

# I

## Introduction

# Liberal Education by Proclamation or Design?

*Karen Spear*

Learning Community: Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.

(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith 1990, 19)

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice has an encounter with the March Hare and the Mad Hatter that teaches her the necessity of being precise in her use of language:

“Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”

“Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles—I believe I can guess that,” she added aloud.

“Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said the March Hare.

“Exactly so,” said Alice.

“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.

“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least—at least mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “Why, you might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see’!”

“You might just as well say,” added the March Hare, “that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like’!”

Is structuring effective undergraduate education something that we can guess at, like the answer to the March Hare’s riddle, or something that we can find the answer to? Is it something we like when we get it, like a nifty surprise? Or something that we intended to get from the start? When we talk about liberal arts education, do we know what we mean or do we simply mean whatever we say? In other words, is a liberal arts education something that is defined, planned, and intentionally designed, or is it whatever we proclaim it to be after we see what we get?

These distinctions have particular relevance to the relationships among liberal arts education, liberal arts colleges, and learning communities. In *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum calls attention to the fragile existence of liberal arts education as calls for vocational preparation and the economic anxieties that underlie these pressures threaten to displace more traditional goals of liberal education:

[Liberal arts education] face[s] some peril in our time, above all the risk of being undermined by a growing interest in vocational, rather than liberal,

*. . . is a liberal arts education  
something that is defined,  
planned, and intentionally  
designed, or is it whatever  
we proclaim it to be after we see  
what we get?*

*Though many institutions  
of higher education proclaim  
that they offer a liberal arts  
education, it is increasingly  
unclear just what that means,  
and increasingly obvious that  
the liberal arts mission resides  
in an amalgam of other  
aims and purposes . . .*

*. . . learning communities are a  
powerful site for preserving the  
spirit, values, and goals of a  
liberal education.*

education. It now seems to many administrators (and parents and students) too costly to indulge in the apparently useless business of learning for the enrichment of life. Many institutions that call themselves liberal arts colleges have turned increasingly to vocational studies, curtailing humanities requirements and cutting back on humanities faculty—in effect giving up on the idea of extending the benefits of a liberal education to their varied students. In a time of economic anxiety, such proposals often win support. But they sell our democracy short, preventing it from becoming as inclusive and as reflective as it ought to be. People who have never learned to use reason and imagination to enter a broader world of cultures, groups, and ideas are impoverished personally and politically, however successful their vocational preparation. (297)

Though many institutions of higher education proclaim that they offer a liberal arts education, it is increasingly unclear just what that means, and increasingly obvious that the liberal arts mission resides in an amalgam of other aims and purposes, sometimes in conflict with each other. The multiplicity of these purposes is relatively straightforward at institutions such as research universities and community colleges. It may not be clear what a liberal arts education is, but at least it's clear that whatever it is co-exists with vocational and professional training, graduate education, community outreach, the creation of knowledge through research, and a host of other purposes. But for the liberal arts college, where the primary purpose is to offer a liberal arts education, it would be particularly helpful to establish what that kind of education is and what path the college has agreed on to get there. Increasingly, the presence of learning communities in a liberal arts college is a key indicator that the college practices its liberal arts mission through the deliberate structuring of curriculum, active learning approaches, and faculty assignments that make a liberal education central to all students' work.

This monograph provides a series of portraits of learning communities in a range of liberal arts colleges. These portraits give insight into the variety of ways that these institutions have used learning communities to sustain, and even strengthen, their mission to provide a liberal arts education. In a time when the *raison d'être* of the liberal arts is both increasingly complex and increasingly necessary, learning communities have emerged to serve an increasingly diverse student population in an institutional environment pushed and pulled in multiple directions. This introductory essay argues that as the purpose of liberal learning keeps drifting out of focus within the very institutions that are singularly devoted to providing it, learning communities are a powerful site for preserving the spirit, values, and goals of a liberal education. A recent finding from the Policy Center on the First Year of College adds some urgency to this problem. Its national survey of curricular and co-curricular practices in a sample of 323 two- and four-year institutions reports the surprising finding that “research universities—the sector that so often bears the brunt of criticism for inadequate attention to the first year—is the sector offering the largest variety of special first-year programs and structural interventions. This survey finds that research university campuses appear to be working harder with more intentionality (and perhaps more

resources) to do what the small institutions take for granted—creating an atmosphere characterized by manageable size and close connections between students and faculty” (Barefoot 2002). Learning communities provide a way for liberal arts colleges to get beyond taking their mission for granted and to embed liberal arts education in a highly self-conscious and clearly structured academic program.

The Policy Center findings suggest that many liberal arts colleges offer some of the bricks of a first-year experience but little mortar. They often offer first-year students small classes taught by senior faculty, provide faculty advising, require students to take a common course or seminar, and focus some faculty development programs on first-year students. They are, however, the institutions least likely to make the more deliberate structural and pedagogical changes typical of learning communities: linking courses, students, faculty, and student life and relating these links to the goals of a liberal arts education. In short, as far as liberal arts education goes, liberal arts colleges may mean what they say, but it’s not clear that they say what they mean. Their liberal education is more by proclamation than design.

This essay revisits the history of learning community work from its inception in the educational theories and practices of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn to demonstrate how the driving philosophy of learning community work has been a history of educational reform in the name of liberal education. It turns to the forces in the current higher education landscape, both internal and external to liberal arts colleges, that tend to lure these institutions in other directions and obscure their liberal arts mission. And it concludes with an overview of the assessment literature on learning communities that establishes their strong contributions to a meaningful liberal arts education. But first, a working definition of a liberal arts education is in order.

