

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

Innovations in Community College Liberal Arts Programs

The champions of liberal education have been on the defensive for decades trying to make a case for the value and necessity of liberal learning. The case for the defense usually rests on the assumption that the world and its students are becoming too vocational and that without perspectives, values, and skills that come from liberal education, they will enter the world as incomplete citizens. There is a great deal of truth in that assumption.

One of the challenges of making the case for liberal education is the problem of language and the propensity of educators to wallow in nuances of words. On May 15, 2014, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the foremost champion of liberal education in the U.S., sponsored a webinar for a few leaders who were participating in a Gates-funded initiative, General Education Maps and Markers (GEMS), the purpose of which is to “reimagine or remap” general education. In the webinar discussion, two incidents occurred that illustrate the challenge we face in communicating. At the beginning of the conversation participants wrangled with whether the project should use “proficiency,” “competency,” or “mastery” as indicators of student achievement and progress. The dispute ended when it was generally agreed that this issue was a topic for continuing consideration.

The other incident—a typed message in the chat room when one participant could not access the discussion by phone—targeted one of the major problems of why educators remain defensive in making a case for liberal education. The participant pointed out that if we wanted to be persuasive, we must make the case for liberal education in language that can be easily understood by students, parents, legislators, vocational faculty, and leaders from business and industry. That is a task we have yet to accomplish.

It is easy to make the argument that we have failed to make our case about the value and necessity of liberal education, in part, because we have failed to communicate in clear language and have settled for a conversation and an advocacy agenda based on our own jargon. There is nothing wrong with having our own in-house voice,

such as AAC&U’s journal, *Liberal Education*, where we share trade secrets with the converted. And most of us can herd our way through the tangled pastures of documents we create to secure grants, make reports, and offer visions for the future. It really is o.k. for us to have a private language. But we cannot use that same language to communicate with constituencies who do not know what we mean by liberal education. Can a first-generation college student distinguish the difference between “proficiency” and “competency”? Does the CEO of a small manufacturing firm in Peoria know what “rubric” means?

If we are to make an irrefutable case for liberal education to constituencies we have not yet addressed or included in our efforts, we must do so in a language they understand. Even though the language needs updating, W. E. B. DuBois succinctly states the core idea of a liberal education: The final product of training “must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man.” (1989, p. 72) Charles Collins, in 1973, in *Everyman Community College: A Cluster Model*, eloquently stated the purpose of education that reflects the philosophy of liberal education:

The purpose of education is to help each human being to experience more fully, live more broadly, perceive more keenly, feel more deeply and to pursue the happiness of self-fulfillment and to gain the wisdom to see that this is inextricably tied to the general welfare. (p. 31 gender language updated)

Making Liberal Education Meaningful for Community College Students

Historically, community colleges have not been primary advocates of liberal education. They have been advocates of general education, which is a corollary of liberal education. The purpose of this article is not to get caught up in a continuing controversy of definitions of liberal and general education. The purpose is to focus on “liberal education” and to feature innovations in liberal education in selected community colleges. Fortunately, a major national project is underway that is communicating with students about liberal education in a language they can understand.

The Teagle Foundation believes that all students, regardless of major, should have an opportunity to

experience the liberal arts. Liberal education entails engagement with the most challenging ideas of past and present. It fosters humility, curiosity, empathy, and concern for others. It helps young people shape lives of meaning, purpose, and informed participation in the democratic process. We believe that the opportunity to experience such an education is part of the promise of our democracy, and that it must not be restricted to the privileged few. (2021, para. 2)

The Teagle Foundation in partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities is sponsoring a project, Cornerstone: Learning for Living, to revive the humanities in American colleges and universities. Community colleges are included in the project, and this article features three community colleges that have received grants. The descriptions that follow are from the proposals submitted to the Teagle Foundation and related sources.

