

Challenges and Strategies in Realizing the Liberal Arts at a Research University

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I want to do two things today. First, I want to present a vision for the liberal arts that includes but goes well beyond the current consensus argument for a liberal education: the development of critical thinking. Providing a contrasting vision is the first step in addressing a limited concept of liberal education. Second, I want to discuss strategies for realizing the liberal arts ideal at a research university amidst additional challenges, including increasing specialization.

I

The vision I wish to present draws on my recent book, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* There were three catalysts for my writing this book. First, the book developed out of the story I was telling parents and students in response to their question to me as dean, whether a liberal arts education would allow them to get a job. Second, although I could recognize the practical value of a liberal arts education, I was disturbed by the ways in which the purpose of higher education was being reduced to merely practical ends. College was being viewed simply as a means to an end and not also as an end in itself. According to surveys, first-year students want above all to “be very well off financially.” That ambition is now the most prominent, whereas a generation ago “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was the highest ambition of students entering college. Related, the national debate on undergraduate education has been overwhelmingly about job preparation. Third was my sense that ideas of moral education and formation were disappearing from the landscape of American higher education. I thought we could do more in this realm and should not relegate character and the development of virtues to residential life.

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In *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* I recognize three values of a liberal arts education: its intrinsic value, its practical value, and its formative value. Let me sketch these briefly while relating them to the idea of the research university.

Intrinsic Value

Students come to college with meaningful questions, and college awakens others. Has time always existed, or was there a beginning? How do planets form, and how did life on earth arise? How does the mind work? What were the great turning points in history? What are the great artworks of the ages? Why do some countries develop successfully and others stagnate? What are our generation’s most pressing moral obligations? Education should be relevant. But there is much that is *relevant* beyond what is *practical*. Few such questions have practical value in the truncated way in which we tend to define practical value, but they do *matter* to students. To understand our world as it *is* and to understand our world as it *should be* are values in and of

themselves.

Commonly, we speak of the “big questions.” While “big” justly captures the idea that these are far-reaching questions that transcend individual disciplines, “big” suggests only a *quantitative* dimension. I prefer the term “great questions,” which captures also their profound and ennobling *quality*.

The college experience is for many a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ask great questions without being overwhelmed by the distractions of material needs and practical applications. College, with its focus not only on the everyday, but also on the transcendent, its engagement as much with the past as the present, its consideration as much of the other as of the here-and-now, is an oasis of difference in our culture. We should not be ashamed of that. To think of alternatives, we need to step back from the present and the everyday. When education is reduced to the practical and the instrumental, the question, how do I achieve this or that end, is valued over higher-order questions, such as: What ends should I pursue? Which are more interesting? And which are more worthy?

There is a contemporary tendency to reduce what is valuable or worthy to what we call useful, but the useful is useful only insofar as it serves other ends. What is (or should be) even more valuable than the useful is what is valued as an end in itself, that is, what is often passed off as useless: for instead of helping us reach some higher goal, it is itself a most worthy goal; the exploration of nature, knowledge of the social world, engagement with art and literature, contemplation, dialogue, friendship, and love are prominent examples.

The intrinsic value of higher education was at the core of the founding of the research university in early 19th-century Germany. Knowledge for its own sake was one of a small number of core principles and was related to the elevation of the arts and sciences over the previously higher-ranking disciplines of law, medicine, and theology. Three additional related core principles were the idea of the unity of knowledge across disciplines, the interweaving of research and teaching, and the elevation of *Bildung* or formation.

The two greatest challenges to realizing the intrinsic value of education, including exploration of the great questions, are the practical concerns of American society and faculty specialization, which may lead faculty to shy away from addressing the great questions.

Practical Value

Some goods that have intrinsic value are also useful for extrinsic purposes. The idea that something can be both a means and an end is complex but hardly contradictory. The concept was introduced already by Plato, who draws the distinction in the *Republic*, recognizing that “there is a kind of good which we would choose to possess not from desire for its aftereffects, but welcome it for its own sake” (357b). The power of sight, for example, gives us immediate pleasure, but it also allows us to do many other things, from undertaking crafts to reading texts. A liberal arts education is another such good, and so I note here the practical value of a liberal arts education.