### **The Essence of a Liberal Arts Education**

Martha Nussbaum provides a useful definition of a classical liberal arts education and its transformation for contemporary society, and I quote her here at some length:

Like Seneca, we live in a culture divided between two conceptions of a liberal education. The old one, dominant in Seneca’s Rome, is the idea of an education that is *liberalis*, “fitted for freedom,” in the sense that it is aimed at freeborn gentlemen [*sic*] of the propertied classes. This education initiated the elite into the time-honored traditions of their own society; it sought continuity and fidelity, and discouraged critical reflection. The “new” idea, favored by Seneca, interprets the word *liberalis* differently. An education is truly “fitted for freedom” only if it is to produce free citizens, citizens who are free not because of wealth or birth, but because they can call their minds their own. Male and female, slave-born and freeborn, rich and poor, they have looked into themselves and developed the ability to separate mere habit and convention from what they can defend by argument. They have owner-

*. . . many liberal arts colleges  
offer some of the bricks  
of a first-year experience  
but little mortar.*

ship of their own thought and speech, and this imparts to them a dignity that is far beyond the outer dignity of class and rank.

These people, Seneca suggests, will not be uncritical moral relativists—for ownership of one’s own mind usually yields the understanding that some things are good and some bad, some defensible and others indefensible. Nor will they scoff at the traditions that the older “liberal” education prizes: for they know that in tradition lies much that has stood the test of time, that should command people’s respect. They will start from convention and tradition when they ask what they should choose, viewing it as essential food for the mind. On the other hand, they do not confuse food with the strength in the mind that the food is supposed to produce. They know they need to use tradition to invigorate their own thought—but this benefit involves a willingness to criticize it when criticism is due. They do not prize custom just because of its longevity, nor do they equate what has been around a long time with what must be or with what is “natural.” They therefore want to learn a great deal about other ways and people—both in order to establish respectful communication about matters of importance and in order to continue rethinking their own views about what is best. In this way, they hope to advance from the cultural narrowness into which we all are born toward true world citizenship (1997, 293-94).

The meaning of liberal arts education is not uncontested territory. Scholars place emphasis on different things and understand the history of this long tradition in slightly different ways to reach different conclusions. Nor is a general agreement on the meaning of liberal education in the abstract uncompromised by the political realities, conscious or unconscious, well intentioned or nefarious, of campus politics and turf wars—or by honest disagreements among educators and scholars about the best way to provide a liberal education.

But whatever the disagreements, they do not overshadow the general agreement that Nussbaum’s definition evokes. A liberal education cultivates a free and flexible mind, able to think on its own, informed by tradition and convention but not governed by them, prepared to engage in criticism of past and present, but sensitive and responsive to individual and cultural points of view that differ from one’s own. While not everyone will agree to the letter of what liberal arts education is, most probably do agree considerably on what it is not: liberal education is not narrow or specialized education; it is not technical or vocational education. Further, scholars of liberal education will agree that liberal education is more than merely “general education” in the form of lower-level courses that serve as introductions to the disciplines in preparation for advanced study, or simply courses to develop proficiency in basic skills such as writing, mathematics, or languages. On the contrary, liberal education goals are often expressed in terms of a range of higher literacies such as academic literacy, cultural and multi-cultural literacy, technological literacy, quantitative literacy, and scientific literacy: cultivated habits of mind that make an informed and reflective life possible, rather than the accumulation of bits and pieces of information that can be displayed on standardized tests or that can dazzle the cocktail party crowd.

Thus, liberal education has a gestalt quality beyond the mere accumulation of introductions and exposures to disciplines and skills.

As Nussbaum's definition suggests, the core focus of liberal education is intelligent participation in today's pluralistic democratic society. Stanley Katz's essay in *Rethinking Liberal Education* emphasizes "that undergraduate education often serves as the last and best chance postsecondary students have to broaden their intellectual horizons and to prepare for the great demands that society will place on them" (79). In the same volume, Frank Wong argues, "we do not need to abandon the traditional ideal that emphasized integrated learning aimed at the whole student. This integration included character development along with intellectual development, practical knowledge combined with academic knowledge, and education for who they are as well as for what they will do . . . The New American College's approach would extend the scope of liberal education to engage the needs of the larger society in a spirit akin to the distinctively American land grant university" (71). And Leon Botstein, reflecting on the introduction at Harvard of the elective course system as a particular moment in the history of liberal arts education in America notes, "the elective-course system in its new Harvard form, combined with distribution requirements and an enormous premium on undergraduate specialization, was a kind of metaphorical mirror of the idealized free marketplace of ideas. We were convinced that we were training young people to cherish the advantages of free choice and liberty in a world in which the grim alternative of totalitarianism was not a mirage but a present danger" (Farnham and Yarmolinsky 1996, 52).

### **Learning Communities and Liberal Arts Education**

The continuing theme in American educational reform that has resulted in learning communities is a commitment to preparing students for active engagement in democracy. From the beginning, learning communities have been an educational reform movement working against the grain, on the one hand, of academic detachment from society (learning for its own sake) and, on the other, of the Arnoldian mission of cultivating a social elite. Barbara Leigh Smith has written an extended history of the learning community movement in *Learning Communities: Re-forming Undergraduate Education* (forthcoming, Jossey-Bass). This brief review highlights that history and emphasizes the particular shortcomings in liberal education that reformers were trying to address.

