

---

# What a Liberal Arts Education is...and is Not<sup>1</sup>

**Jonathan Becker**

*Dean of International Studies, Bard College*

For some time, educational experts have been challenging the relevance of liberal arts education. Liberal arts education has been derided as elitist and dismissed as outmoded and ‘in trouble’.<sup>2</sup> Even its advocates speak of a need for ‘revitalization’ and ‘restructuring’.<sup>3</sup> These attacks have been heard most from within American academe, where the liberal arts have had the greatest impact and left the largest imprint on the higher educational establishment. Paradoxically, this criticism has reached a crescendo just at the time when interest in liberal learning is spreading across the globe. Whether in Eastern Europe or Asia, Western Europe or Africa, an increasing number of educators are looking to import and adapt liberal models of higher education.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of liberal arts education has found particular resonance in Central and Eastern Europe (where this author has been engaged in educational reform for the past decade) since the collapse of Communism. Academics see liberal learning as an antidote to Marxist-Leninist ideology, which permeated the teaching process in Soviet times, and as a remedy to the disciplinary rigidity and didactic pedagogy that dominates higher education in the region. Since much of what has happened in the region over the last decade has been about the enhancement of citizens’ agency, many reformers find liberal arts education consonant with their broader political and social goals. In short, liberal arts education is seen as a fundamental part of the process of democratization and as a means of promoting an active and engaged citizenry. In other parts of the world, educators are turning to liberal arts education because they recognize the limits of old teaching methods, particularly in light of competition from new technology, and because they understand that contemporary modes of thinking and the demands that the contemporary marketplace puts on students require them to move beyond the constraints of rigid disciplinary structures.

Adapting the liberal arts to new educational environments has not always proved a simple task. Reformers are often more eager than knowledgeable. They are often assisted by ‘experts’ from abroad who are unfamiliar with domestic conditions and who focus more on lofty goals than institution-building. At too many conferences and workshops I have attended in Eastern Europe, I have seen the glazed eyes of educational reformers from the region as they listen to Americans offer sweeping generalizations about liberal arts education and/or prescriptions divorced from Eastern Europe’s

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is a modification of a talk of the same title given at the Open Society Institute’s UEP Alumni Conference in Budapest Hungary, June 2003.

<sup>2</sup> W.R. Conner, ‘Liberal Arts Education in the Twenty-First Century,’ AALE Occasional Paper # 2, 25 May 1998, [www.aale.org/conner.htm](http://www.aale.org/conner.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Carol M. Barker, *Liberal Arts Education for a Global Society*, Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2002, [www.carnegie.org](http://www.carnegie.org), p. 9; Stanley Katz, ‘Restructuring for the Twenty-First Century,’ in Nicholas H. Farnham and Adam Yarmolinsky eds., *Rethinking Liberal Education*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 77-90.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Gillespie, ‘Opening Minds: The International Liberal Education Movement,’ *World Policy Journal*, Winter 2001/2002, pp. 79-89.

---

reality. When the best that we can offer is soaring images and a paraphrase from Justice Potter Stewart's famous dictum on obscenity--you 'know it' when you 'see it'--we fail as educators and increase the likelihood of misinterpretations and ultimately dead ends. It is our duty as critical thinkers and educators to move beyond generalizations and sift out what is essential to a liberal arts education.

My goal in this essay is a very practical one: to provide a definition of a modern liberal arts education that will assist those involved in developing liberal arts institutions. I hope to articulate how, in a very practical way, liberal arts education works in higher educational institutions, particularly in the classroom.

This task is not simply an intellectual exercise. In the past six years, colleagues at Bard College and I have been involved in a project with St. Petersburg State University in Russia to create Smolny College, Russia's first accredited liberal arts institution. We have also been involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in other projects in Russia, where Smolny's accreditation by the Ministry of Education has created a precedent for the spread of the liberal arts, as well as in Germany, Romania, South Africa and China. While much that is presented here might seem obvious to those who are steeped in liberal arts traditions, each issue addressed has surfaced at some point as a real-world concern. One area that I focus on in particular, which is often overlooked, is what I call the nexus among administration, curriculum and pedagogy: the infrastructure that makes a liberal arts education possible. By articulating clearly how liberal arts systems work and dismissing misconceptions about liberal arts education we can inform potential reformers more clearly of the nature of the project they may wish to embark upon and the pitfalls they might face. The liberal arts is not an easy system to understand and can be challenging to adapt. People should know where they are sailing before leaving port.

It should also be underlined that the process is not a one-way street: there is a significant degree of reciprocity of learning when one goes through the process of examining different traditions and adapting a familiar institution to a foreign environment. By deconstructing the liberal arts and building it from the ground up we refine our thinking about our own educational system and learn of shortcomings as well as potential opportunities for change.