Austin Community College (ACC) in Texas: At ACC, all guided pathways begin with a student success course required of all incoming students. Under the direction of Ted Hadzi-Antich, Jr., Associate Professor of Political Science at ACC, a “Great Questions Seminar” has been created to meet the student success course requirement and to provide incoming students with a common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts. Students then have the option to complete the “Great Questions Journey” to satisfy distribution requirements in the transferrable general education core. All “Great Questions” courses use transformative texts to stimulate discussion and encourage students to make cross-disciplinary connections as they move through general education requirements.

Many community colleges seek to instill non-cognitive skills (e.g., growth mindset, time management, study skills) in first-time-in-college students by mandating “student success” courses that are lecture style, text-based, and taught by academic advisors or other college personnel. The Great Questions Seminar (GQS) pioneered at Austin Community College offers a different approach to foster the skills needed to be a successful college student. It is a 16-week seminar taught by faculty from a variety of disciplines guiding incoming students as they engage with a set of common texts—including works such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Euclid’s *Elements*, and poetry from around the world—while learning the practical skills needed to be successful in college and familiarizing themselves with the resources available on campus, from the library to the counseling center. The texts for the seminar are chosen by faculty to prompt students to examine their own ideas in conversation with peers and to strengthen enduring habits of critical analysis and thinking they will continue to use in subsequent coursework and in the world of work.

is designed for students at all levels of academic preparation. Conspicuously lacking from sections are lectures, PowerPoint presentations, and textbooks. Students learn along with faculty guides who are typically not subject matter experts on the assigned texts and who model how to approach works that might initially seem daunting with openness, curiosity, and as an “engaged amateur.” All sections of GQS are taught from a standardized syllabus, providing all students with a common intellectual experience rooted in seminal works in the arts and sciences that serve as a foundation upon which they can build their diverse majors.

ACC has been engaging in an ambitious and college-wide faculty recruitment and training effort, increasing the number of sections each year to fit demand. Instructors are permitted to teach GQS only after completing the training needed to maintain the integrity of the course and to ensure that instructors are prepared to teach students at all levels of academic preparation. As a resource for faculty and students alike, the syllabus includes a comprehensive list of study questions that faculty can use to help guide class discussions, regardless of their familiarity with the texts. During the pandemic, ACC pivoted to conduct additional faculty training seminars (conducted virtually) and to develop an online teaching and curriculum development institute.

As of 2021, 92 ACC faculty members from 19 different departments, spanning government to nursing, have been recruited and trained to teach GQS. In 2021, a total of 32 sections enrolling over 630 students were taught, with the goal of offering enough sections to enroll an estimated 1,500 incoming students by 2022/23.

ACC has been involved in this project longer than the other community colleges in this article, so some assessment data are available. Fall-to-Spring persistence for students who successfully completed GQS in fall 2020 was 98 percent, whereas 72 percent of students who were not enrolled in any success course at ACC in fall 2019 persisted to spring 2020. Further, the students enjoy the Great Questions Seminar, with over 75 percent of all survey respondents indicating that GQS was one of the best courses they took online in the Fall 2020 semester. Fall 2020 data also suggest that diverse student respondents overwhelmingly found the course material to be relevant to them and the course to be inclusive. Over 80 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree they want to continue learning more about the writings, art, and other works they were introduced to in GQS, so the course is likely to have a lasting impact on students’ academic interests.

The project has been so successful that project director Ted Hadzi-Antich, Jr. has launched a non-profit organization, The Great Questions Foundation, (<https://www.>

tgqf.org/) to promote liberal education and core-text and discussion-based learning at community colleges. The Great Questions Foundation is working with faculty colleagues from 11 community colleges across the nation on a project to develop a web-based resource for faculty interested in engaging with discussion-based pedagogy focused on transformative texts.

Linn-Benton Community College (LBCC) in Oregon:

Mark Urista, Communication Faculty, and Raymund Ocampo, Music Faculty, are the project directors at LBCC. They initiated active planning on their project in June 2021.

