

Liberal Arts Matters at Butler University: An Experiment in Institutional Transformation

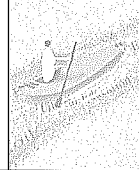
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The LEAP (Liberal Education and America's Promise) National Leadership Council has asked that American society give a new priority to what the council calls "the essential learning outcomes for college students" (American Association of Colleges and Universities 2007). These outcomes are the ones traditionally associated with a liberal arts education: high skill levels in critical thinking, communication, moral discernment, and individual and cooperative problem solving; knowledge of human cultures, the physical and natural worlds; attitudes of civic engagement and multicultural awareness; and a commitment to integrative and lifelong learning. The council also notes that work is needed on building public and student understanding about what a liberal arts education actually entails and why it is important for the twenty-first century.

While business leaders agree that student learning outcomes associated with a liberal arts education should be more emphasized (Jones 2005), there is evidence that the general public, current and prospective college students, and their parents do not fully understand either what a liberal arts education means or why it should be sought. A recent national survey (Hersh 1997) found that parents and prospective college students had little idea about what a liberal education is and that few groups, other than faculty and liberal arts college graduates, have a positive appreciation for such an education. (See also Graff 2003.) Even faculty at liberal arts institutions may not be doing all they can to help students understand and value their educations (Laff 2006); faculty often assume that students understand more about their own educational process than they actually do. Therefore, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities committed to the liberal arts to make concerted efforts to design strategies that effect changes in understanding, attitude, and appreciation of liberal education among current and prospective students and among broader constituencies.

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Butler University has instituted initiatives to highlight liberal education, encourage the campus community to talk about its vibrancy and value, and promote the liberal arts. We are attempting to break the "conspiracy of voluntary silence" (Schneider 2003) that has helped hide the tradition of liberal education from the public. We are incorporating and expanding on best practices, inventing new ones, and framing them all as part of one comprehensive endeavor called Liberal Arts Matters. We have also begun an assessment program to determine if paying concerted attention to the liberal arts can have discernable results in student understanding and behavior.

Liberal Arts Matters is a multifaceted, long-term effort partly designed to ensure that all Butler graduates, independent of major, understand the meaning and appreciate the value of a liberal arts education. Our starting hypothesis is that most undergraduate students—even at institutions like Butler with a long and distinguished liberal arts tradition—do not have a full understanding of either the definition or the value of a liberal arts education. We are further hypothesizing that with deliberate interventions and strategies, we can effect changes in student understanding, appreciation, and behavior. We believe that by being more intentional with our students, we can change attitudes and behaviors, and, in fact, transform student culture. Currently, slightly less than one-half of the university's four thousand full-time undergraduates are enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, with the remainder pursuing degrees from four professional schools. Our goal is to reach all Butler students, regardless of discipline. We envision a time when "liberal arts across the curriculum" is as established as current Butler programs in "writing across the curriculum" and "speaking across the curriculum."



LIBERAL ARTS MATTERS INITIATIVES

The Liberal Arts Matters program has multiple initiatives, directed at various audiences. Table 1 lists, by primary audience and agent, these initiatives. Details of each follow in the paragraphs below and on our Liberal Arts Matters Web site at www.butler.edu/liberal-arts-matters.

they are being collected and posted on the Liberal Arts Matters site under Faculty Perspectives. The syllabus project asks each faculty member in the college to include on his or her syllabus for each course a statement about how that course fits into a liberal arts education. The response to this request has been overwhelming—more than three hundred

scientist and an English professor. In another symposium, professors from the fields of biology, theater, and psychology all addressed the topic of sex. The second year of the symposia featured a slightly different format. Two faculty members led the audience in a discussion of broad topics such as Art and Craft, Heart and Mind, and Freedom and Responsibility.