The essay relies much on the work of Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl whose essay, 'What Democracy is... and is Not,' explores an even more timeworn and elusive concept.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, I will attempt to define the essential characteristics and concepts that distinguish liberal arts as a unique system of education, the procedures, rules and arrangements which create an enabling environment necessary for a liberal arts system to succeed, and highlight common misinterpretations and erroneous conclusions about liberal arts education.

## Definition

**I**n order to clarify what we mean by liberal arts education, we should start with a definition. The following definition focuses on the goals of liberal learning, an issue about which there is general consensus, as well as the means for obtaining these goals, something that is less frequently discussed at length.

---

<sup>5</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, 'What Democracy is... and is Not,' *Journal of Democracy*, vol 2, no. 3, Summer 1991, pp. 75-88.

---

*Modern liberal arts education is a system of higher education designed to foster in students the desire and capacity to learn, think critically, and communicate proficiently, and to prepare them to function as engaged citizens. It is distinguished by a flexible curriculum that allows for student choice and demands breadth, as well as depth, of study, and by a student-centered pedagogy that is interactive and requires students to engage directly with critical texts within and outside of the classroom.*

Three initial points should be made about this definition. First, I intentionally use the term ‘liberal arts’ education as opposed to ‘liberal’ learning or education. While the two notions share similar goals and are often used interchangeably, in my view ‘liberal arts’ education is a more comprehensive package. For example, a teacher can reflect liberal educational pedagogy by using interactive teaching methods, but she might be isolated within her institution and constrained by a traditional curriculum. Similarly, a curriculum can have liberal elements, such as choice of classes, but might be structured in such a way that those elements are limited and peripheral. To be sure, many concepts associated with liberal education are the building blocks of the liberal arts: but while they are frequently necessary they are often insufficient to meet the criteria of liberal arts education. It is in this context that I use the term ‘system’ by which I mean ‘an ensemble of patterns’ that determine the educational process, including the curriculum and pedagogy.<sup>6</sup> In order to work properly, the ensemble must be ‘institutionalized’, which is to say ‘habitually known, practiced and accepted by most, if not all’ of the relevant actors, including faculty, students, administrators, governing bodies, and accreditors.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the vast majority of participants in a system of liberal arts education necessarily must be knowledgeable of, and willing to conform to, the expectations and requirements of that system. Finally, I specifically modify the term ‘liberal arts’ with the word ‘modern’ in order to underline my focus on contemporary practices. There is a long history of liberal arts education and some institutions take pride in their traditional ways. For example, St. John’s College, which has branches in Annapolis, Maryland and Santa Fe, New Mexico maintains a distinctive ‘great books curriculum’ throughout its students’ four years of study, harking back to the origins of liberal arts education in Europe and the United States. There is much that is of value in this approach, but it is important to stress that this is neither modern nor the norm, and thus falls outside of the definition offered here.<sup>8</sup>

## Goals

**T**he first part of our definition speaks of goals. *The central tenet of liberal arts education is that it is more concerned with the development of the individual than the preparation of the student for a specific vocation.* Harking back to its Greek origins, it is concerned with shaping citizens who are capable of being active participants in democratic society. In modern times, it goes beyond this to prepare students to function in a dynamic social environment. The liberal arts wager is that love of learning, capacity for critical thinking, and ability to communicate effectively are, in the course of their lives, more valuable to students than depth of knowledge in one subject. These qualities are particularly important in allowing graduates to adapt to changing social and economic conditions and to help them to continue to grow, learn, and adapt to changing conditions long after they have left the halls of academe.

---

<sup>6</sup> Schmitter and Karl, ‘What Democracy is...,’ p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Schmitter and Karl, ‘What Democracy is...,’ p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> For further information on St. John’s see <http://www.sjca.edu>.

---

## Curriculum

The second part of the definition, which focuses on curriculum and pedagogy, is equally important and more critical to the international context in which liberal arts education now finds itself. It is one thing to speak of lofty goals; it is another to clarify the real-life circumstances that allow institutions to pursue such goals.