Year after year communication skills rank first or second in the *Job Outlook* national survey of attributes deemed most important in job candidates. Not surprisingly, the demand for communication skills only increases as employees ascend the corporate ladder. In such settings,

one must be able to find the words to motivate and guide others, an exercise that transcends technical competence.

Among the best outlets for the development of oral skills are small seminars and oral examinations in a liberal arts setting. Though we sometimes associate the idea of the seminar with college, its origin lies in the research university. The concept of the seminar, which engaged students as learners, was introduced in Göttingen, initially in philology and then in history, becoming a distinctive and essential part of the German university. For Fichte, “die Bildung des Vermögens zum Lernen” [the formation of the capacity to learn] was more important than learning itself (131). Examinations and student essays, Fichte argued, should not parrot back information, but instead exhibit the self-activity of the student’s mind, the capacity to take what one has learned and extend it in a variety of different areas (130-34).

Written Communication is also essential. In *Academically Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa show that undergraduate business majors do not make the same level of gains as other students in complex reasoning, critical thinking, and effective writing and that the main reason for this limited learning is the fewer hours business students invest in studying, including studying alone, which involves extensive reading, writing, and rewriting.

A Notre Dame liberal arts graduate and Harvard M.B.A. once told me that when his firm interviews finalist job candidates, they give them an office, a computer, and a choice of five topics from which they must choose one, on which they are expected to develop an essay in ninety minutes. Liberal arts graduates, I’m told, tend to excel in this exercise, which is viewed as an essential test of thinking and of organizational and communication skills.

The development of communication skills is challenged at those research universities that elevate research over teaching. Students learn best when they are active in the learning process and receive ample and meaningful feedback. But to require, grade, and comment on more work and to have students write and rewrite papers cost faculty time. Extensive feedback on class contributions as well as lengthy one-on-one oral exams, with appropriate feedback, also demand faculty time. In addition, high standards are essential to good learning, but giving lower grades, which helps students see that they aren’t yet what they might become, also costs time, since lower grades require greater justification. Further, small seminar classes, which are essential to active learning, are more expensive for the university, which needs to decide whether it wants to prioritize that investment or competing ones, such as course reductions for leading researchers, which are partly bought with larger classes. Finally, if faculty see their goal as involving primarily disciplinary teaching, then the development of formal skills, including speaking and writing, could easily be neglected. In short, blending the liberal arts value of developing communication skills with the research university ethos and aspirations involves challenges, most of which relate to university priorities and incentives, faculty priorities and time, and faculty specialization.

I have thus far mentioned only communication skills, but we could add here as practical values of a liberal arts education a number of other capacities, all of which require to some degree smaller classes and considerable faculty time, with high expectations and appropriate feedback: critical thinking and problem-solving skills; exposure to the methods of various disciplines as well as opportunities to synthesize them; study of other languages and cultures;

gaining an eye for complexity and a tolerance for ambiguity; and developing a love of learning that encourages the capacity to continue to learn.

Another essential liberal arts goal is fostering wisdom, or the ability to understand individual phenomena from the perspective of the whole. Scholars at liberal arts colleges have an advantage here insofar as they tackle more frequently than scholars at research universities broader topics in their scholarship (Ruscio; Oakley 155-56). Because smaller colleges have fewer faculty members, their faculty must teach a wider range of topics; and because the communities are smaller, forging intellectual bonds with colleagues in other disciplinary areas tends to be easier, thus indirectly bringing faculty beyond their disciplinary boundaries and making the whole more visible. Cultivating wisdom or a sense of the whole tends to be a greater challenge at research universities, where specialization is more likely.

Formative Value

When the value of a liberal arts education is defended today, educators normally stress critical thinking, which is essential to success and crucial to the venerable enlightenment goal of dismantling false truths. In faculty surveys critical thinking is always at the top in terms of the highest priorities for faculty members. In one such survey, 99.6% identified the “ability to think critically” as “very important” or “essential” (DeAngelo 125). Only a fraction of the same faculty tend to view “develop moral character,” or “develop personal values” as “very important” or “essential” (Lindholm 5). Often neglected within a culture that elevates only critical thinking is formation, the goal of helping students develop virtues, build character, and gain a sense of vocation, the moral and social purpose of education.