TABLE 1. LIBERAL ARTS MATTERS INITIATIVES

Initiative	Primary Audience(s)	Agent(s)
Essay contest	students/general public	students
First-year essay	first-year students	faculty
Syllabus project	students/faculty	faculty
Symposia	faculty	faculty
Core Values statement	general public	faculty
CrossCurrents	faculty/staff	faculty/staff
Recommended Readings	general public	faculty/staff
Board of Visitors	alumni/friends	BOV members
GALA	students	faculty
Embedded journalists	students/general public	students
Research project	general public	faculty

The college-sponsored liberal arts essay contest, open to all Butler undergraduates, awards a prize of \$1000. With this opportunity, we ask students to consider how the content and process of a liberal arts education illuminate the type of education most worth pursuing, with respect to future lives and ambitions, and to the lives they are living now and the people they are becoming. The submissions are judged by a committee of members of the faculty and of the college's board of visitors. Winning essays are posted on the Liberal Arts Matters Web site, and the author of the winning essay is recognized at the college's annual Honor Day.

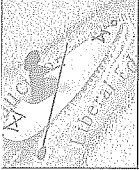
Each fall during orientation, we distribute a faculty-written essay to incoming liberal arts and sciences students on the general subject of a liberal arts education. As these essays are written,

statements now appear on the Liberal Arts Matters site. Thus, students are regularly presented with thoughtful statements about the liberal arts. Since we share syllabi statements with all faculty at the beginning of each semester, meaningful discussion about this topic occurs.

The Liberal Arts Symposium Series is an annual series of six to eight symposia. For each symposium in the inaugural year, three faculty members from different disciplines addressed the same "big" topic from their disciplinary perspectives. The themes of the sessions were beauty, justice, truth, conflict, sex, despair, and harmony. All members of the Butler community—students, faculty and staff—as well as Indianapolis community members were invited to eat lunch, discuss and debate during the hour-long symposium. At the symposium on justice, the presenters were a chemist, a political

One of the most intriguing developments that has emerged from the Liberal Arts Matters initiative is a College Core Values statement. Written by a committee of department chairs and adopted by the entire college faculty in 2007, the statement is a lyrical two-page tribute to the history, value, and aims of liberal arts education. It addresses not only the past and present context of such an education, but also what the liberal arts means to us and to the world we inhabit. The discussion, both in college meetings and in the halls, surrounding the development of the statement was invigorating for the faculty, served to blur disciplinary boundaries, and contributed to a sense of shared purpose and college cohesiveness. This statement, which appears in the university *Bulletin*, may also be accessed in several languages from a link at the Liberal Arts Matters Web site; it has proved so popular that we have produced and distributed posters of a portion of the statement beginning with the words "Think for yourself and act wisely and well in the world."

CrossCurrents, another program that has inspired hall conversations at Butler, is designed to support reading and discussion among faculty and staff across the university on interesting topics. In this program, groups of five to ten faculty and/or staff members convene, read three books on a topic, and meet to discuss the readings. To encourage participation, the college funds the purchase of the books and refreshments. The only obligation of the group is to present a public panel on



the topic during the semester following the conclusion of discussions. To promote interdisciplinarity, a different department must be represented for each three participants in a group. Numerous groups have self-organized, including one around the theme of “empire,” another on the Holocaust in France, and one on women in science. Faculty and staff are also writing book reviews that are posted under Recommended Readings on the Liberal Arts Matters Web site; one review per week appears in a local newspaper under the college’s banner.

The college’s board of visitors has become engaged in Liberal Arts Matters as well. A portion of each board of visitors’ twice-yearly meeting is devoted to liberal arts topics such as a presentation about new initiatives or the reading of

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the winning student essay by its author. The Board has also agreed to endow the liberal arts essay contest. Additionally, we asked members of the board to contribute short, personal stories on the importance of liberal arts education, commenting on how such an education has enhanced their careers and private lives. These vignettes have been posted on the board’s Web site.