In terms of curriculum the first important characteristic of a liberal arts system is *student choice*. Student choice comes in two important forms: the curriculum is sufficiently flexible that students have substantial leeway to *choose courses* that they will take, and it offers students the possibility to *choose an area of academic concentration* (often called a ‘major’) after they have entered their higher educational institution. The very fact that students play a significant role in shaping their program of study is critical to the democratization of the educational process. Symbolically, it confirms that there is not a single path or a master plan to higher learning. Perhaps more importantly, the engagement of young adults in making critical educational choices prepares them for important decisions they will make later in life. Moreover, allowing students the flexibility to choose their area(s) of academic concentration after they have entered college/university underlines liberal arts’ belief in the capacity of people for growth and change, its emphasis on continuous learning, and its stress on the importance of critical thinking, as opposed to the accumulation of knowledge. As such, the liberal arts approach strongly contrasts with classical continental European systems (West and East), adapted throughout the world, where students enter faculties/departments that are autonomous and operate effectively as mini-universities: students enter the faculty of law, history, or engineering and never leave that faculty for their four or five years of study. The classical European system not only presupposes that students are certain of their main educational foci upon entrance to college/university, but it narrows their breadth of study once they have entered a higher educational institution.

The emphasis on student choice in liberal arts education does not mean that anything is permitted (a source of great disappointment to some students at Smolny College who took the ‘liberal’ in liberal arts too literally). As our definition indicates, modern liberal arts education is supported by a curriculum designed to promote breadth as well as depth. Breadth of study is often ensured through requirements that students take a certain number of mandatory courses (often referred to as the ‘general education requirements’ or the ‘core curriculum’) that are designed to ensure that all students are exposed to classics and/or important modes of inquiry and approaches to knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Breadth can also be ensured through so-called ‘distribution requirements’, which oblige students to take courses in different groupings of disciplines, but without necessarily specifying which courses are required.<sup>10</sup>

These requirements are the subject of continual debate at most institutions (Bard, for example, is now undergoing one of its regular curricular reviews). Three important points should be raised here. First, to meet the liberal arts standard, there must be some structure that requires students to have curricular breadth. If breadth of study is optional, then the system’s goals are critically undermined. Second, in

---

<sup>9</sup> In other cases institutions have what can be called limited choice in the form of distribution requirements, which oblige students to take courses in different groupings of disciplines, but without necessarily specifying which classes are involved.

<sup>10</sup> For example, my institution currently requires students to take classes in seven areas: philosophical, aesthetic and interpretive discourses; literary texts and linguistics; social and historical disciplines; foreign language and culture; natural sciences, empirical social sciences or mathematics; practicing arts; and laboratory science or computationally based courses. They must also pass a quantitative test and take a course that entails a significant quantitative element. All courses are classified according to the requirements that they fulfill.

---

the modern version of liberal arts education, curricular requirements should go beyond arts and humanities and extend to mathematics and the natural sciences. While liberal arts curriculums are most often associated with the humanities, it should be recognized that if students are to participate in important decisions confronting contemporary society then they must be numerate and understand modern scientific concepts. Moreover, going back centuries to the roots of the modern liberal arts, subjects such as mathematics and astronomy were considered essential parts of liberal education. Finally, the number of requirements cannot be so great as to preclude student choice, the importance of which was discussed above.

As far as depth is concerned, modern curriculums regularly require students to follow or design (together with faculty) a program of concentration or a major, the requirements of which must be clearly articulated and transparent. Academic programs may require students to take a certain number of courses in a given subject area, may specify certain mandatory courses, and may require or recommend a specific sequence of courses. They also may require or recommend courses in related areas. The overall goal is to ensure that graduates have a minimum proficiency in at least one coherent intellectual sphere (sometimes students focus on more than one area). It should also be stressed that concentrations or majors are not limited to traditional academic disciplines. Liberal arts institutions have been particularly strong at developing interdisciplinary programs that have supplemented and in some cases supplanted age-old approaches while maintaining intellectual integrity.

One note of caution is important to mention here: there is always going to be a tension between breadth and depth of curriculum. One tendency, particularly in institutions which operate in a milieu in which the continental European model dominates, is to over-plan concentrations/majors, which is to say to make majors so demanding that they emulate pre-existing structures in terms of requirements. This risks imperiling the breadth element of liberal arts education. Student choice should ideally not be limited to the breadth requirements outlined above but should be possible, within reason, throughout a student's education.

## **Pedagogy**

**T**he other critical component of our definition of modern liberal arts education is pedagogy.<sup>11</sup> As Vartan Gregorian has argued, 'At the heart of liberal education is the act of teaching.'<sup>12</sup> Teachers sharpen their students' analytic skills by exposing them to different points of view, familiarizing them with a variety of theoretical approaches to probe issues, and requiring them to read texts with a critical eye. However, it is not simply the substance of teaching that is different but the entire approach to the educational process. An interactive, student-centered pedagogy means that the classroom is not a one-way transmission belt of knowledge from professor to student. Specifically, instruction does not simply consist of a teacher reading lectures to students, as is common throughout much of the world. Instead, learning within the classroom is an interactive process. The classroom is an environment in which students are encouraged to question assumptions and conclusions and to learn from each other, thus democratizing the learning experience. In order to be prepared to participate in this democratized classroom, a significant amount of learning must take place outside of the classroom. Students are expected to engage in primary and/or secondary texts that analyze issues to be addressed

---

<sup>11</sup> For a useful exploration of teaching and pedagogy, see Carol Geary Schneider and Robert Shornberg, 'Contemporary Understandings of Liberal Education,' Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Vartan Gregorian, quoted in Eugene M. Lang, 'Distinctively American: The Liberal Arts College,' *Daedalus*, Winter 1999, p. 135.