If any individual can be regarded as the father of education reform in America, it would be John Dewey. His interest in active, student-centered learning was combined with a central contention that schools are the crucial site for building the values and ways of thinking necessary for participation in democratic community life. His legacy in defining a distinctively American liberal arts education is firmly established. While Dewey articulated a philosophical rationale for liberal arts education, his contemporary, Alexander Meiklejohn, made things happen. Founder of the first "learning community," the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin, Meiklejohn created a living-learning community that stressed an interdisciplinary, integrative experience, with a seamlessness between students and faculty, knowledge and practice,

*. . . learning communities have been an educational reform movement working against the grain, on the one hand, of academic detachment from society (learning for its own sake) and, on the other, of the Arnoldian mission of cultivating a social elite.*

*. . . the liberal arts college of the latter twentieth century faced the profound challenges of creating a humane scale for the liberal education of a fabulously diverse student population in an exponentially more complex democracy and in an educational environment now openly polarized between the very different missions of the college and the university.*

thinking and doing, analysis and action. In contrast to Eliot’s conviction at Harvard that the free elective system was a celebration of free choice in an open marketplace of ideas, Meiklejohn, along with others during the 1920s, saw, according to Smith, “that the uncritical acceptance of the Germanic model of the research university would inevitably lead to the neglect of general education<sup>1</sup> and larger questions about universities’ social purpose and social responsibility . . . [They] recognized that the elective curriculum being put in place in the 1910s and 1920s was failing to produce a coherent and meaningful general education program” (Smith et al., 4).

Meiklejohn’s project was an effort to avoid “the disease of departmentalism,” an issue that becomes one of the continuous threads in the development of learning communities as instruments of liberal education. The way he sought to combat this disease becomes a second thread in the development of learning communities: size. While the university required a large and growing scale to accommodate the disciplinary specialties and research activities that constituted it, the Experimental College worked on a small scale, to create the intimacy and closeness characteristic of the academic community of its predecessor, the English college. Although not all experimental units needed to look alike—some residential, some not; some coeducational, some same sex; some for lower-division students, some for the upper-division—what they had in common was a size small enough to engender the mutual dedication of faculty and students to one another in non-hierarchical roles and a common, integrated curriculum.

### **Early Learning Communities in an Era of Educational Change**

Responding to changes taking place in higher education in the 1920s, Dewey and Meiklejohn’s efforts to restructure undergraduate education in ways that would preserve the liberal arts experience were indeed prescient in view of the sea change that began after World War II. The influx of veterans after the war expanded the scale of American higher education to a degree that Dewey and Meiklejohn probably could not have imagined, and the post-Sputnik infusion of federal dollars for research permanently enshrined the knowledge-making enterprise and its home in the research university as a primary thrust of American higher education. By the 1960s and ’70s, with higher education more than doubling in size from the pre-war period, the times were ripe for another wave of experimentation and reform to accommodate the very different college population that had arrived on college campuses. While the liberal arts college of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could count on a small, homogenous population who shared more or less common values and discourse—and a society hospitable to the goals of cultivating gentlemen of good character who would assume a role in civil society—the liberal arts college of the latter twentieth century faced the profound challenges of creating a humane scale for the liberal education of a fabulously diverse student population in an exponentially more complex democracy and in an educational environment now openly polarized between the very different missions of the college and the university. Joseph Tussman, a Meiklejohn student and professor at Berkeley, characterized these conflicting missions this way:

The university is the academic community organized for the pursuit of knowledge. It is arrayed under the familiar departmental banners and moves against the unknown on all fronts. Its victories have transformed the world. The university is a collection of highly trained specialists who work with skill, persistence, and devotion . . . but it pays the price of its success. The price is specialization, and it supports two unsympathetic jibes: the individual specialized scholar may find that, as with Oedipus, the pursuit of knowledge leads to impairment of vision; and the community of scholars, speaking its special tongues, has suffered the fate of Babel.

The men [*sic*] who are the university are also, however, the men [*sic*] who are the college. But the liberal arts college is a different enterprise. It does not assault or extend the frontiers of knowledge. It has a different mission. It cultivates human understanding. The mind of the person . . . is its central concern. . . . The university strives for multiplicity and knowledge; the college for unity and understanding. The college is everywhere in retreat, fighting a dispirited rear guard action against the triumphant university. (Tussman 1969, xiii-xiv)

Tussman's rear guard action was to rethink the relationships among the structure of an institution, its culture, and a student's education. He saw how the culture and structure of the research university had infused and reshaped all of American higher education, including liberal arts colleges as well as community colleges, the structure of which by necessity, mirrored that of the university to ensure the transferability of courses. With knowledge parsed into discrete discipline-bound course units, Tussman argued that fragmentary course-taking had replaced the unity and coherence of an academic *program*. Individual faculty created independent, coherent courses, "but a collection of coherent courses may be simply an incoherent collection. For the student, to pursue one thread is to drop another. He seldom experiences the delight of sustained conversations. He lives the life of a distracted intellectual juggler" (Tussman 1969, 7).

What animates an education, Tussman believed, was "a dominating idea"—a theme—around which a community is formed. Not surprisingly, given the historical commitments of liberal arts education to democratic practices, that theme was "education for democracy." Thus, Tussman's Experiment at Berkeley became the next iteration in learning community work. Individual courses gave way to an interdisciplinary community of scholars who structured their work around a two-year, thematically-driven program, housed in a space adjacent to, but separate from, the Berkeley campus, where members sought to understand and integrate the ideas, challenges, and practices of democracy.