We believe that study abroad opportunities can have a profound effect on the lives, both current and future, of our undergraduate students. Accordingly, we have launched a program called Global Adventures in the Liberal Arts (GALA), which offers study abroad experiences in multiple locales during one semester. Approximately fifteen students study course material related to each locale and are taught by a variety of Butler professors,

one of whom remains with the group for the entire semester and three of whom travel to specific locations for two weeks. The courses blend classroom and onsite lectures, discussions, written assignments, and examinations. The group spends significant time in each location, allowing students to explore each setting. Our first GALA program was mounted in 2008 with a European slant. Students studied in London, Belfast, Paris, and the English Lake District with a resident faculty member from biology. Short courses on conflict, Paris history and architecture, and the arts were offered. Additional offerings (GALA-Asia, GALA-Latin America) are under discussion.

The “embedded journalist” initiative provides an opportunity for student scribes to travel with student groups

on short study abroad trips with the purpose of writing about the experience. In summer 2007, an embedded journalist accompanied a group of students and a faculty member on a two-week Shakespeare trip to England. Upon returning, the journalist published articles in the student newspaper and the alumni magazine. Another student journalist accompanied the Butler Wind Ensemble on a European concert tour. Once sufficient numbers of these experiences have occurred, we will use the articles to promote study abroad opportunities.

How will we know if our efforts are affecting student culture, attitudes, and behaviors? We have designed a longitudinal research project to look at this question. Since Butler University declares in its mission statement that we “integrate

the liberal arts into professional education,” we expect that students who matriculate here may already understand and value something about liberal arts education. To assess the depth of their understanding, we are surveying each incoming class of first-year students during orientation. We ask about behaviors relating to and views about liberal arts education. For example, we ask, “How frequently do you read an intellectually challenging book that is not required for school?” Other questions are about seeking out people who are different or attending cultural events. We ask about their thoughts on multilingualism, and how strongly they agree with the statement, “Critical thinking is fine but doesn’t really prepare students for life in the real world.” Finally, we ask an open-ended question about what the phrase “liberal arts education” means to them. We are currently assessing the data from the initial administration of this survey in 2006. We are also surveying each cohort during their sophomore and senior years to determine if the Liberal Arts Matters interventions make a difference.

There is already ample anecdotal evidence of increased interest in and conversations about the liberal arts among faculty members, both within and beyond the liberal arts and sciences. Robust attendance from all colleges at the symposia, eagerness to collaborate with colleagues in CrossCurrents or GALA, and growing participation in the syllabus project all point to an increase in the visibility and importance of the liberal arts within faculty culture. We also believe that the increase in conversation about liberal education is contributing to interdisciplinary and intercollege planning with respect to Butler’s new core curriculum, opening up opportunities for team teaching, and bridging disciplinary borders.

With respect to the larger audience, we believe that almost any thoughtful,



out-of-the-university conversation about liberal education can only enhance the understanding and increase the perceived value of the liberal arts. By engaging the College's Board of Visitors, highlighting Liberal Arts Matters in the *Butler Alumni Magazine* (Alexander 2007), distributing Core Values posters, and continually updating the Liberal Arts Matters Web site, we believe we are reaching important constituencies outside the academy.

While various pieces of Butler's Liberal Arts Matters initiative have been instituted at other colleges and universities, including the University of Wisconsin system, we are unaware of such a concerted and wide-ranging effort to promote the value of liberal arts education to all constituencies, and in particular, to

students. As the project proceeds, we will report useful or enlightening information gained from the various initiatives described above and those yet to come. As we are all aware, business and civic leaders are looking for graduates who possess the skills commensurate with a liberal arts education—communication, analytical and quantitative reasoning, etc.—as well as the attributes of liberally educated persons—global awareness, compassion, appreciation of diversity, civic engagement, and so forth (Jones 2005). We also strongly believe in the enriching value of a liberal education for the lives our students are living now and will be living in the future; we think that it is of paramount importance to help our students (and their parents) realize what

is perhaps most important about their college education. ■

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