---

during a class. Because of this students are empowered to offer informed insights and even to draw conclusions different from the teacher. The teacher provides guidance, clarifies issues, expresses her views and evaluates the performance of students. However, she does not stand alone, unquestioned.

Of course, specific pedagogic approaches will vary according to teacher and subject matter. A liberal arts system leaves room for different teaching styles. Not all teaching in liberal arts institutions depends on a pure Socratic method. Moreover, the degree of interactivity can alter according to the subject matter: a course in physics will offer different challenges and take a different structure from a course in history. However, regardless of the teacher and the subject matter there are certain characteristics which must predominate in a liberal arts system: learning is interactive, students are encouraged to raise questions and challenge assumptions, the teacher does not have a monopoly on knowledge, and a significant amount of learning takes place outside of the classroom.

## **Procedures, Rules and Arrangements of a Liberal Arts Education**

**N**ow that we have examined some of the essential characteristics and concepts that distinguish the liberal arts as a system of higher education, we must turn our attention to the real world and focus on factors that enable such a system to exist. Here we will look at structural issues that exist at the nexus of administration, curriculum and pedagogy and then some more specific issues pertaining to teaching and pedagogy. The former are particularly important because they are too often afterthoughts: educators are so often focused on the goals of the liberal arts that they give short shrift to critical mechanisms which make a liberal arts system work.

### **Structural Issues**

**T**he first important structural area is the administrative framework: there must be *an academic calendar, credit system, and class schedule that facilitate rather than impede the pillars of breadth and depth* in a liberal arts educational system. This might sound banal, but one would be surprised at how frequently structures can skew the educational process. The most extreme case of this phenomenon that I have witnessed happened at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest,<sup>13</sup> a new and very progressive ‘liberal’ (but not liberal arts) institution, where I worked in the mid 1990s: due to the speed with which CEU was established in the wake of the collapse of Communism, it fell into the trap of replicating continental European traditions of departmental autonomy, with departments acting effectively as separate institutions. Departments created their own academic programs from the bottom up, the result being that one relatively small (500 student) university had eight departments with six academic calendars, five credit systems and three definitions of a class hour. These structures created the equivalent of non-tariff barriers between departments, crippling the capacity of students to take courses in other departments (for example, the second trimester for political science students was 10 while it was sixteen weeks for history) and impeding the development of interdisciplinary programs, a critical element of the institution’s mission. In other milder cases, even at my current institution, conflicting class scheduling between, for example, the

---

<sup>13</sup> At the time, CEU, founded by George Soros, had campuses in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw. Currently it has only a campus in Budapest.

---

sciences and studio arts, has created insuperable conflicts between disciplines even when there is consistency in calendar and credit system.<sup>14</sup>

A second important structural issue that has an important impact on a liberal arts system is the framework that determines the amount of time students regularly spend in the classroom and the number of courses they can take at any one time. Because liberal arts education consists of a student-centered pedagogy with a democratized classroom it requires that *students prepare for class by reading texts on their own*. It also requires that *students produce written work*. This means that students cannot be in class every day for six or seven hours and that they cannot take ten, twelve or even fourteen courses at one time, as is common in many countries of the former Soviet Union. Such structures, which are often created in response to state requirements, leave little time for independent reading and writing by students thus creating a dependency on the teacher as a purveyor of knowledge. In reality, if the pedagogy at an institution is consistent with the liberal arts approach it would be difficult, in my mind, for most students to take more than four or five standard courses at one time, six at the most. (There might be variation for courses with lesser than the standard number of credits). This does not, however, mean that attending class is unimportant. On the contrary: since so much emphasis is placed on learning in the classroom, students must be expected to attend class regularly and to contribute to the learning process by raising questions and participating in discussions. This is not the case in the classical European systems where attendance at lectures is often optional. Indeed, attendance is so important that many liberal arts institutions have specific policies that lower grades of students who do not attend class regularly.