At liberal arts colleges a relatively high percentage of faculty members, in contrast to the national norms, do believe that moral values and self-knowledge are important undergraduate goals (Ruscio 216-17). Research faculty oriented toward developing disciplinary expertise among their graduate students are less likely to share this vision. In general, many faculty hesitate to engage personal development and moral formation. Much of the caution is understandable.

- The elevation of critical thinking, with its implicit suggestion that liberal education means viewing everything with a distant and disinterested eye, seems to work against the idea that what one is studying could have meaning for one’s heart and soul. This is linked to the common idea that critical thinking is, as the name implies, negative; it identifies and uncovers problems, it does not itself develop tenable views.
- Faculty are also hesitant to address issues that take them beyond their specialized knowledge and raise complex questions of ultimate values.
- Faculty are uneasy with reductive versions of character development, which tend toward ready-made answers and moral and ideological indoctrination.
- Faculty hesitation may be further reinforced by a modesty about impinging on sensitive areas or imposing their own values on students.

As understandable as this hesitation may be, the separation of intellectual and moral exploration is ultimately untenable. As Mark Van Doren noted more than half a century ago, “The danger in separating character from intellect and asking it to operate alone is that men will then be licensed to handle moral ideas as though they were not ideas” (63).

Residential life and extracurricular activities, including community service, help develop character. But so does academic work. Many intellectual pursuits presuppose virtues of character, and so the two often develop in tandem (Schwehn). For example, to prepare well for each class by completing all assignments, rereading materials, making appropriate notes, and reflecting thoughtfully is to elevate study over other available pleasures and is as such an illustration of temperance. To consider that every author I study may have ideas that are worthy of my attention presupposes generosity of spirit. To recognize in the works we study insights of great value and a measure of greatness is to experience the virtue of modesty.

Discussion classes test and develop many additional virtues. To listen carefully to the views of others and to weigh them honestly, even if they should contradict your initial inclinations, is to practice a form of justice. To encourage effectively the participation of others and successfully draw good ideas out of them is to exhibit intellectual hospitality. To challenge the views of interlocutors without making the attack personal and thus without drawing their eyes away from the search for truth is to practice diplomacy. Humility is evident whenever I recognize that I must withdraw an idea from discussion in the face of decisive counter-arguments, that I haven’t myself discovered the answer, and that I must continue to listen attentively to the views of others. To hold on to a view even against consensus when one is convinced of its validity is to experience social isolation for one’s belief in truth and is an act of civil courage.

Similarly, if we lack certain character virtues, then we will make intellectual mistakes. Arrogance leads us to think that our abilities are greater than they are and that we see more than we really do, which can lead to our dismissing arguments that might indeed be worthy of our attention. The fear of criticism can lead me to shy away from having my own ideas tested (and improved). In Plato’s dialogues we see the ways in which ideas relate to life-forms. Plato interweaves the criticism of ideas with the evaluation of persons. Individuals who are full of themselves, dogmatic and self-assured, are not likely to uncover truth.

Assignments can help to bring out the existential and moral dimensions of education. Even if a majority of study questions focus on understanding the works, evaluating their assumptions and arguments, exploring their forms, and recognizing the works in their various contexts, some questions can address more existential interests. In such a context, students learn not only *about* works but also *from* works. But that involves moving beyond simply critical thinking and disciplinary expertise.

II

Beyond a truncated vision, I see three further challenges to the integration of the liberal arts at a research university, though one could name still others: the tendency toward specialization; a university investment and reward system that elevates research over teaching and specialization over breadth; and the replacement of the *local*, that is, the teacher-scholar

whose identity involves fostering the community of learning at one's own institution, with the *cosmopolitan*, that is, the scholar who identifies above all with her discipline and less so with her own college (Gouldner). All three challenges are related.