In applying for the Cornerstone Project's Planning Grant, the faculty team of LBCC agreed to broadly define a "transformative text" as one that encompasses written, visual, musical, cinematic, and material culture texts. In so doing, we recognize the transformative nature of "reading" a work of art or music and the role of these artistic texts in expressing and challenging universal questions. In addition, we hope to encourage a broader participation of our humanities faculty and to recognize the way in which our Art and Music programs forge important shared experiences for students and community members from our two counties. As a team of faculty, we are inspired by the musical composition of Max Richter who "re-composed" Vivaldi's Four Seasons, creating what he calls "a conversation" with a well-known classical musical text, but from a contemporary viewpoint. It is with this spirit of a dialogue between the timeless and the contemporary that we submit this proposal.

LBCC has the distinction of serving two counties--one strongly conservative and the other strongly liberal. Linn and Benton counties are, in many ways, a microcosm of the strengths and tensions of American society at the present moment. Our Cornerstone work aims to creatively engage these differences by finding commonalities and meaning via transformative texts, artworks, musical compositions, and civil discourse.

In addition, our role as a community college will define the project by addressing issues of equity and inclusion in ways that are distinct to the social and economic justice mission of community colleges. As a community college, we have the opportunity to counter the perception of the humanities as reserved for elite student populations.

Almost 12 percent of LBCC students are Hispanic/Latino. Although we are not designated a Hispanic-serving institution, we share similar goals that include supporting the success and completion rates of our Hispanic students and ensuring our curriculum is inclusive. In light of this, we plan to work closely with our Office of Institutional Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and our

Difference, Power, and Discrimination (DPD) Faculty Learning Community, which is affiliated with the DPD Program at Oregon State University. Close collaboration with these two groups will help ensure that our common archive of Transformative Texts is more than a list of common texts, but one that reflects the perspectives of historically marginalized or oppressed groups and rigorously engages in the work of critical pedagogies and curriculum transformation at the institutional level.

Community college faculty are primarily engaged in the vital work of teaching General Education courses and are highly skilled in teaching students from a wide variety of backgrounds and majors, including students who are undecided about a major. In contrast to four-year institutions, community college faculty do not have a broad range of coursework or required research to re-enliven teaching practices and content. The Cornerstone Program will provide an opportunity for our faculty to re-engage with texts that inspired our own academic careers, deepen our professional development, and pause from an intense teaching schedule to reinvigorate our teaching.

During the Planning Grant phase, we will lay the foundation for a Transformative Text initiative in our Gen Ed requirements and current pathways. We plan to pilot the sequence first in Business and then in Biology, our two largest majors. We will develop a shared experience of humanistic engagement through our current pathways.

The LBCC Cornerstone Project will use existing, required coursework in Gen Ed: Writing 121 (Composition), Communication 111 (Speech) or Communication 114 (Argument and Critical Discourse), and Humanities 103 (Romantic Era to Contemporary Society). These classes will maintain and elevate our current standards for transfer to partner institutions via the Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer (AAOT) and Associate of Science (AS) degrees.

At a lower-division level, Humanities 103 will be an adaptation of the Purdue model (also a project of the Teagle Foundation), providing an additional, thematic humanities course that draws connections between the Humanities and students' professionally-oriented academic majors. In current pathways at LBCC, Hum 101, 102, 103, or HST 203 are typically scheduled for students' second year. These courses are currently focused on historical periods and meet a Western Culture requirement; however, Hum 103 has also been used more broadly as an introduction to the humanities. We will use the Planning Grant to redevelop Hum 103 as the designated course in the Cornerstone Project sequence, one that can address thematic or great questions through the lens of literature, visual culture, or music.

In addition, we will work with the Business and Biology Departments to move this requirement to the third term of the first year (LBCC is on the quarter system), effectively creating a linked first-year experience for students who follow the pathway.

LBCC has adopted and is implementing the Guided Pathways Project of the American Association of Community Colleges. By developing a Cornerstone Project that is embedded in our existing degree pathways, our curricular structure can integrate a cohesive three-course sequence within existing institutional practices. We plan to implement the project across all majors, including STEM degrees.

LBCC has a number of existing centers and agencies that will be engaged with this project and a statewide-recognized research unit that will participate in the assessment of project outcomes. The assessments will include analyses of student progress and satisfaction, faculty perspectives, impact on college policies and structures, and impact on college culture.

