

Liberal Education is General AND Special!

An AGLS Statement, 2008

The Mission Statement for the Association for General and Liberal Studies commits the Association to serve “colleges and universities by helping students and faculty enjoy the benefits of a liberal education attained through quality general education.” There is another critically important component to liberal education, the major or undergraduate professional program, but there are many other entities in higher education that promote and oversee the quality of the majors. The context of this AGLS statement, then, is one in which both this Association and the promoters of majors and professional programs have come together in mutual support of general education and its role in 21st century liberal education.

The still recent millennium was a very special moment for higher education. Under pressures from, first of all, employers of our graduates and then from the federal government, a shift of emphasis from inputs to learning outcomes changed the landscape in undergraduate education. Most noteworthy was the change that occurred in specialized and professional accrediting associations. They discovered, or more accurately re-discovered, that the outcomes of liberal education are essential to the 21st century professional. Acting on such rediscovery, these accreditors included both traditional (critical thinking, communication, ethics) and new (cultural and environmental sensitivity, global perspectives) liberal education outcomes directly in their revised criteria for accreditation.

As a result, the current or “cutting edge” model for liberal education is a united endeavor of general education and the major, involving **collaboration** of a much wider group of faculty in the service of student learning and also **integration** of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes from the two main components of each student’s undergraduate experience. In fact, the main thesis of this position paper—that **liberal education is now defined as the collaboration and integration of general education and the major**—is identical to the primary outcome of a national project sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in which AGLS, seven other higher education associations, all six regional accreditors, and four specialized accreditors participated. The consensus on this new definition on the part of that

significant group of people was truly an important event in higher education. (See the 2004 AACU publication *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*, the final report of the “Project on Accreditation and Assessment.”)

The participants in this project made a clear and conscious shift in patterns of thinking. The old shibboleths of “broad is shallow” and “deep is narrow” were rejected. Breadth is no longer shallow, **if** general education is not confined to very basic outcomes in the early semesters; so there is cumulative learning possible in general education that is extended throughout all the semesters of the degree program. And depth is no longer narrow, **if** the major is in ongoing interaction and complementarity with a robust, coherent, and extensive program in general education.

The logic of the new model obviously is “both/and” rather than “either/or.” Liberal education is not identical to the major, because the major develops, not the full range of intellectual capabilities, but a select (reduced) number of them. But liberal education is not to be identified with general education either, because a study in depth is needed to push a student, even on the undergraduate level, to go as far as possible in studying something. The “both/and” approach means that there are **two** noble endeavors that **together** produce the educated person for the 21st century from their connection and synergy in the curriculum. One of the best, because both clear and comprehensive, formulations of this vision is in the handbook for regional accreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

Baccalaureate programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and a fulfilling life. These programs also ensure the development of core learning abilities and competencies, including, but not limited to, college-level written and oral communication; college-level quantitative skills; information literacy; and the habit of critical analysis of data and argument. In addition, baccalaureate programs actively foster an understanding of diversity; civic responsibility; the ability to work with others; and the capability to engage in lifelong learning. Baccalaureate programs also ensure breadth for all students in the areas of cultural and aesthetic, social and political, as well as scientific and technical knowledge expected of educated persons in this society. Finally, students are required to engage in an in-depth, focused, and sustained program of study as part of their baccalaureate program. [*Handbook*, page 20]

The great and irreplaceable value of the major or professional program is that it immerses the student in a disciplined, critical, and sustained inquiry—but in some limited slice of human experience. Newman called disciplines “mental abstractions,” and that is both their strength and their limitation. The price of autonomy of a discipline indeed is limitation: it is this but **not** that. If the major is permitted to reign over the curriculum in some imperial manner, the result is a campus composed of disconnected “silos.” (Joseph Kockelmans describes it as a prison, where inmates with the same record are all placed in the same cell!)

The cure or remedy, of course, for isolating each discipline in its own “silo” is to open up channels of communication with other disciplines. A scholar must become aware of the mental abstraction that constitutes one’s field of study and then compensate for it. One of the best methods for doing this precisely lies in what general education activities can do to institutionalize dialogue among the different disciplines. The Middle States regional accrediting association expresses their standard in this regard in a brief but wonderfully apt way: “Students should be prepared to make enlightened judgments outside as well as within their academic specialty.” Another excellent formulation comes from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing: “Nurses recognize that clinical judgments have as much to do with values and ethics as they do with science and technology.”

Besides opening up channels of communication between the disciplines, general education has another important role to play. If an institution has some special reason for existing, that particular identity will undoubtedly be expressed in a mission statement. Given that the majors selected by students scatter them into a wide variety of distinct and different pathways, it is general education that furnishes the forum where the institution can work to achieve its mission with all its students. Hundreds of postsecondary institutions offer practically identical major programs in the disciplines. What converts those major programs into degrees from **this** higher education institution is interaction between each major and general education, fulfilling its role as the means by which institutional mission reaches every student.

This new “both/and” conception of liberal education still needs to establish itself in the language academe uses to talk about general education and the major. Faculty complain, frequently and at

length, about how dominant the career orientation of their students is, but Jonathan Z. Smith asks the extremely indelicate question: “Isn’t it possible that it was the **faculty’s** careerism that once ruined liberal education?” Consider also the architectural metaphors used for general education. If you label it a “foundation,” you’ve limited it to basics and something to get done with and only then go on to build. If you call it “scaffolding,” that’s worse—temporary (and ugly). A better choice to express “both/and” thinking is “framework.” The framework of a building makes possible any number of wonderful things: it is stable, it holds all the components together, it relates them, and it permits renovations. There are indeed powerful new ways of talking that communicate accurately and effectively this vision of complementarity between general education and the major.

