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# LIBERAL EDUCATION AND INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

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**Abstract:** This paper presents an argument about new and needed connections between liberal education and integrative learning in the twenty-first century. Integrative learning, I propose, can and should become a *primary* catalyst—perhaps even THE primary catalyst—fueling a new vigor, vitality, and social value in a contemporary liberal education.

Let me emphasize at the outset that integrative learning, as used in this paper, is not a synonym for interdisciplinary learning. Rather, integrative learning is a shorthand term for teaching a set of capacities—capacities we might also call the arts of connection, reflective judgment, and considered action—that enable graduates to put their knowledge to effective use. Thus defined, integrative learning may certainly include the various forms of in-

terdisciplinary learning. But it should also lead students to connect and integrate the different parts of their overall education, to connect learning with the world beyond the academy, and, above all, to translate their education to new contexts, new problems, new responsibilities.

This expansive conception of integrative learning is a vision for our future. Let's look, briefly, at where our students are right now.

As our nation moves into the twenty-first century, a college diploma is rapidly becoming what a high school diploma became 100 years ago—THE widely sought and generally expected passport to both economic mobility and contributing citizenship. High school is no longer enough; and the more education Americans achieve, the more they can expect to find opportunities of all kinds in our society.

Americans of all ages recognize these new developments, and in response, they are flocking to college. Across the nation, nearly 75% of high school graduates already pursue some form of post-secondary education within two years of graduation. Working adults also are going to college. Forty-three percent of all college students are age 24 or older, and these older students have indeed become “the new majority” on college campuses.

As we all know, there is currently a new, economically-driven tension between Americans' interest in higher education and shrinking budgets in the states and on our campuses. But as an historian looking at the trends over time, I think there is no question but that the United States is moving toward a state of affairs in which higher learning will become the normative preparation both for work and talent development, rather than an elite or elective choice as it has been for most of our history.

This is potentially a transformative development, and we can all justly take pride in our collective share in making this expansion of college participation, a reality. At the same time, there is abundant evidence that too many students are not making the most of college. Over half must enroll in remedial courses once they enter. Approximately half do not finish their degrees at all. As faculty readily admit, many of those who do graduate have not fully mastered core skills of analysis, communication, and problem-solving. Such students may have finished the required number of courses. But they have not succeeded in making the most of college.

These observations raise fundamental questions about what students—and our society—should expect from a college education. What kinds of learning will serve graduates well over time? What kinds of learning does society need to continue to fuel a dynamic economy? What is the academy's role in preparing students, not just for democratic citizenship, but in a nation

that now possesses unrivaled power all around the globe?

## Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Student Learning

In 2002, the Association that I head offered its own official position on these questions in a major report on the purposes of college education, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. A distinguished national panel of educators, school leaders, business executives, and community figures framed the report, in dialogue with campus leaders at innovative colleges and universities from Boston to Texas to Hawaii and with our member campuses all across the country.

The *Greater Expectations* report calls for a new commitment to provide every one of our students with a liberal education—that is, with the kind of education that develops their intellectual and ethical capacities, deepens their understanding of the world around them (the social world as well as the physical world), cultivates their sense of civic and social responsibilities to others, and prepares them to thrive in a world characterized by innovation, complexity, and change.

The report also argues that it is time to tear down the walls that have traditionally divided liberal education from pre-professional fields, and to make a commitment to teach every field as a form of liberal or liberating education. And finally, the report argues emphatically that we must give new priority to helping all students become “intentional” about their goals for learning and about taking responsibility for the uses of their learning.

Intentional learners are “integrative learners.” They have learned the arts of exploration and connection that are now essential to effectiveness in a complex world.

*Greater Expectations* does not recommend a “common college curriculum.” Once goals for students’ learning are clearly articulated, there can be many ways of achieving those goals for different students, different fields of study, and different institutions. But the report argues vigorously against the kind of haphazard credit accumulation that many students now experience as they make their way toward a degree.

## Integrative Learning and the Re-Mapping of the Undergraduate Experience

The *Greater Expectations* report is more than a call for educational focus, reform, and renewal. It also points to changes in the practice of undergraduate education that are starting to emerge within the academy. Many of these

changes, in fact, are already being widely adopted, although frequently on the margins of the curriculum rather than as a new architecture for the entire educational experience.

Taken together, these reforms have the potential to help us achieve the *Greater Expectations* vision for student learning. The question before us is whether we will act to make these reforms aligned and mutually reinforcing so that, comprehensively, they provide a new direction and intellectual focus for the overall college curriculum. As my colleagues and I have explored these questions, I have come to believe that a focus on integrative learning is the key to the entire conception of a *Greater Expectations* liberal education.

In Table 1, I provide a mapping of the most common curricular and pedagogical innovations we observe on college and university campuses. I have organized these new programs and pedagogies under three major themes: 1) *Cultivating Inquiry Skills and Intellectual Judgment, “Across-the-Curriculum;”* 2) *Fostering Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement;* and 3) *Promoting Integrative and Culminating Learning.*

The innovations listed under the first and second of these formative themes point to new ways of achieving two of the most enduring goals of a liberal education: the thoughtful and creative use of human reason, and the ideal of taking responsibility for the quality of our shared societies. What we see captured in Table One—at least potentially—are ways of aligning these disparate innovations so that they work together to help students achieve important educational outcomes.