The Cornerstone Project at LBCC has the potential to re-engage the college with the core question of the role of the liberal arts in students' education experience at the community college level, initially focused on students in transfer degrees but, in the longer term, also for students seeking two-year degrees. In our preparation for this grant application, we have already held interdisciplinary and cross-department meetings that have been incredibly fruitful and rejuvenating. In imagining a more coherent educational experience for students, grounded in the humanities, we have also experienced a shift in our own collaborations with staff and faculty across the institution that is challenging us to consider "discrete" academic units (i.e., Destination Graduation, Business transfer degree, Biology transfer degree, Gen Ed requirements) within a more holistic, coherent frame-work.

Lorain County Community College (LCCC) in Ohio: Kimberly Karshner, Professor of English, and Benjamin Cordry, Professor of Philosophy, are the project directors at LCCC.

Students benefit directly from studying transformative texts. In such texts, authors struggle with profound problems related to human existence – problems about meaning, ethics, relationships, community, family, and identity, among others. These problems are problems for everyone. Engaging the text is a means for reflecting on problems, a way to connect with the author, and a way to connect with other people in a community of readers. The status of such texts as texts that people from various social groups, historical periods, and cultures relate to and find meaning in signals the potential such texts hold for students.

Indirectly, such texts are unparalleled paths for reaching general education goals including diversity, critical thinking, and communication. The authors are not the ahistorical, neutral voices of textbooks, but people writing from a point in their life to an audience. Struggling to achieve real understanding requires empathy, creativity, and critical thinking. Without critical thinking, the significance of the text is undifferentiated from one's immediate cognitive and emotional reactions. Transformative texts can, of course, be the subject material for essays, research papers, and oral presentations. But communication doesn't have this merely outward relationship to reading texts. As social beings, we seek to share with others the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that matter to us. Academic writing and presenting are vessels that give form, precision, and direction to this urge. Moreover, thinking and communicating are deeply connected: one might think through imaginary dialogue, and in real dialogue one often revises one's thoughts. Thinking and communicating feed back into reading: No transformative text is worth simply reading once. In rereading a text after reflecting on it, discussing it, and studying it with others, one gains new insights and perspectives. A transformative text, especially one taken up in a social setting, is a well for the soul from which one can draw nourishment repeatedly. This is as true for community college students as it is for anyone else.

Our goal is to create a three-course pathway (nine hours) that integrates the use of transformative texts in achieving our general education outcomes of diversity, critical thinking, and communication. The pathway would consist of ENGL 161 (English Composition I), ENGL 162 (English Composition II), and an elective course chosen from a variety of high-enrollment humanities and history courses. At LCCC, history courses are categorized in social science. While initially the use of transformative texts will be piloted in select sections, the aim is for all sections of the relevant courses to integrate them. We will also create the faculty and student supports necessary to ensure the quality and sustainability of this pathway. This pathway will be built over three stages: an initial exploratory stage, an expansionary stage, and a final stage in which the pathway is fully institutionalized in a sustainable way. If our proposal is approved, funds for the Planning Grant will be used for the exploratory stage, which will culminate in a proposal for an Implementation Grant. If that proposal is approved, those funds will be used for the expansionary and final stages.

LCCC's general education program includes outcomes addressing diversity, critical thinking, and communication, and we are at the beginning of a multi-year revising process that will reconsider how we state, assess, and implement these outcomes. Our process connects

to a state-wide initiative from the Ohio Department of Higher Education to include a general education diversity outcome through a humanities or social science elective that promotes awareness of intersectionality within identity and culture and develops empathy. Moreover, our English composition faculty are in the process of developing an OER textbook for use in ENGL 161 and ENGL 162. This textbook will include a chapter for students on critical reading strategies, and teaching materials are also being developed. These materials will be useful not simply for composition teachers, but for all humanities and history teachers as they develop their students' skills as readers and writers. During the second or third year of our transformative text project, the OER work of the English faculty could be incorporated into writing-across-the-curriculum training for faculty in general. Finally, the need to change how we address the diversity outcome in our general education program is evident from our 2019 National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climate Survey, which revealed that well over 50 percent of our students report not learning about race in their courses. Now is an opportune time for LCCC to consider how, as an institution, to intentionally include transformative texts in the general education program for all our students.