Tussman's experiment took place in the larger higher education milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, marked by radical rethinking of pedagogy and purposes and driven by new programs, new colleges, new faculty, and new students. Even while the traditional liberal arts colleges founded before the Civil War struggled to define themselves in the midst of new competition from community colleges and universities, a handful of public liberal arts colleges were founded during this period, often with the mandate to provide innovative undergraduate education (i.e., The Evergreen State College, Pitzer College, University of California-

*Tussman argued that  
fragmentary course-taking had  
replaced the unity and coherence  
of an academic program.*

Santa Cruz, Hampshire College, Fort Lewis College, New College (Florida), Ramapo College, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, Empire State College). In *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, Arthur Cohen notes, “The few liberal arts colleges in the public sector developed primarily in the 1960s as alternatives to the large-size institutions. Built within existing state higher education systems, they managed to maintain their appeal much as did the private liberal arts colleges: residential settings, small classes, prescribed curriculum. Some of the more successful institutions were the University of California at Santa Cruz, The Evergreen State College in Washington, the University of North Carolina at Asheville, and Ramapo College of New Jersey, which, along with others of the type, sustained the traditional liberal arts while adding international, multicultural, and interdisciplinary studies” (Cohen 1998, 306).

In spite of the excitement on many college campuses, this was also a period of both consolidation and mission creep for liberal arts colleges. Cohen observes that during the middle twentieth century, private liberal arts colleges tried to ensure their survival by “offering graduate or professional programs, thereby diluting their traditional undergraduate emphasis. But twice as many closed or became comprehensive in the five years from 1971 to 1975 as had opened in the prior twenty-five years . . . In many instances the lines between comprehensive institutions and liberal arts colleges became increasingly blurred” (Cohen 1998, 191). Nevertheless, of the 719 liberal arts colleges open in 1970, 583 remained by 1976. By then, massive enrollment shifts to comprehensive universities resulted in 25 percent of students attending these new, hybrid institutions, accompanied by a massive migration of students to the new public community colleges.

One consequence of these enrollment shifts was that the *label* of a liberal arts education was applied more and more indiscriminately, often as a kind of advertising ploy, implying that if an institution applied to itself the term “liberal arts,” it had to be a high quality school. The public believed it: if a college or a university said it offered a liberal arts education, that was good and it was true. And, in spite of internal grumblings and occasional revolts against “service courses” and “out-of-department obligations” that were “gutting the major,” faculty members wrapped themselves in the mantle of “the liberal arts” and convinced themselves they were indeed offering a liberal arts education. That way, they could keep doing what they were doing and call it liberal arts. But too often, the liberal arts were simply the disciplines themselves: history, literature, music, and the like. Where the *concept* of a liberal arts education remained truly vital, if tenuous, was in the several learning community experiments, variously at Wisconsin, Berkeley, San Jose State, and subsequently at SUNY-Old Westbury, SUNY-Stony Brook, LaGuardia Community College, and The Evergreen State College. Although their histories and personalities are intermingled, largely through the combined influence of Meiklejohn and Tussman, what’s important to our context is the coincidence that these were by no means cookie-cutter experiments; they all revolved around the axis of the liberal arts themes under discussion here. (See Figure 1.)

## Mervyn Cadwallader and the Role of The Evergreen State College

Parallel to Tussman's Experiment at Berkeley, for instance, was Mervyn Cadwallader's "Tutorial Program" at San Jose State. Meiklejohn's work influenced both men, and their programs began and ended at the same time. Although the two men knew each other, their programs were not patterned on each other. Both, however, oriented themselves around the classic theme of democracy. The San Jose program went on to broaden and diversify its thematic emphasis, eventually taking up the theme of "political ecology" and extending outward to include the sciences. This innovation helped to disentangle the structural innovation of the learning community from any specific theme, making the concept more broadly applicable and appealing to other institutions and their faculty. Yet, when Cadwallader relocated to The Evergreen State College in 1969 to become one of the founding deans in the new college's coordinated studies program, the initial interdisciplinary themes were "Democracy and Tyranny," "The Individual and Society," and "Political Ecology," emphasizing again the recurrent liberal arts mission of preparing students for a life of civic engagement, what Cadwallader called a "moral curriculum." Even though later learning communities have centered themselves around highly divergent themes with a broad variety of students, what seems consistent is the transformation of the old liberal arts *content* into liberal arts *practices*: interdisciplinary study, intellectual integration, collaborative learning with the democratic values and behaviors that are at the core of community engagement, and active learning to connect theory with practice.