The final structural issue, which moves closer to the issue of teaching, relates to the classroom. In short, *classes must be small* enough that interactive teaching is possible. There is no magic number, and much depends on subject and teacher. However, it is clear that large lecture halls filled with students are incompatible with a liberal arts education. In most cases, the vast majority of classes at a liberal arts institution would allow for substantive discussion, and many would have the intimate environment of an academic seminar. In other words, we are talking about low tens of students.<sup>15</sup>

The downside of this approach is that it is very expensive. It is therefore worth noting that some of the larger institutions in the United States, including large state universities, have developed cost-effective strategies that allow them to accommodate the demands of a liberal arts system. In these institutions large courses are structured so that all students are expected to attend lectures presented by the primary teacher, but additionally the class is divided into smaller groups that meet regularly in a seminar format to discuss in more detail the substance of the lecture and assigned readings. The primary lecture might contain some interactive elements but such interactivity is fundamentally limited due to the constraining nature of the large lecture hall and to the inherent impossibility of large-scale student participation. As such it is not ideal.<sup>16</sup> That having been said, if effectively structured and if the other factors discussed below are addressed, this approach can meet the minimal systemic requirements for a

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, at Bard we discovered that students were discouraged, and in some cases prevented, from taking classes in the sciences because core science courses were scheduled to meet on Mondays and Thursdays (with Thursdays including long periods of lab work) while the vast majority of courses in the social studies, arts and humanities were scheduled on Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Thursdays.

<sup>15</sup> It is also beneficial, although not essential, that the physical set-up of the classroom is such that chairs are set up in a circular or rectangular pattern, rather than facing forward towards the teacher. This breaks down barriers, encourages participation, and reinforces the democratic nature of learning.

<sup>16</sup> Another problem in the United States is that too often the smaller seminars tend to be overseen by graduate students who have relatively little teaching experience and/or knowledge of the subject being taught.

---

modern liberal arts education. Indeed, given financial circumstances in many countries interested in liberal arts education, it might be the only alternative available.

## Teaching and Pedagogy

**W**e begin our examination of the procedures, rules and arrangements associated with teaching and pedagogy by focusing on the preparation that must take place prior to the meeting between teachers and students in the classroom. As suggested above, it is essential that students be *assigned readings* prior to classes at which the subject of the readings is discussed. Interactive teaching and the democratization of the classroom are fundamentally constrained if students have not read preparatory materials. If no such materials are provided, substantive discussion is extremely difficult and students are reduced largely to asking questions about facts. They are not in a position to challenge their teacher's interpretation or to learn effectively from each other.

In this context it is essential that *students be provided with a syllabus structured in such a way as to outline specific readings for specific class sessions*.<sup>17</sup> A long list of recommended readings for a course, as is common in many countries, does not suffice for two critical reasons. First, there is no assurance that students will know what readings are appropriate for any given class, let alone that they will have read them. Second, the interactive process is paralyzed if there are no common referent points amongst the students.<sup>18</sup>

A logical corollary to this is that *assigned readings must be readily available to students*. Whether assigned readings can be purchased, accessed through a library or over the Internet, or given to students, environmental circumstances must exist so that all students can reasonably have the opportunity to read the assigned materials. This might sound intuitive, but I have seen a case in which an entire class was assigned to read a book, one copy of which was available in the entire city. In other circumstances assigned readings have not been available at all. A fancy syllabus that is not supported by available materials is close to worthless. This speaks to a potentially uncomfortable reality: in order for a liberal arts system to succeed, extensive investment in libraries and/or modern communications technology must occur.

Another key area of teaching and pedagogy is found in the *evaluation of student work*. While there are many theories about effective evaluation methods, there are certain issues that are critical to the system of liberal arts education, particularly in terms of promoting transparency and accountability necessary for democratic learning. First, there must be transparency about what types of work contribute to the teacher's evaluation of students. The course syllabus should outline the assignments and tasks that are expected of students and how their performance on those assignments contributes to their final evaluation. Second, contemporary liberal arts education places an emphasis on continuous assessment, which is to say that the final mark is based on an accumulation of results from a number of

---

<sup>17</sup> This syllabus may include many other things, such as a clear articulation of the primary issues addressed in the course, a summary of the main questions to be examined during the course, study tips, and recommended readings. As is discussed below, it should also contain a clear articulation of expectations of students, including all elements that contribute to a student's final grade.

<sup>18</sup> Informing students of assigned readings as the course unfolds, as opposed to providing them in a syllabus, can theoretically allow students to be prepared for interactive discussion. However, real-world experience leads me to believe that it is a vastly inferior and, in fact, unworkable alternative. In reality, it almost always results in difficulties because materials prove not to be available on short notice, students who are absent do not learn of the assignments, and students are deprived of the opportunity to plan ahead.