The third theme, *Promoting Integrative and Culminating Learning,* is newer. In my mind, the practices associated with this theme reflect our dawning realization that in a world of unparalleled complexity, we must give new priority to teaching students how to navigate that complexity and how to grapple successfully with problems that are not only unscripted but often vigorously contested.

Collectively, the practices that foster integrative and culminating learning can help ensure that students will learn to take context and complexity into account when they apply their analytical skills to challenging problems. A strengthened emphasis on integrative learning also holds the power to bridge—at last—the longstanding cultural divide in which one set of disciplines, the arts and sciences, has been regarded as intellectual but not practical, while professional fields have been viewed as practical, but for that very reason, inherently illiberal. As we give new priority to integrative learning, analysis and application can become mutually reinforcing where, for too long, they were presented as alternative educational pathways.

But integrative learning seems to me more than just a third strand in the reinvention of liberal or liberating education for this era of *Greater Expectations*. Rather, **integrative learning is the key to success with each of the other over-arching goals:** 1) *Cultivating Inquiry Skills and Intellectual Judgment* and 2) *Fostering Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement*. The whole point, after all, of emphasizing powerful skills across-the-curriculum is to help students build increasing power and facility in the use of those skills. Students need to see and believe that they will be expected to deploy capacities cultivated in the first year experience at an even higher level of sophistication and versatility in the final year experience. They need to recognize that analysis, writing, and research are not just exercises to be completed as required, or, as is too often the case, largely avoided. Rather, they should come to understand that they are building intellectual and analytical powers as tools for the work of their lives and that integration of learning is essential to their own future success. Many of the reforms listed in Table 1 as practices for integrative learning and culminating studies can and should be used as ways of teaching students both to connect their learning and to assess their own progress in meeting a high standard of performance.

Similarly, integrative learning is also an essential element in the goal of helping students develop a strong sense of social responsibility and civic engagement. For too long, our campuses have made civic engagement and social responsibility an extracurricular activity, the realm of student affairs and off-campus life. Today, however, we see abundant efforts to tie the educational experience to “big questions” that matter both to students and the health of our communities. Here too, successful integration of learning is surely the key to success. The more students transfer knowledge and skill from the classroom to the community and then back again, the better prepared they will be to take responsibility for their lifelong roles as citizens and human beings.

As I observed at the outset of this paper, this is an expansive conception of integrative learning. It is a conception that looks beyond today’s often isolated educational innovations to a more comprehensive and cumulative design for the undergraduate experience.

In presenting it, however, I am mindful that the curriculum changed fundamentally just a century ago, from a common set of studies for all students, to today’s eclectic mix of general, major, and elective programs. What has changed before can—and undoubtedly will—change yet again. The academy has the power to guide these changes in purposeful directions. Teach-

ing our students the arts of integrative learning should become a purpose important to us all.

### **Table 1**

#### **Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Education With a Mapping of Contemporary Initiatives**

##### ***1. Cultivating Inquiry Skills and Intellectual Judgment - “Across-the-Curriculum”***

*Student Learning Outcomes:* goals for learning articulated across the entire curriculum, guiding liberal arts and sciences disciplines and professional studies alike;

*First Year Experiences:* first-year programs and seminars that help students learn what is expected of them educationally and work proactively to develop better analytical, research, communication, and information capacities;

*Skill-Intensive Content Courses:* designs for practicing important skills recurrently “across-the-curriculum” in courses explicitly tagged for their emphasis on intensive writing, technology, quantitative reasoning, second language, and, sometimes, ethical reasoning;

*Undergraduate Research:* involving students in inquiry and hands-on research.

##### ***2. Fostering Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement***

*Big Questions:* imaginative ways of teaching the arts and sciences that connect the content of these courses to important questions in the larger world;

*Field-Based Learning:* a new emphasis on internships, service learning, and other forms of practice that help students connect their academic learning with “real-world” experience;

*Diversity, Global, and Civic Engagement:* a wealth of programs, both curricular and co-curricular, intended to foster civic engage-

ment, diversity and global learning, and social responsibility;

*Community-Based Research*: a growing emphasis on community-based research, often done collaboratively.

### 3. *Promoting Integrative and Culminating Studies*

*Liberal/Professional*: new connections between liberal and professional education (see #1 above);

*Learning Communities*: thematically linked courses in different disciplines that students take as a “set” with the expectation that they will examine important human, scientific, or societal questions from multiple points of view;

*Advanced Interdisciplinary General Education*: courses that invite comparison and connection;

*Portfolios and E-Portfolios*: documenting and assessing students’ intellectual progress over time;

*Capstones*: capstone courses and/or experiences that help students integrate their learning both in the major and in general education arenas;

*Culminating Projects and Assessments*: required for completion of the degree.

**Biographical Note:** Carol Geary Schneider has been president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities since 1998. In this role, she has initiated a major effort to rethink the broad aims of a 21st century college education so that liberal learning becomes a framework for the entire educational experience. Dr. Schneider is a graduate Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Mount Holyoke College. She has a Ph.D. in history from Harvard University, where she was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. In 1982, she was named a Mina Shaughnessy Fellow of the U.S. Department of Education. She has taught at the University of Chicago, DePaul University, Chicago State University, and Boston University. Dr. Schneider’s recent articles include: “Core Missions and Civic Responsibility: Toward the Engaged Academy,” in *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*; “From Diversity to Engaging Differ-

ence,” in *Knowledge, Identity and Curriculum Transformation in Africa*; and, with Lee Knefelkamp, “Education for a World Lived in Common with Others,” in *Education and Democracy: Re-Imagining Liberal Learning in America*.