaries,” the goal of which is ethical, focusing on “the development of individuals as moral agents.” If that is a luxury, he argues, “so is truth in a courtroom, love in a marriage, or kindness in response to suffering” (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9/12/2003). Although we prefer to view the title of our initiative, *The Currency of the Liberal Arts*, as one that invites debate, Professor Gregory might reject it for its allusion to the marketplace.

Another article from the *Chronicle*, dated August 15, 2003, calls for “Teaching the Ethical Foundations of Economics.” Written by a Professor of Economics from the University of Richmond, Jonathan B. Wight, the article advocates the “reintroduction” of ethics and moral inquiry in the

teaching of economics, as a core of the liberal arts experience. Worried that economists—both within and without academia—view their discipline as a science, “divorced from messy ethical details [and] the normative passions of right and wrong,” he returns to Adam Smith as the great teacher of economics as a moral science” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8/15/2003).

And a recent *Op-Ed* piece from *The New York Times* (dated 9/9/2003) bemoans the “overall shift among universities to making the object of a liberal arts education not so much the development of the individual’s inner life as it is the acquisition of skills.” Entitled “How Teachers Can Stop Cheaters,” the article is less a condemnation of academic cheating than an admonishment by English Professor Mark Edmundson for fellow university teachers to design assignments that preclude cheating, and instead engage students in the material in ways that ask for analysis as well as moral reasoning, ethical inquiry, and personal reflection, all of which are hallmarks of a liberal education.

Why do we need to undertake this initiative now, during a time of severe fiscal crisis? 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. This initiative is an extension of the past year’s budget and legislative hearings, the Regents’ listening sessions and their current “rethinking exercise,” the conversations our Chancellors, Provosts, Deans and others are having with their communities. Economic Summit IV, in which Wisconsin’s higher education, business, labor, government, and non-profit sector leaders addressed the future of Wisconsin, presented an ideal forum in which to pursue the discussion of the currency of the liberal arts.

We announce this initiative to the Board of Regents in the same semester in which the Board has undertaken a “rethinking exercise,” as a complementary effort (albeit on a smaller scale) and a reminder to all of us that—fiscally challenged though we may be—we must not lose sight of the academic core that lies at the heart of UW System institutional missions.

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