The list of transformative texts will include texts from multiple genres and perspectives and cover diverse historical periods and cultures. Texts will be ones that are accessible to first-year college students and are especially useful for achieving the outcomes of diversity, critical thinking, and communication. In light of LCCC's significant need to address the diversity outcome, listed texts will address themes of identity, diversity, justice, or multiculturalism; the set of authors will be very diverse in terms of race, sex, gender, ethnicity, social class, and culture. Insofar as part of learning about diversity involves examining and reconstructing one's own identity in context, the list will also include authors from and texts about the local region. The literature of the Midwest, the Rust Belt, Ohio, and Lorain County is directly pertinent to the lives of our students but is something their education often leaves unexplored or even unacknowledged.

Throughout the exploratory phase, a variety of data will be collected to assess the success of the program. Three primary types of data will be collected: data about participation, data about the texts, and data about faculty and student experiences. Specific assessment tools will be developed and benchmarks for success will be determined.

Corollary Benefits of the Teagle Initiative

While the primary focus of the Teagle Initiative is to improve and expand the teaching of the liberal arts, there are substantial benefits to these three community colleges that have already occurred and will occur that

reflect a number of reform efforts recently underway in the nation's community colleges. The means used by the project are couched in transformative texts and great questions. The ends have the potential to reform and transform the broader culture of the colleges. Some of the examples of reformation and transformation include:

- The renewal of the Humanities.
- Interdepartmental collaboration.
- An expansion of Guided Pathways.
- Faculty professional development.
- Operating from a culture of evidence.
- Increased avenues for diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Simplifying language for esoteric ideas.
- Connecting cultures from the past and present to self.
- Improving communication among faculty and between faculty and students.
- The renewal of General Education.

A focused project such as the Teagle Initiative would be of great benefit to the faculty and students at a community college if only one or two of these examples were also realized in the course of the project. In the three colleges reviewed in this article, almost all of these examples will be realized, which makes this project particularly significant.

In my view the renewal of General Education (GE) in the participating colleges could prove to be one of the most significant outcomes of the initiative. If there is any education most essential for community college students it is GE as originally defined by its champions as an integrated, cohesive, common core of learning. Although tailor-made philosophically for the community college and its students, in its current form it is a debacle. And unfortunately, GE has been almost totally ignored by the reform advocates of the last few decades.

Instead of a common core of learning essential for all students, GE today is in educational jargon a "distributed curriculum" and less kindly referred to as a "cafeteria curriculum." Faculty decades ago, gave up on trying to agree on a common core of learning and opened the floodgates to long lists of courses in the six or seven categories such as "social sciences," "humanities and fine arts," etc. faculty use to corral some kind of meaning from historical options.

- **In a California community college**, the catalog includes four different sets of requirements for general education degrees—already confusing for students. In the college's general education requirement of six courses, students must choose from among 217 different courses (one course from 46 in natural sciences; one from 47 in social and behavioral sciences; one from 79 in art, humanities and culture; and so on).
- **In an Ohio community college**, students must choose from 46 different courses in the arts and humanities to meet a three-course general education requirement,

from 36 courses in the social sciences and from 48 in math and science.

- **In a Texas community college**, students are required to select five courses from among 78 courses in three different categories to meet general education requirements.

Not only does this framework place considerable stress on students who have to make the choice of which courses to take and when, there will never be enough academic advisors when the ratio of advisors to students most often exceeds one to 1,000. The clearest way out of that wasteland is to create a common core of learning based on six or seven specifically required courses, agreed on by the faculty, that students can understand and advisors can manage. It is much hoped that the project leaders in the three community colleges cited in this article will explore the reform of their general education programs as they initiate creative program and practices in liberal education—the original foundation of General Education.

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