

The Case for an Essential Education: Bridging the Liberal Education vs. Workforce Education Divide

By:

Terry O'Banion

Email Address:

obanion@league.org

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There is a robust literature on liberal education and on workforce education, and much of that literature focuses on explaining the purpose or defending the value of each position. Occasionally, one side will reference the value of the other side, but those references are seldom fully developed. As long as this debate has gone on, however, advocates and leaders who favor a combined approach have made their voices known, as illustrated in the following perspectives:

Calvin M. Woodward created, in 1879, the first school-based job training program in the nation, the St. Louis Manual Training School of Washington University. When the first class of 50 boys began their studies on September 6, 1880, they were greeted by an inscription from Woodward over the entrance:

Hail to the skillful cunning hand!
Hail to the cultured mind!
Contending for the World's command,
Here let them be combined. (Barlow, 1976, p. 46)

The aim of a community college education must be not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to take them beyond their narrow interests, broaden their perspectives, and enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose.... The community college, more than any other higher education

institution, should overcome departmental narrowness by integrating technical and career studies with the liberal arts. (AACCC, 1988, pp. 17-18)

The key question, it seems to me, is how to rebalance, while preserving the essence of liberal learning, at a time in which higher education in general and, most especially, the humanities are under a sustained attack by cost-conscious advocates of an increasingly narrow vocationalism. (Altschuler, 2014, p. 3)

Community colleges offer degrees in career education and liberal arts and sciences. To suggest that one is more important than the other is short-sighted and counterproductive. Career programs and LAS programs do not compete; they complement each other. If you want a strong community, both culturally and economically, then you'll recognize the value of all college degrees. (Lombardo, 2014, p. 2)

The business community and the students are best served in the educational setting when career technical education is combined with general education to create students who are capable of managing their careers for life. (Drummond, n.d., p. 1)

Foundational, lifelong skills such as critical thinking, teamwork and collaboration, and problem solving are climbing to the top of employers' wish lists....Ultimately, integration in this area should bridge academic and applied education and skills expectations across institutions and employers to accelerate opportunities for students. (Tyton Partners, 2015, pp. 6-7)

These quotes from six different advocates of integrating liberal education and workforce education reflect a perspective that has been in place for many decades, a perspective that has been picking up steam in recent years. For some, integration still means making sure both perspectives are represented as complementary.

However, what we mean in this monograph is a new perspective; one that integrates, combines, and unifies the two historical perspectives into a new and different form of Essential Education. In an essay calling for "ending the divide between liberal arts and practical education," the president of Northeastern University, Joseph Aoun (2015), calls for an essential education he terms, "The New Literacy":

What the worn-out juxtaposition of the liberal arts versus the applied disciplines overlooks is that aspects of each are essential for living a full life, both professionally and personally....Both domains have relevance, utility and beauty, and both contain critical components of a new skill set—a new

literacy—that students need if they’re to flourish in modern life and the global economy. (para. 14)

Although AAC&U focuses its mission as an advocate of liberal education, the association recognizes the need for an education that bridges liberal education and workforce education.

A great democracy cannot be content to provide a horizon-expanding education for some and work skills, taught in isolation from the larger societal context, for everyone else....It should not be liberal education for some and narrow or illiberal education for others. (AAC&U Board of Directors, 2010, p. 3)

A step toward bridging the divide sometimes comes through in the language of advocates and champions. In *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002), AAC&U called for, “a practical liberal education as the most powerful form of learning for the twenty-first century” (p. xi). Larry Warford (personal communication, December 4, 2014), Senior Workforce Consultant for the League for Innovation, has called for a liberal career education as a way to bridge the divide. Practical liberal education and liberal career education are examples of encouraging language from strong advocates on both sides of the divide.

We do not need another commission on liberal or general education; we do not need another commission on workforce education or CTE; we need a *Commission on Essential Education for All* as a new way of thinking about this issue. One way to initiate such a commission is for AAC&U and the Association for Career and Technical Education to combine efforts to establish it. Both associations have created seminal documents on what they believe to be essential from the perspective of their associations. These documents already contain many answers to what constitutes a quality education essential for all students. It will take work and compromise to agree on the specifics, but it is a goal worth exploring in which our own divisiveness about what constitutes an essential education for all students contributes to the divisiveness in our students and our society.

Whether a model of Essential Education is designed by national organizations or by faculty committees appointed in leading community colleges, educators who want to explore what constitutes an Essential Education for all students should first agree on a set of values they hold in common regarding this paradigm. The following tenets are offered as a place to begin:

1. Liberal education and workforce education are of equal value in American society and in the educational enterprise.

2. No student is fully educated who does not experience and embrace the core skills and knowledge represented by liberal education and by workforce education.
3. An educational experience that integrates the core knowledge and skills from liberal education and workforce education is much more powerful and substantive in its impact than an education that is skewed to one side or the other.
4. Faculty must be prepared to transcend the partisan commitments to their disciplines while they are engaged in designing and implementing an Essential Education.
5. Faculty from secondary and postsecondary education must be willing to work across and through existing systems.
6. Collaborative and applied learning and Student Success Pathways are foundational strategies to implementing the Essential Education paradigm.
7. New and innovative forms of information technology will make it possible to create and deliver an Essential Education that simultaneously embraces an integrated core of learning for all students and addresses the unique needs of each student.
8. Colleges will need to create new forms of assessment to measure the impact of an Essential Education.
9. New structures and organizations may need to be created in the college to accommodate the new forms of Essential Education.
10. Thinking outside of the course as the organizational structure for learning may produce more innovative and creative models of an Essential Education.

As noted throughout this monograph, while there has been an historical divide between the advocates of liberal education and workforce education, there has also been recognition at many junctures of the importance and value of integrating the two sides. In recent decades there is growing interest in integrating the two positions, stymied by the historical architecture of education erected by earlier advocates to defend and solidify their positions. It will be very difficult to overcome the barriers of the historical architecture: separate divisions, separate faculty, separate facilities, separate funding, separate advocates, and separate terminology. The place to begin the conversation is to find common ground in a set of common values based on the goal of creating an education for students that helps them make a good living and live a good life.

Working from a common set of values—these ten or others agreed upon by those who will do the work of creating the curriculum for an Essential Education—provides a

foundation on which the future can be built. To assist educators in creating a new model of essential education that bridges the divide between liberal education and workforce education, the following partial models or constructs are offered as starting points.

There are no fully-developed models or constructs of Essential Education that are universally acknowledged. There are partial frameworks, pieces of promising concepts, and some practices around which a core of Essential Education could be constructed. These suggestions cannot be labeled emerging models; they are, however, partial constructs that could become models in the hands of creative educators.

The following seven constructs are offered to provoke and stimulate educators to consider the possibilities of a redesigned learning experience that incorporates and integrates the most important elements from liberal education and workforce education. Historically, such programs are usually framed as a series of core courses, as exemplified in Construct 1. The other constructs suggest different approaches, such as creating a program of Essential Education around core questions or using an approach such as problem-based learning or applied learning to frame a quality education for every student. Some of these constructs already include specific elements that make it easy to design a curriculum; others include elements of teaching and learning practices based on research that may provide a gateway to creating a new form of curriculum. These are only seven constructs or gateways to a new curriculum of essential education. Creative faculty will design other approaches to meet the needs of their institutions and their students.

Terry O'Banion is President Emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College and Chair of the Graduate Faculty at National American University's Roueche Graduate Center.

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