Still another strain of learning community-like reform emerged at Colorado College in 1970. Colorado College, a private liberal arts college in Colorado Springs, moved boldly into curriculum restructuring by creating the "block plan," in which the curriculum was re-organized into eleven, three-week intensive blocks that students would take, one block at a time. Departments remained intact and the offerings were simply reconfigured disciplinary courses although interdisciplinary courses were also commonplace. The Colorado College plan, however, was motivated by many of the same factors as the mainstream learning community movement: class size, fragmentation of effort, lack of sustained interaction, intellectual and practical integration, and the desire for time flexibility for fieldwork. The block plan has now been replicated in a number of independent colleges including Cornell College of Iowa, Tusculum College, and Salem College of Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

*Even though later learning communities have centered themselves around highly divergent themes with a broad variety of students, what seems consistent is the transformation of the old liberal arts content into liberal arts practices: interdisciplinary study, intellectual integration, collaborative learning with the democratic values and behaviors that are at the core of community engagement, and active learning to connect theory with practice.*

**Figure 1**  
**Early Learning Community History**

Alexander Meiklejohn — Wisconsin  
(1927–32)

Joseph Tussman — Berkeley  
(1965–69)

Mervyn Cadwallader — San Jose State  
(1965–69)

Cadwallader — SUNY-Old Westbury  
(1969–70)

Cadwallader — The Evergreen State College  
(1970–75)

Colorado College  
(1970)

Patrick Hill — SUNY-Stony Brook  
(1975–83)

Roberta Matthews — La Guardia  
Community College  
(1973–76 and 1999–2001)

Patrick Hill — The Evergreen State College  
(1983–present)

Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor  
Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education  
(1984–present)

Early 1980s  
University of Maryland  
University of Tennessee  
Gallaudet College  
Queens College  
SUNY-Plattsburg  
University of Nebraska  
Denison College  
Lesley College  
Rollins College  
Daytona Beach Community College  
University of Utah

## The Problem of Institutionalization

As Smith points out, only when these various experiments coalesce into a more broad-based reform movement and finally become institutionalized will lasting change occur. The initial learning community experiments described here tended to be short-lived because they existed on the fringes of their institution, because they depended for their energy on the drive and charisma of a single leader, because they could not work their way into the core structure of the institution, including its personnel allocations, budgetary processes, and degree requirements, and because they exacted enormous personal costs from their founders. Tussman's reflections on the demise of the Berkeley Experiment are revealing:

I was unnerved by other doubts about myself. Life in the Program was enormously exciting. But why was I so exhausted? . . . I felt the seductive charm of "normal" academic life—the intellectual tension, the pervasive wit, the intellectual privacy, the leisurely autonomy, the cool arm's length, controlled, well-mannered involvement, on one's own terms, with others. I missed it, and I shrank from the thought of giving it up for the unremitting intensity of life in the Program. Was I really prepared to wrestle endlessly with the recalcitrant to live the life of a missionary in a corner of a gaudy Rialto? The very question was demoralizing. So, when the Vice Chancellor told me there would be no tenure slots, I did not argue. (Tussman 1997)

Embedded in these reflections is the nub of the institutional change problem: the intersection of the personal with the organizational. Tussman seems to have considered the problem of liberal education as the problem of competing versions of reality. The model of the university offers one version of reality, the model of the college another. The reality we live in, and the values we attach to that reality, construct our individual identity, and in turn, those collective identities construct and reinforce the culture of that reality. To probe further the problem of institutionalization for learning communities in liberal arts colleges, it's useful to conceive liberal arts colleges (and the faculty who compose them) as having either a low liberal arts identity or a high one.

Colleges with a low liberal arts identity share some or all of these characteristics:

- Disciplines, departments, and majors are the organizing structures of the college's academic program. Their needs define how faculty positions are defined and allocated; how faculty are hired; how the academic budget is prioritized; how governance operates; how students are recruited, advised, and retained; how course schedules are constructed; and how faculty are assigned their teaching responsibilities.
- Departmental distribution courses comprise general education, which is defined primarily as a breadth and exposure requirement for students. Operationally, these distribution requirements serve departments as advertising opportunities for students shopping for a major. Therefore, general

*The initial learning community experiments . . . tended to be short-lived because they existed on the fringes of their institution, depended for their energy on the drive and charisma of a single leader, [and] could not work their way into the core structure of the institution . . .*

*Emphasis is on interdisciplinary learning demonstrated in identifiable curriculum structures that stress intellectual connections across disciplinary lines, supported by pedagogies that evoke high engagement among students and with faculty.*

education functions primarily as a service program to the major. Even when distribution requirements are designated by theme, the meaning of theme is undermined or lost by the disciplinary landgrab for course inclusions under that heading.

- The concept of “liberal arts education” is ill-defined or undefined. General and liberal education are interchangeable concepts. The achievement of basic literacies in writing and mathematics is often the only point of even quasi-agreement on core competencies, and these requirements tend to be parceled out to marginalized groups of adjunct faculty.
- Faculty members’ primary affiliation is with their discipline, and their identity is defined by their academic specialization; therefore, faculty development is almost exclusively disciplinary in content and departmental in origin.
- The primary emphasis for students is the academic major, described either as vocational preparation or preparation for graduate school.
- Integration of knowledge across disciplines is left to the student.
- New faculty are socialized into their departments and protected from college-level service until they have achieved tenure.
- Interdisciplinary experiments come and go, but sooner or later, full-time faculty return to teaching in their departments, the program is increasingly staffed by part-time faculty, and eventually these experiments disappear for lack of leadership, lack of faculty, or lack of student participation.

In contrast, liberal arts colleges with a high liberal arts identity share some or all of these characteristics:

- Emphasis is on interdisciplinary learning demonstrated in identifiable curriculum structures that stress intellectual connections across disciplinary lines, supported by pedagogies that evoke high engagement among students and with faculty.
- A well-defined and shared institutional emphasis on pedagogy evokes active-learning strategies, such as learning communities, service-learning, interdisciplinary senior seminars, living-learning programs, team teaching, and freshman interest groups.
- Faculty development/faculty reward systems focus on pedagogy and cross-disciplinary conversations.
- Faculty members’ affiliation is primarily with the institution as opposed to the discipline.
- A shared understanding of what a liberal arts education is distinguishes it clearly from general education or education in the major. This understanding serves intentionally to define the college’s mission with its various publics: students, faculty, alumni, trustees, legislators, administrators, recruiters, and student services personnel.
- The college strongly emphasizes the integration and application of knowledge.