---

assignments, including, but not limited to: mid-way exams, final exams, essays, research papers, oral reports, laboratory research, art projects, and class participation.

There are a number of important points that follow from this. The modern liberal arts education rejects the near or total dependence on the final examination for a student's grade. In particular it rejects a mark largely or totally dependent on a one-on-one oral exam, a method regularly used in Europe and the former Soviet space. Why is this the case? It is assumed that the goal of the evaluation project is not simply to assess students but to help them to learn and improve: a highly weighted final examination simply does not offer the opportunity for useful feedback. Oral finals are particularly problematic because they are neither transparent nor verifiable. They reinforce the omnipotence of the faculty member and, experience has shown, they leave great latitude for results based inappropriately on extra-curricular issues, including some that are clearly not in keeping with the democratic principles underlying liberal education. Does this mean that a modern liberal arts educational system rejects final exams? The answer is no. A final or an exam at the end of the course can form part of a final mark. Some subjects are more conducive to finals than others. The point is that a final exam should not, as a matter of habit, dominate the evaluation process within a liberal arts system and that efforts should be made to reduce the circumstances in which the final constitutes all or the predominant part of the grade.

The discussion of evaluation and continuous assessment raises two additional issues. The first one focuses on the type of assignments students are given: it is extremely important in the modern liberal arts education to require students to write essays and research papers. If a primary goal of liberal arts education is to foster in students the capacity to communicate proficiently then students must be required to develop their written skills. Oral skills are no doubt important, and one product of my experience in Russia is a belief that American institutions need to place a greater emphasis here. However, there is no substitute for written communication for developing the capacity to analyze and argue, and through the writing process to develop and refine ideas. It is worth adding that, especially in the Internet age, cultivating in students the capacity to conduct effective research is also vitally important. Skill needs have changed for engaged citizens: instead of learning how to find information they must now learn how to sift critically through the huge volumes of information available.

One final element in terms of evaluation of student work that is important to examine is the nature of faculty feedback to students. A liberal arts education places a *premium on substantive and timely feedback*. Teacher feedback is one of the primary ways through which learning occurs, particularly in the development of research and writing skills. I have witnessed circumstances in which teachers have made the shift to continuous assessment and assigned research papers but failed to provide students with substantive comments on their work. In some cases students received minimal comments and in other cases they only received grades. This reflects one of the great challenges of liberal arts education: it is time intensive for the faculty and thus can be costly.

## **Additional Issues**

**T**here are a number of other procedures, rules and arrangements that are critical to a liberal arts system of education that are worth mentioning:

- The admissions system must be transparent, free and fair. It is impossible to have a democratic form of education if the starting point is riddled with corruption and nepotism.

- 
- Students need to be advised effectively. Because the system celebrates student choice but maintains a number of requirements, it is essential that students be guided through the educational process.
  - Student transcripts should be available to advisers. Experience at Smolny College has demonstrated that the transcript transforms the advising process.
  - There should be a developed credit system that is translatable across national boundaries. Given that notions of citizenship have gone global and the ever expanding demands for student mobility, modern liberal arts institutions need to ensure that their product is transferable across national boundaries. A coherent and transparent credit system is the foundation of such exchanges.

## What Liberal Arts Education Is Not

**T**hus far we have attempted to define modern liberal arts education and identify some of the procedures, rules and arrangements that make such a system of education possible. We have also attempted to articulate why a liberal arts education cannot be reduced simply to the goals it espouses. For the sake of clarity, however, it is worth devoting some time to underlining what a liberal arts education is not. Often liberal arts education appears to be an empty vessel into which numerous ideas and assumptions are poured. Addressing some common misunderstandings, some of which have been alluded to above, will help to avoid some dead ends.

**First**, modern liberal arts education does not exclusively take place at the so-called residential liberal arts colleges. It is true that liberal arts education has its most famously associated with traditional liberal arts colleges, like Amherst, Swarthmore and Bowdoin. Due to historical and financial reasons (in spite of efforts to provide aid to needy students and to promote diversity), such institutions are often perceived as elitist. Indeed, they educate a very small percentage of the college-educated population.<sup>19</sup> However, the success of liberal arts education is that it has reached far beyond these institutions. In other words, liberal arts education is not simply for residential liberal arts colleges. Through special programs and structures that create what are essentially schools or institutes within universities, even large state institutions with tens of thousands of students offer a liberal arts education.<sup>20</sup> Such an approach is particularly useful in countries undergoing educational reform because it allows reformers to graft modern liberal arts structures onto established institutions. In so doing the liberal arts institutions benefit from the universities' resources, particularly faculty, teaching space and libraries. The faculty can work exclusively in the liberal arts program or can lead dual lives, as it were, working in the liberal arts unit while maintaining their foot in the more traditional faculties/departments. One important point worth noting is that we have found in our experience in Russia that faculty who teach both in the liberal arts college and in traditional departments internalize many of the liberal teaching methods they are required to incorporate into their teaching in the liberal arts program and apply them, where possible to their other educational contexts. As such liberal arts institutions can impart some of the values of liberal education even to traditional institutions.