Research university classes, if I can oversimplify here for the sake of argument, are often specialized, not least of all because research universities have a high number of faculty and course offerings and because scholarship advances for the most part incrementally, moved forward by studies of ever narrower scope. Faculty know that their scholarly contributions are most likely to be accepted if they attend to finite innovations in method and carve out discrete spheres of inquiry. Naturally, they seek to integrate their teaching and their scholarship.

Given these tendencies, how can we get *faculty* to convey and embody the values of the liberal arts? More specifically, what tools does an *administrator* have at her disposal to solve this problem? The power of an administrator, I would say, lies in three areas: vision; personnel; and budget. The most powerful tool is vision. In addition, hiring, promotion, and leadership decisions determine the personnel who will carry out a vision. Finally, budget expresses vision through differential allocations and priorities.

Vision

First, then, articulating and communicating a vision is essential, and in this context it must be a vision that includes the highest aspirations for liberal education. When we act because we identify with a compelling vision, we are intrinsically motivated. The ideal strategy any university has to motivate faculty members toward its goals is to ensure that they identify with the overarching vision. Repeated allusions to the vision help university constituents build an emotional attachment to the institution and help to form a culture and ethos where the vision is central.

Given external pressures to elevate research, I sought at Notre Dame to ensure that teaching and learning remained prominent.

- I spoke consistently of Notre Dame's triadic identity, suggesting that Notre Dame is simultaneously a residential liberal arts college, with a traditional emphasis on undergraduate learning; an increasingly dynamic and ambitious research university; and a Catholic institution of international standing.
- In my account of the ideal candidate for a position at Notre Dame, I began with teaching: "First, the candidate should be an excellent teacher who is attentive to the liberal arts ideal, existentially engaged in his or her subject, and able to communicate to a broader audience. The person should thoroughly enjoy discussions with students."
- As dean, I began all promotion and tenure letters with teaching and communicated that fact to the faculty.
- When I interviewed job candidates, I asked about teaching and required data on their teaching. I also occasionally vetoed potential hires with weaker teaching records.
- Vision is also communicated nonverbally, so I not only remained active as a scholar, but also taught, as difficult as that was.

A compelling vision attracts future students, forms the community of current faculty and students, and inspires graduates, donors, and other supporters. There are ways to communicate the core values of the liberal arts such that faculty can identify, because faculty, despite their conscious intentions, tend to be pleased when they connect with students in deeper ways and impact them as persons. The vision of course comes not only from administrators but also from faculty, including new faculty.

Personnel Decisions

Second, we can realize the liberal arts ideal if we find and reward those faculty who support the liberal arts. If one leaves hiring decisions entirely to departments, then, depending on local culture, scholarship alone could determine the hierarchy of finalist candidates. Hiring decisions, salary adjustments, tenure-and-promotion decisions, and leadership appointments can foster or fail the mission of liberal education.

The potential contribution of faculty candidates to teaching and formation should become part of the interview process. “Who was your best teacher?” “What attracts you about teaching in a liberal arts environment?” “How will your research help you as a teacher?” “What is the ultimate value of studying history or literature?” “If a student were to say, I love philosophy or Russian, but I want to major in something practical, how would you respond?” Answers to such questions can help committees and administrators sift a potential faculty member’s contribution to the liberal arts.

If departments are not forwarding candidates who satisfy such expectations, administrators should stop releasing lines to those departments. You do not want to hire faculty who score poorly on the questions above, nor do you as an administrator want to veto departmental recommendations, which quickly uses up political capital.

One strategy I found advantageous was to introduce competitive searches. Invite more departments to search than you have lines available, telling them that you will hire only the very best candidates in the competition. That quickly motivates departments to satisfy an institution’s vision for itself and an administrator’s expectations. Depending on where lines land, you can raise or lower a department’s expected contribution to the general curriculum, and you can continue to challenge departments to compete more effectively for competitive hires.

In addition to employing one-time funds strategically, higher administrators should ensure that personnel decisions reward faculty members who excel in both scholarship and teaching, including teaching in the wider sense of fostering the liberal arts. Expecting some worthy contribution to liberal arts learning before each promotion level might, for example, be a reasonable incentive. To the extent that reward structures signal values and priorities, colleges should also recognize teaching as they do research, and not only classroom teaching in one’s discipline. Special prizes can be awarded for teaching in the liberal arts as well as for advising and informal mentoring.