- New faculty are socialized into the college and participate as full members of the academic community from the outset of their careers.
- Liberal education occupies tangible space in the curriculum. It is owned collectively and, as a program, has legitimate leadership, budget, space, and all the other institutional markers that signify academic integrity and permanence.

### **Challenges to Institutionalization: Personal, Internal, External**

To be fair, in today's climate it is harder and harder for liberal arts colleges to sustain a high liberal arts identity. The personal costs that Tussman described loom large as the internal pressures to universitize combine with the external pressures to homogenize and economize. As we have seen, the pressures and rewards of disciplinary culture are enormous. Faculty of liberal arts colleges often experience a kind of superiority/inferiority complex. They take pride in their commitment to working in a teaching institution, although sometimes this pride borders on a self-limiting hubris that tells them they have nothing left to learn when it comes to teaching because they have, after all, chosen to teach. But alongside that sense of superiority is the nagging voice of inferiority, easy to succumb to as the status, money, and political clout of higher education flows to their colleagues in the research universities. Over there, the workload appears lighter, the students brighter, the public and professional support more generous, and the intellectual pleasures greater. Often the result is a kind of über-disciplinary culture within the academic departments of liberal arts colleges as the besieged circle their wagons.

At the same time, the explosion of knowledge into ever more specialized sub-disciplines puts unrelenting pressure on faculty and programs to expand. The major seems to take on a life of its own as it pushes to absorb more and more credit hours, much like the textbooks for introductory courses that get bigger and bigger while the paper gets thinner and thinner with each new edition. Both strive to cover ever more content because there is always more content to cover. Alternative conceptions of the major to the dominant model of content coverage for students and intellectual free agency for faculty are hard to come by. Although most liberal arts faculty are committed to smallness, the simultaneous push is to grow so the department can acquire new faculty who can bring in the new specializations. Faculty are not immune from the all-too-human problem of holding incompatible desires simultaneously: to recruit more majors that will justify more faculty but to keep the college as a whole, small. Besides all that, many faculty do love to work at the upper reaches of their disciplinary knowledge, with students who are beginning to share their passions.

In describing the effect of these tensions for a liberal arts education, Bruce Kimball characterizes the push and pull of competing intellectual and programmatic visions as the tension between the unfettered pursuit of truth in the philosophical tradition of the liberal arts and the drive for a common discourse in the oratorical tradition of the liberal arts:

*The major seems to take on a life of its own as it pushes to absorb more and more credit hours, much like the textbooks for introductory courses that get bigger and bigger while the paper gets thinner and thinner with each new edition.*

*. . . the push and pull of  
competing intellectual and  
programmatically visions [is] the  
tension between the  
unfettered pursuit of truth  
in the philosophical tradition  
of the liberal arts and the  
drive for a common discourse  
in the oratorical tradition  
of the liberal arts.*

The submission demanded by the oratorical liberal education involves the surrendering of one's personal view for the sake of consensus within the community of academicians. Recent attempts to formulate core curricula have shown that this kind of discipline, or surrender, is not happening. These curricula, however much they may be draped with rationales of breadth and depth, are largely products of balancing the political interests of entrenched departments and programs. The reason that such curricula are bundles of the disciplines' courses rather than the courses of disciplined reading and expression that the oratorical ideal recommends, is that the latter would require the professional scholar to submit to the curriculum, rather than vice versa, and thus to relinquish the freedom and autonomy of the philosophical ideal—a freedom and autonomy so painstakingly earned a century ago and now so lavishly enjoyed. (Kimball 1986, 238)

Although this is an over-simplified application of Kimball's argument, it is useful to explore how the philosophical tradition tends to mark the low liberal arts identity college and how the oratorical traditional tends to mark the high liberal arts identity college.

### **External Forces and Their Effect on Liberal Arts Colleges**

If internal pressures push toward compartmentalization and specialization, external pressures keep pushing toward homogenization and a perceived economy of scale. Three external forces work against the philosophy of the learning community: state-level standardization, student mobility, and growth-driven funding formulas. Although, on the surface, these look like forces limited to the public sector, the intermingling of students between the two sectors makes these forces felt in the private sector as well. For instance, students attending private high schools increasingly take concurrent enrollment courses sponsored by local community colleges and start their first year of college with a handful of college credits. Expensive private high schools find this a useful recruitment strategy to anxious parents seeking to reduce education costs.

With public institutions now enrolling the majority of the nation's college students, state legislatures exercise unprecedented control over the substance, structure, and day-to-day operation of higher education. Cohen observes that "all the external pressures on curriculum favor vocationalism," and he predicts that "state level control is certain to grow; the independent public college has already become an oxymoron" (438). A transitory student population has added pressure to ease transferability of courses, resulting in state-mandated core curricula, common course numbering systems, concurrent and dual enrollment, standardized assessment measures, and other forms of homogenization. Too often, these measures are simply imposed by state higher education offices with little or no collaboration with the colleges and universities. Significantly, they are grounded in many of the characteristics of the low identity liberal arts college in its mirroring of the research university. Added state-level pressures include the drives to decrease time-to-graduation and to hold institutions accountable for student

retention. All these forces result in a climate of increased micro-management and an erosion of cooperation between state governments and higher education leadership in an increasingly bureaucratized and systematized environment.