**Second**, a liberal arts system is not synonymous with the four-year bachelor's degree programs envisioned in the Bologna process in Europe. It is perfectly possible to have a four-year bachelor's degree program which has neither the curricular nor the pedagogic specificities of the liberal arts system. The liberal arts is about an approach to education: a four-year time line does not define it.

---

<sup>19</sup> Eugene M. Lang, 'Distinctively American: The Liberal Arts College,' *Daedalus*, Winter 1999, pp. 133-150.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the University of Michigan, [http://www.lsa.umich.edu/lsa/parents/liberal\\_arts/](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/lsa/parents/liberal_arts/).

---

**Third**, the liberal arts need not replace the predominant educational system. It can coexist with and even productively interact with more traditional systems. One thing that Russian faculty who teach both in the liberal arts and traditional university environments have noted is that their teaching, regardless of the milieu, has been transformed by their liberal arts experience. As such, it should be viewed as complementary instead of competitive.

**Fourth**, a modern liberal arts education does not simply focus on the arts, or exclusively on the arts and humanities. If a modern liberal arts education is to fulfill its function of creating prepared and engaged citizens, then it must embrace social sciences, including quantitative social sciences, and life and physical sciences in traditional and/or innovative interdisciplinary ways. Similarly, it does not focus exclusively on ‘great books’.

There is an interesting question as to whether a liberal arts education can include elements of professional training, be it in journalism, marketing or computer training. Some liberal arts institutions strictly prohibit the inclusion of pre-professional training as components of their degree. I do not have strong feelings here but tend to err on the side of flexibility. In my view, pre-professional training can form a component of liberal arts education, but only insofar as it plays a distinctly secondary role to those disciplines which are consistent with the core goals of liberal arts education, particularly developing in students the desire and capacity to learn, think critically, and communicate proficiently.

**Fifth**, a liberal arts education does not mean that literally anything is allowed for students in terms of course selection and curriculum. The educational process in a liberal arts system is governed by what can be called ‘*bounded uncertainty*’.<sup>21</sup> Students have great latitude to choose courses and develop a program of study. However, they are still often required to take courses in a number of disciplines and to focus on one or more coherent disciplinary or interdisciplinary areas. They do not have the choice, as it were, of submitting assigned work if they hope to perform well (and yes, students are evaluated in liberal arts institutions).

**Sixth**, liberal arts institutions are not only associated exclusively with politically liberal outlooks. Indeed, if they wish to develop critical thinkers and active citizens, they should ensure that students are exposed to a number of perspectives, including those associated with more politically conservative approaches to issues. Liberal arts institutions have ample room for faculty and students, as well as assigned readings, which cover the political spectrum.

**Seventh**, a liberal arts education does not sentence graduates to a lifetime of unemployment. The opposite is true: many employers, including those in areas of business and finance, seek to hire liberal arts graduates, and many are liberal arts graduates themselves.<sup>22</sup> Liberal arts education prepares graduates for new economic conditions that emphasize flexibility and adaptability instead of single-company or single-industry lifetime employment.<sup>23</sup> By focusing on the development of the person and endowing students with the capacity to think critically, problem-solve, and communicate effectively,

---

<sup>21</sup> Schmitter and Karl, ‘What Democracy is...,’ p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Hersh, ‘The Liberal Arts College: The Most Practical and Professional Education for the Twenty-First Century,’ *Liberal Education*, Summer 1997, pp. 26-33.

<sup>23</sup> A World Bank report on education in Europe and Central Asia stresses that the shift from centrally planned to market economies ‘will increasingly require workers with better information-processing, problem-solving, and knowing—how-to-learn –to-learn skills. Available international test data show that ECA (Europe and Central Asia) countries are significantly behind OECD countries in many such skills.’ Sue E. Berryman, ‘Hidden Challenges to Education Systems in Transition Economies,’ The World Bank, Europe and Central Asia Region, Human Development Sector, September 2000, p. 13.

---

liberal arts education fosters in students the capacity to respond to changing circumstances. That is an essential part of the liberal arts wager. Liberal arts graduates might not initially appear as prepared for the job market as others, but in the long run their abilities are likely to make them greater contributors to their places of employment than their more narrowly trained colleagues.

