

Liberal Education in the Global Perspective

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The liberal arts hold a central place in the history of higher education. From Greco-Roman origins and curricular incarnation in medieval universities to the academic program of Harvard College in the 17th century, the liberal arts were a fundamental part of higher education in the West. In the late 19th century, however, liberal education, based upon the study of the liberal arts, began a steady decline. Forces for this erosion also had origins in the West. A new university model that emerged from Germany challenged the moorings of liberal education by placing greater emphasis on research and graduate education than on the teaching of undergraduates. The core curriculum that once had a compatible and narrow assemblage of courses in classical languages, literature, history, religion, math, and basic science would see many more entrants by the mid-20th century, all making a claim for space in the curriculum as a result of the increasing specialization of the academic disciplines. Clark Kerr, in his *Godkin*

Lectures in 1963, stated that increasingly the research enterprise would take priority over undergraduate education and that the humanities would be diminished by greater funding for science. The result, he noted, was that the coherence of the curriculum would suffer.

KEEPING LIBERAL EDUCATION ALIVE IN THE WEST

Not only did universities prove Kerr's predictions correct, but also liberal arts colleges, devoted to undergraduate education, were impacted by the complex departmentalization of knowledge that flowed from graduate schools. Yet, it is possible to point to a continuous discourse in American higher education since the mid-1960s about the undergraduate curriculum. Disagreement about the content of liberal education became a central issue. This was fueled by opinions such as those of E. D. Hirsh's book (*Cultural Literacy*, 1987), in which he advocated a return to a more narrowly defined canon of Western thought. Those who warned of loss regarding cultural identity, illiterate students, and general education running amok were met by passionate charges of elitism, cultural hegemony, and a curricular *idée fixe*. The most salutary outcome of the claims and counterclaims formed a general consensus that undergraduate education was important and the curriculum needed to be structured carefully to provide students breadth and depth in their academic programs.

While no consensus was reached on exactly what subject matter should constitute a liberal education program, considerable agreement existed among American educators about which attributes to foster. The Association of American Colleges and Universities, representing its member institutions, stated that liberal education should provide students broad knowledge of culture,

science, and society (general education) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. It characterized liberal education as helping students develop a sense of social responsibility as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills—such as communication, analytical and problem-solving ability, and a demonstrated competency to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

The United States is viewed as a stronghold of liberal education, but its colleges and universities have had to respond to increasing demands from students and their families for more utilitarian education. Liberal arts disciplines compete with the desire for more practical curricula that support such programs as business administration. In Europe, early specialization trumped liberal education. While there are some longstanding liberal arts institutions such as the American University of Paris, only the past dozen years have engaged glimmers of new life within the region that gave birth to the liberal arts. A prominent example is the Netherlands, where eight liberal arts colleges have been established as part of the university system. Poland now has an active and successful liberal education movement affiliated with its public universities, which has grown steadily in prestige. There are relatively new liberal arts colleges in Berlin and Bratislava. The European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Science consortium was founded in response to these developments. As a matter of perspective, however, it is important to note these liberal arts institutions enroll a small number of students in the European Union region.

LIBERAL EDUCATION BEYOND ITS WELLSPRINGS

Liberal education exists outside the geography of its origins, principally through external assistance and not as indigenous undertakings. Americans have had a role in establishing liberal arts institutions in non-Western countries. Two early examples are the American Universities of Beirut (1866) and Cairo (1919) that now have deep roots in the Middle East and have for many years educated the elite of the region. More recently, in another wave of activity, the National University of Singapore has just announced a partnership with Yale University, to introduce a liberal arts college to Singapore's higher education offerings. New York University has established a residential liberal arts college in Abu Dhabi. Bard College has developed, with local partners, liberal education institutions and programs in Russia, Central Asia, and more recently, Palestine. The Asian University for Women stands as an outpost for liberal education in Bangladesh. These and other examples help to conclude that liberal education is enjoying a global migration.

For much of the non-Western world, including countries that have a transplant from an earlier era, liberal education is generally a foreign concept. For example, despite its own success, the American University of Cairo has had little influence on bringing liberal education to Egypt's huge public higher education system. The strength of undergraduate education in the United States notwithstanding, in much of the developing world graduate education and the research enterprise has inspired the greatest attraction for educators from other countries. With no strong reason to understand the nature of baccalaureate education, there is also little incentive to understand the role of liberal education and its general education component in the curriculum. In addition, donor

agencies, such as the World Bank, further marginalized liberal education by emphasizing workforce and market studies as key elements for higher education planning in developing countries.

The big question is whether liberal education can develop on its own and be available to larger numbers of students in developing countries. Without a definitive answer, some noteworthy recent developments are under way. China exhibits a significant focus on the undergraduate curriculum that features a general education component. Poland has a mixed picture that includes the previously mentioned vigorous liberal education movement that exists alongside curricula left over from the Soviet era. India and Turkey, while neither is a great repository of liberal education, have institutions attempting to align the broader underpinnings of liberal education with professional education. A new development in South Africa holds promise. The minister of higher education and training has recently launched an initiative to strengthen the social sciences and the humanities. The goal is to have stronger education and research in the liberal arts to support South Africa's transformation beyond its apartheid past. These examples, unfortunately, are outliers. Countries struggling with higher education reform efforts tend to focus foremost on noncurricular issues—such as, access and finance. With limited resources and a huge enrollment demand, their ability to engage in academic reform efforts that include liberal education is a doubtful outcome.

Curricular reform that includes liberal education will require some fundamental understandings. First and foremost, the student and his/her personal and intellectual development must matter, alongside preparation for the workforce. As part of this focus, baccalaureate-level education and the

quality of its content and pedagogy must be viewed as a significant part of the higher education system. These are sine qua nons. Beyond the benefits of preparing students with broad intellectual skills for life and transferable analytical skills for the workplace, liberal education also educates for well informed citizenship, a critical aspect of nation building.