While the goal of making transfer a relatively seamless proposition for students (and therefore a cost-effective process for taxpayers) is laudatory, the result is a deep loss of institutional and programmatic distinctiveness, which in turns fuels student interest in a tourist approach to college. Like most tourists, many students visit colleges the way they visit the local shopping mall, where they hang out for a while then move on to hang out for a while at another. As even the most casual visitor to shopping malls knows, they all look surprisingly alike. The tourist approach, combined with students' real economic needs to stop in and out of college to earn money for tuition and expenses, makes them less likely and less able to define themselves as four-year residents of a specific academic community. There is also what might be called the designer-jeans phenomenon in which students jockey for admission, through a series of transfers, into what they perceive as the most prestigious institution available to them—usually the state's flagship university or the next best thing, as if the label on their diploma will be the *sine qua non* of their merit on the job market or attractiveness to a prospective graduate program. Even students who are placebound often confront the issue of college choice primarily as an economic decision. The local liberal arts college may offer very little to differentiate itself programmatically from the less expensive community college.

The other external pressure in the public sector is a perceived economy of scale. With state funding formulas anchored in growth, liberal arts colleges have no choice but to seek ever larger enrollments if they hope to increase their base funding. In an age where bigger is better, even the most liberal definition of a liberal arts college makes such institutions an increasing rarity. Colleges enrolling fewer than 700 students are an endangered species. Breneman's 1994 definition restricted liberal arts colleges to small (under 2,500), private residential colleges limited in majors to humanities, languages, social sciences, physical sciences, and arts (Breneman 1994). The Carnegie Commission began to blur the lines between liberal arts colleges and comprehensive institutions by defining liberal arts colleges as having a strong liberal arts tradition that also offered modest occupational programs, including engineering and teacher training, or any public institution with an enrollment under 1,000 or private school under 1,500 regardless of courses. This definition embraced 719 schools in 1970, 583 by 1975.

Contemporary liberal arts colleges are characterized as selective colleges of 3,000 students or fewer, a student faculty ratio of 15:1 or fewer, with small classes, a single-purpose academic program that is almost exclusively undergraduate and residential, and a faculty culture oriented around teaching. The 2000 Carnegie Baccalaureate College Category lists only 228 colleges as Liberal Arts Colleges, with another 321 as General Baccalaureate Colleges. The Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) broadens that definition further: some of its member institutions have enrollments in the 4,000s and student:faculty ratios upwards of 20:1. In all these broadening definitions of a liberal arts

*Engineering a small college  
experience, even in a liberal  
arts college, can be a  
Sisyphean effort.*

college, the drive has been to sustain the ideal of a liberal arts education in the face of mounting pressures of scale and increasingly un-liberal curricula. Nevertheless, comprehensive universities now number 496 in the Master's I category and 115 in the Master's II group, while Doctoral/Research Universities have grown to 261, continually decreasing the percentage of students who attend liberal arts colleges, private or public.

Alexander Astin's definition of a liberal education stands in stark contrast to the picture just painted:

In pursuing an economic or materialistic view of education, we tend to forget the basic values that lead us to recommend a "liberal education" for all undergraduates. The real meaning of a liberal education goes far beyond just teaching the student to be a doctor, a lawyer, a diplomat, or a business executive. A liberal education is really about encouraging the student to grapple with some of life's most fundamental questions . . . What do I think and feel about life, death, God, religion, love, art, music, history, and science? What kinds of friends and associates do I want in my life? What kinds of peer groups do I want to affiliate with?

In many ways the philosophy underlying a liberal education is a testimony to the value of the peer group. In other words, a liberal education assumes that a little bit of serendipity is a good thing. Allow young people to go away from home and to live together in an academic environment for a while, and some good things will happen. Give these young people a good deal of freedom, coupled with some new challenges and new responsibilities, and some good things will happen. (Astin 1993, 436-37)

Thus, for advocates of learning communities, who seek to cultivate a distinctive and intimate experience of college, these pressures only increase the difficulties of institutionalization. Engineering a small college experience, even in a liberal arts college, can be a Sisyphean effort.

Which takes us to the lessons learned through the work of The Evergreen State College, particularly the mission of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.

### **The Evergreen State College and the Washington Center: From Experiment to Movement**

The establishment of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education was the lever for beginning the process of institutionalization. The Evergreen State College opened in 1971 with aspirations of taking a leadership role in higher education reform, not just in the development and full scale institutionalization of its own form of learning community—the coordinated studies program—but in its grassroots approach to change through outreach and alliances with nearby community colleges, such as Seattle Central, and other four-year colleges and universities in the state. These aspirations became more concrete in the mid-1980s with initial funding from the Exxon Education Foundation and later the Ford Foundation, FIPSE, and The Pew Charitable

Trusts, along with the Washington state legislature. Funding provided avenues for institutionalization through a robust array of conferences, publications, consultancies, faculty exchanges, statewide working committees, and site visits. And the centerpiece of those aspirations, indeed the core mission of the Washington Center, was the learning community concept.