Faculty know a lot about majors and professional programs. With all the attention given to general education the last 25 years or so, much has been learned there too. But it will be helpful at this point to suggest four design principles for this new double-focus model of contemporary liberal education. The source is a FIPSE project from back in 1979-81 in which fourteen very different institutions were funded to examine the “Varieties of Liberal Education.” Those participants did not, at that time, possess the model of liberal education as a collaboration between general education and the major, but the four common traits of liberal education that they did find are not only compatible with, but can now be seen to require such collaboration.

The **ground** of liberal education is **experiential**. Life sets the agenda for liberal education, and lifelong learning is one of its most desired outcomes. To make sense of our place in the natural and social worlds, to understand relationships to other people (globally, no less), and to deal with life’s ultimate questions (and world religions)—to do all this, no single discipline is adequate, but every discipline can contribute. The general education component functions then as the curricular forum where the insights of a plurality of disciplinary views can be pulled together into a fuller understanding of lived experience.

The decisive or specifying design principle of liberal education is that its **scope** is **comprehensive**. Development of the mind itself is its outcome, not certification in one way of knowing. Disciplines, sub-disciplines, and inter-disciplines continue to proliferate, but the

number of massively distinct intentionalities is limited. One proposal counts seven of them: history, social science, natural science, mathematics, the arts, philosophy, and religion. Granted a list of something like seven intentionalities, it is then entirely possible for students to learn enough about how each of these intentionalities works to enable them to judge the claims they meet in the general education encounters with disciplines other than their specialty. Newman came up with two triads of ways the various disciplines interact in his ideal university: they “complete, balance, and correct” one another (a bit negative here) and they “respect, consult, and aid” each other (more positive). Again, it’s a matter of depth in one field coupled with the ability to make “enlightened judgments” (Middle States) outside it.

The **mode** of conducting liberal education is simply the Socratic mission of all higher education—it’s **critical**. Experience must be tested; claims of experts and so-called experts must be tested. Joseph Kockelmans goes so far as to say that he cannot be sure of the claims of his own studies, until they have been compared with and perhaps adjusted to those of colleagues in other fields. Their major gives students thorough knowledge of how one discipline structures and makes critical sense of human experience, while their general education program continually reminds them of the partiality of that insight and how it can be enriched by the gains made in other fields. Jonathan Smith, in a keynote address for a conference on general education, came up with a particularly incisive statement of how the scope and the mode of liberal education, as presented here, work together.

To function as active citizens in a democratic polity, our students need to be able to maintain an appropriate sense of autonomy in the face of experts claiming special knowledge that they... are unlikely to possess. General Education courses, then, must not only seek to inform students of significant areas of human activity and knowledge, but also strive to enable them to make informed judgments about the claims of special expertise in any of these areas. Such courses do so by familiarizing students both with what is entailed in reaching such claims and what is required to make such judgments. The work of the General Education course is only half done when the student gains some initial sense of familiarity with its subject. Reflexive, critical, and synthetic activities must make up the other half. [Typescript of the paper, page 1]

Finally, as was clear from the very first page of this statement (and from Smith’s final sentence), the **aim** of liberal education is **integrative**. Life itself is a process of synthesis; E.O.Wilson says

“synthesis is simply inevitable.” Fragmentation of learning (“silos”) and tunnel vision are inherently and demonstrably dangerous. The utilitarian-based focus of time and energy on one mode of knowing turns out, in the long run, to be monumentally un-useful. Integration, however, is an unending process—with only momentary successes—because life goes on and lifelong learning is a goal of liberal education. This design principle (very logically) also integrates the first three, in that what is integrated must come from critically evaluated knowledge that emerges from a broad base of human experience. With enough credit hours available to general education over the semesters and active collaboration between general education and the majors, the whole faculty can model this process for students, coach them in their first efforts, and then require them to do it in some culminating undergraduate experience.

One final endorsement of this collaborative model of liberal education comes from Steve Crow, the Executive Director of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, the largest of the regional accrediting bodies in the United States.

In this rapidly changing environment of learning, I suggest that the one constant that all of us in higher education share is a similar, well-understood, elusive, but absolutely critical goal. We define an educated person as one capable of independent, critical thinking about the broader social, economic, cultural, and political environments in which all of us build our individual and corporate lives. To be sure, we expect that student learning will result in achieved competence in applied skills and proven mastery of specific bodies of knowledge, but we aim at something larger... We want our students to be lifelong learners, impelled to continued learning by informed curiosity and equipped to be intellectually rigorous in their pursuit of knowledge. [*NCA Quarterly*, 1997, p.491]

AGLS published a well received *Guide* for program review in general education in 2006. The main section of that publication consisted of a long series of questions (twenty of them!) designed to lead an institution through a comprehensive review of its general education curriculum. This position paper is much more basic, and so its critical questions are many fewer. A serious effort to implement this “cutting edge” model of liberal education will be marked by convincing answers to the following three questions:

- 1) The AGLS question: “Do we rate general education at least as important as the major?”
- 2) The AACU question: “Does our whole faculty assume responsibility for the whole curriculum?”
- 3) The accreditors’ question: “Do we nourish both components of our liberal education curriculum with resources that are commensurate with the long list of outcomes we expect from them?”

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Nichols@saintjoe.edu

John Nichols, Box 895, St. Joseph’s College, Rensselaer IN 47978

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