An opportunity exists in this context for distinction in graduate education. Even large public universities want good teachers, so if a graduate program could develop a reputation for preparing great teachers, with certain broader capacities, as well as excellent scholars, that could be a difference maker.

Orientation

Third, socialize faculty members effectively, thereby interweaving vision and personnel. New faculty members are eager to learn about a college's vision, history, and customs. The first year on the faculty and the year after tenure, when faculty are never more curious about their newly permanent home, offer wonderful opportunities for a college to articulate its vision and priorities, to cultivate solidarity with that higher purpose, including the value of the liberal arts, and to benefit from the ideas of newer faculty members.

On average I think we do a poor job of helping new faculty members understand the ethos of an institution beyond their departments. One needs to have not simply a weekend orientation in the fall but a year-long orientation with multiple engaging events, including time with the president, and selected common readings, which help to form a cohort and give faculty insight into the higher purpose of college. Similar events can be planned for those who are embarking on administrative roles at the level of chairperson or above.

On smaller campuses the orientation might be led by the president, provost, or dean, and at larger universities one such session might involve reading a document by its president and discussing it with the author. Continuing events across the year allow faculty to renew their relationships across disciplines. Besides ensuring that faculty meet colleagues from other disciplines, thus widening their horizons, such an orientation fosters loyalty and community. It ensures that new faculty understand how the missions of their new and former educational institutions differ.

Support Structures and Incentives

Fourth, introduce appropriate support structures and incentives. The budget should support vision. If research and teaching are expected, offer appropriate leave time and an appropriate course load so that both can be realized. Support is a kind of communication, a test of the legitimacy of a vision, if you will; it ensures continuity between aspirations and what is necessary to meet those aspirations.

Universities might also wish to offer faculty seminars on a regular basis. These might take the form of multi-week summer seminars, compact seminars, lecture series, or sets of discussions over the course of a semester. For example, Notre Dame sponsored for some years an annual university-wide, year-long seminar on a topic involving Catholicism, such as the Catholic intellectual tradition, the Catholic social tradition, the Catholic idea of liberal learning, and theology and science. Recognizing that many faculty members could not give so much time to such a demanding initiative, we also sponsored each semester single-afternoon workshops on aspects of Catholicism. Each workshop offered an introduction to Catholicism, explored a classic work in the Catholic tradition, or engaged a topic involving Catholicism and contemporary society. Similar activities could be structured to advance the liberal arts, including reading and discussing significant classic or contemporary works on the liberal arts or on teaching.

We also need to offer faculty ways in which they can expand their teaching repertoire in order to address great questions, foster students' formal skills, and address character.

A simple workshop can offer faculty strategies for integrating the liberal arts more fully into their courses. For example, one might begin each syllabus with a paragraph or two on the fascinating questions the course explores, that is, the intrinsic value of the subject.

Then the learning goals would follow—not the material that you as a faculty member will cover, but what the students will learn. Certainly much of what students learn will relate to a given discipline. But why not also help faculty members formulate learning goals that engage the three-fold value of a liberal arts education? Learning goals might spell out, for example, that students will gain familiarity with a fascinating question and, in so doing, learn to enjoy the life of the mind and to grasp the value of wonder.

Whatever discipline one is teaching, the development of formal skills should be highlighted as learning goals or outcomes. Faculty members might state that students will advance their skills in evaluating the tenability of various kinds of arguments; that they will develop their capacity to ask pertinent and interesting questions and to argue for and against various interpretations; that they will learn to become more adept in intellectual discussion, improving their capacity for empathetic and thoughtful listening as well as for articulate precision. By introducing learning goals along these lines, the teacher can encourage meta-reflection on the methods of the discipline as useful beyond the discipline itself and so help students feel comfortable taking a course for the love of the material, all the while knowing that they are gaining the skills that will allow them to flourish beyond the classroom.