In addition to the linkages that the center formed with other colleges and universities in Washington, the center tied learning community work with other national higher education reform initiatives such as writing-across-the-curriculum, collaborative learning, active learning, science and math education reform, diversity, and assessment. These connections gave the center national as well as local influence; more important, they added depth and resonance to what learning communities could achieve and how they could achieve it. What had been only implicit in the original work at Wisconsin, Berkeley, and San Jose State now became explicit as work in these other reform areas was deliberately embedded in the structure of the learning community. These linkages deepened their value and appeal by combining mutually reinforcing change initiatives and a vast professional network. By 2000, something on the order of 500 institutions of all kinds had adopted learning communities, sometimes on a very small scale, sometimes as requirements for all students. The local experiment has become a national movement.

*... learning communities are,  
at their core, a liberalizing  
and humanizing force in a  
students' education.*

### **Learning Community Goals and Outcomes**

What remains constant is that learning communities are, at their core, a liberalizing and humanizing force in a student's education. In a university setting, true to their history, learning communities attempt to replicate the values of the traditional liberal arts education. In a liberal arts college, they attempt to restore a liberal arts education at a time of dramatic transition that makes such an education fragile and vulnerable despite the most longstanding commitments. While democracy need not be a *subject* of study, democracy becomes a *practice* of study within learning communities. Tinto's research on learning community effectiveness helps to clarify what that practice entails. Students in learning communities persist in their education and they learn more. They do better academically. "They learn from each other and develop a sense of responsibility for the learning of others" (Ratcliff and Associates 1995,10).

Tinto's is only one thread in a growing fabric of research that demonstrates consistently that learning communities stimulate students' involvement in their learning, enhance retention, increase students' skill in and respect for collaboration, and contribute to improved academic performance.<sup>3</sup> The cases presented here, in addition to the research referenced below, contribute to the growing empirical literature on the powerful outcomes of learning communities.

One need only re-read Jonathan Winthrop's 1630 sermon from the deck of the *Arbella*, "A Model of Christian Charity," to play out the connections of these learning community outcomes with foundational principles of American democracy—the establishment of a community dedicated to the common good over the advancement of private interests, the argument that in bearing one another's burdens, everyone benefits. Some 350 years later, Bruce Kimball likewise argues

that the *artes liberalis* must promote an emphasis on the centrality of a respectful and disciplined discourse for creating the kind of community that makes a liberal education possible. He argues that “the resuscitation of the community of learning” comes from the concept of community itself, because “a community is, after all, a group of people who talk to each other and do it well” (Kimball 1986, 240).

Midway through her travels in Wonderland, Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. “I don’t much care where—,” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat. “—so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation. “Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

Liberal arts colleges certainly take students *somewhere*. But the value of the work on learning communities is that the robust conversations that their theory and practice can stimulate, and the culture and values they reintroduce, can take these essential institutions where they want to go without such a long and aimless walk.

## Endnotes

1. Though the terms “general education” and “liberal education” are often used interchangeably in the higher education literature as Smith does here, we choose in this chapter to distinguish between the two in discussions of contemporary programs. By “general education” we mean an emphasis on more basic education in college-level skills and course work focused on an introduction to the major. By “liberal education” we are referring to the higher order, integrative goals of liberal arts education defined by Nussbaum and others cited in this essay.
2. For an account of the Colorado College history, see Robert Loevy, *Colorado College: A Place of Learning* (Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado College, 1999) and Maxwell F. Taylor, *Colorado College: Memories and Reflection* (Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado College, 1999).
3. See, for instance, Ratcliff and Associates, *Realizing the Potential: Improving Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment*. University Park, PA: National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, 1995; Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Gardiner, 1998; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990; *Patterns of Student Retention and Achievement in Selected Learning Community Programs*, Olympia, WA: Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, 2002; National Survey of Students Engagement, 2002; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, *Learning Communities: Re-forming Undergraduate Education*, forthcoming; Jossey-Bass; MacGregor, J., and Associates, *Doing Learning Community Assessment: Stories from Five Campuses*, Pew National Learning Communities Project and the American Association of Higher Education, forthcoming.

## References

- Astin, Alexander. 1993. *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Barefoot, Betsy O. "National Survey of First-Year Curricular Practices: Summary of Findings," [www.brevard.edu/fyc/survey/findings/final%20Summary%20curricular.pdf](http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/survey/findings/final%20Summary%20curricular.pdf).
- Botstein, Leon. "Some Thoughts on Curriculum and Change." In Farnham and Yarmolinsky, 51-62.
- Breneman, David 1994. *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Reprint 1994. Stamford, Connecticut: Longmeadow Press.
- Cohen, Arthur. 1998. *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Farnham, Nicholas, and Adam Yarmolinsky, eds. 1996. *Rethinking Liberal Education*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gabelnick, Faith, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Barbara Smith, eds. 1990. *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 41. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gardiner, Lion. 1998. *Redesigning Higher Education: Producing Dramatic Gains in Student Learning*. ASHE-ERIC. 23(7). Washington, D.C.: George Washington University Press.
- Katz, Stanley. "Restructuring for the Twenty-First Century." In Farnham and Yarmolinsky, 77-90.
- Kimball, Bruce. 1986. *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pascarella, Ernest T., and Patrick T. Terenzini. 1991. *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty-five Years of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ratcliff and Associates. 1995. "Realizing the Potential: Improving Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment." University Park, PA: National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment.
- Smith, Barbara Leigh, J. MacGregor, R. Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick. Forthcoming. *Learning Communities: Re-forming Undergraduate Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tussman, Joseph. 1969. *Experiment at Berkeley*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Tussman, Joseph. 1997. *The Beleaguered College*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, University of California.
- Wong, Frank. "The Search for American Liberal Education." In Farnham and Yarmolinsky, 63-76.