**Eighth**, the liberal arts' focus on pedagogy does not preclude active research agendas for faculty. Indeed, in spite of heavy teaching demands, faculty should be encouraged to pursue academic research. Faculty who conduct research tend to be better teachers because they are more knowledgeable about, and engaged with, their subjects and more aware of new theoretical developments within their fields.

**Finally**, the liberal arts is not a static system of education. One of the reasons it has thrived for so long is its capacity to modify its procedures, rules and arrangements in response to changing circumstances. As technological changes continue, pedagogical approaches will evolve. As the liberal arts system goes global, it will incorporate national traditions and adjust to new environments. There are many elements that will remain essential to a liberal arts education, but as a system it is not stuck in time.

## Concluding Reflections

**T**o a large extent, this paper has been written in response to the growing interest in liberal arts education across the globe. However, as potential reformers and their supporters consider embarking upon the liberal arts project, there are a number of challenges that they should be cognizant of:

- The liberal arts system is resource intensive. The liberal arts system needs more faculty and a greater number of classrooms than other systems of higher education. It also requires a library and/or communications technology that can accommodate the large volume of assigned readings and sufficient administrative resources to ensure that the complex structure remains coherent. Given increasing demands on state budgets, potential reformers will have to be creative in finding ways to adapt the system if it is to 'go global' as so many seek.
- The liberal arts curriculum can conflict with state standards. In countries where there are many curricular requirements (ranging from the number of courses to the subjects which must be covered), there need to be compromises on the part of the state or creative solutions within the curriculum. Smolny College in Russia has been fortunate that the Ministry of Education has been so responsive to this new form of education and, in fact, implemented one of the most important educational reforms in post-Communist Europe in response to the curricular demands of the liberal arts. Not all ministries will be so responsive.
- The liberal arts pedagogy can be tremendously challenging to faculty accustomed to more didactic approaches. For teachers who are used to reading lectures, particularly ones who have been doing so for decades, the democratization of the classroom can prove extremely troubling, particularly when it entails students challenging their interpretations. Moreover, as we mentioned earlier, the time commitment necessary for liberal arts teaching can also prove problematic: faculty need to prepare their course syllabi and ensure readings are available, read multiple written assignments and provide feedback to students. In places where economies dictate that faculty have two or three jobs, they simply may not be able to devote the time necessary to respond to the demands of the liberal arts.

---

That having been said, many faculty who have recently been introduced to the liberal arts approach have found it to be liberating and tremendously rewarding. They happily trade in their old notes and their total command of the classroom for the new learning environment, complete with stimulating interchanges and challenging discussion. The diverse curriculum can also allow them to explore new issues in their classes and shape their courses by drawing on different disciplines.

- Considerable thought needs to be given to how a liberal arts undergraduate degree can mesh with graduate programs designed for more intensive forms of education. The depth that liberal arts provides should qualify students for graduate programs, but much negotiating may need to take place with faculty and administrators of graduate programs who are more accustomed to looking at the volume of courses instead of quality of learning. In some instances accommodations will have to be made to allow for a smooth transition. However, this does not mean that liberal arts graduates are not up to the challenge. Nothing illustrates this better than the US experience in science and engineering, areas in which one would think liberal arts graduates might not be competitive in terms of their capacity to succeed in graduate school. In fact, quite the opposite is true. As Thomas R. Cech argues, ‘Liberal arts colleges as a group produce about twice as many eventual science Ph.D.s per graduate as do baccalaureate institutions in general, and the top colleges vie with the nation’s very best research universities in their efficiency of production of eventual science Ph.D.s.’<sup>24</sup> Indeed, liberal arts colleges constitute three of the top six and 11 of the top 25 institutions in the US in terms of producing undergraduates who complete doctorates in science and engineering.<sup>25</sup>

The liberal arts system is not a magic bullet that will solve all of society’s problems. However, when properly constituted it offers a coherent approach that endows students with abilities that will prepare them for a lifetime of civic engagement, learning, and employment. In countries where vocational training, hyper-specialization and didactic pedagogic approaches dominate higher education, it can offer an alternative that will resonate amongst students and faculty. It is not an easy system to adopt, but the rewards may well be worth the investment.

---

<sup>24</sup> Thomas R. Cech, ‘Science at Liberal Arts Colleges: A Better Education?’, *Daedalus*, vol 128, no 1, Winter 1999, p. 213. Cech continued, ‘On a more subjective note, when highly successful scientists compare their liberal arts college education to what they likely would have received at a large research university, most rate their college experience s a substantial advantage to their career.’

<sup>25</sup> Cech, ‘Science at Liberal Arts...’ p. 200.