Learning goals might also open a window onto the existential and higher purpose of a given discipline. For example, students will develop their own positions on the topic of the course, and they will be able to describe them and defend them in the light of alternative positions. Science classes might stress some of the virtues of character, such as honesty and integrity, discipline and perseverance, modesty and teamwork, that will be developed in the course of exploring a topic as part of a research team. Or a learning goal might note that students will see a connection between the scientific principles explored and questions of public policy.

Since teaching and research are ideally linked, one can also imagine research support for projects that fit the ideals of liberal learning. The recently created Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study, for example, offers research support to scholars who work on integrative questions, ultimate questions, or questions of value. Such research support indirectly fosters teaching in the liberal arts.

Incentives are another strategy to link academic and budgetary priorities. Budgetary decisions should always foster an institution's highest aspirations. If fostering the liberal arts is a priority, then the budget should be used to enhance that goal. One could imagine course development grants for faculty who want to reconfigure a course around a great question or focus on neglected formal skills, such as the oral capacities of students, or whose courses will address issues of character, formation, or vocation. The National Endowment for the Humanities established grants for new courses that address enduring questions, such as, What is the nature of evil? What is the relationship between humans and the natural world? Why do we laugh? What is friendship? The goal was to encourage broader teaching on college campuses. Similar incentives could exist on campuses themselves.

Politics as the Art of the Possible

Finally, be practical. Politics is the art of the possible. If our goal is not simply to articulate but to realize a vision, we need to think not only of what *should* be but also what *is*. The goal of politics is to bring the descriptive more in harmony with the normative level, and for that one needs to know both one's aspirations and the lay of the land, including what is possible. Not all faculty can stretch. One should start with those who can and try over time to widen the circle.

Consider at Notre Dame, for example, five distinct levels of liberal education.

(1) The Program of Liberal Studies offers a superb great books major and so attracts faculty who are intrinsically drawn to such a program, which ensures that a certain number of faculty and students are deeply engaged in liberal education.

(2) Notre Dame offers the year-long Honors Humanities Seminar each year to more than 100 first-year students. The director has no difficulties finding faculty, often endowed chairs and prize-winning teachers, in literature, history, philosophy, and other departments who are thrilled, as I was last year, to take the same group of 16 students in the fall from Homer to Dante and in the spring from Machiavelli to Woody Allen. Such a program widens the circle further. Its students need not major in the great books, but they start college with a year-long immersion in great works.

(3) Notre Dame's College Seminar, which is required of all Arts and Letters students, addresses a great question; engages works from the arts, humanities, and social sciences; includes at least some classic works; and focuses on oral skills. Faculty enthusiasm for this course is significant. It offers a welcome middle ground between a core course with a prescribed curriculum and a specialized course, for faculty must stretch toward larger questions and other disciplines, but they can do so outward from a topic that already engages them, such as "Democracy," "Justice," or "Evil."

In my version of the course, students have explored the topic "Faith, Doubt, and Reason." They read works in philosophy and theology and literature, they attend theater performances, they discuss great films by directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Woody Allen, they visit the campus art museum, and they read sociological studies of the beliefs of America's youth and analyses of politics and faith in America today. Because a person can't speak well without first having thought deeply, students must write approximately sixty pages. The students take a 30-minute one-on-one midterm oral examination and a 45-minute one-on-one final oral examination; for each examination, the student receives a page of written comments. For most students it is a wonderful learning opportunity.

(4) Requirements are another way in which an institution realizes liberal arts values. Some research universities have in fact more requirements than liberal arts colleges. In the College of Arts and Letters Notre Dame's core consists of two courses in philosophy and two in theology; two courses in mathematics and two in science; three courses in the combined areas of history

and social science, with at least one course in each area; individual courses in the fine arts, in literature, and in writing; foreign language study equivalent to three semesters; and the above mentioned College Seminar.

(5) In each major, one expects to see some broader courses as well as courses that address liberal arts priorities, such as intensive-writing courses. As departments incline toward technical and special-topics courses, part of the regular review process could involve checking to see to what extent broader courses are also offered, so in political science the presence of classical political theorists and in sociology thinkers such as Durkheim and Weber, and to what extent courses advance the students' capacities in the liberal arts.*

*This is a tentative draft, which will be shortened for presentation.

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