

point of view

Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life

Colleges Must Bridge the Divide Between Technical and Liberal Education

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Is there any educator, parent, legislator, pastor, entertainer, farmer, housekeeper or industrialist who will disagree with the statement “We want an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life”? No one really disagrees with the common sense captured in this statement.

All of us want an education for ourselves, our children and our neighbors that will ensure that we are trained to engage in productive work and prepared to engage in a productive life. We understand intuitively that human beings do not live by bread alone nor can life be enjoyed if there is no bread on the table.

For centuries, educators have struggled with attempts to reach the golden mean of helping students make a good living and live a good life, but they have usually done so by contrasting opposing forces — by making the case for one end of the continuum against the other. The arguments for an integrated education are usually framed in workforce education versus liberal education, hands versus heart, hard skills versus soft skills, or the skillful hand versus the cultured mind. The literature is full of these either/or arguments although most thought leaders usually agree that what is needed is an integration of the two positions. In the end there is strong agreement with the statement “We want an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life.”

One of the challenges of reaching agreement on the golden mean of an essential and integrated education is the historical architecture in which educators have created silos as barriers to such integration. For example, in the community college we have created two distinct cultures of workforce education and of liberal/general education. They operate in different silos separated by facilities, curricula, staff qualifications, titles, degrees, values, and funding. Visionary leaders have attempted to bridge the divide between the silos by creating structures in which vocational faculty are housed with liberal arts faculty as in the unit structure at Santa Fe College (Fla.) or by assigning a vocational faculty member to co-teach with a developmental studies faculty member as in the I-Best program pioneered by community colleges in Washington State. However creative

and wellintended these attempts have been to bridge the divide, they only make more visible the differences between the two cultures.

Bridging the Divide

There is one key area in the educational enterprise that has not been fully explored that may lead us to the golden mean of bridging the divide between workforce education and liberal education — the curriculum. The curriculum reflects the common wisdom and the professional expertise of the faculty in terms of what the faculty believe students should learn. The curriculum is the formal structuring of the content and the values colleges wish to pass on to students; it is the transparent compact between the college and the student of what the college deems worth learning. Unfortunately, in the most recent reform efforts the curriculum has been almost totally ignored as a venue for change and transformation. The focus has been on structures, intake processes, high impact practices, pathways, financial aid, outcomes, data, technology and assessment. Millions have been spent by foundations, states, and the federal government on these approaches with only a modicum of interest in the curriculum limited primarily to creating new math pathways and revised approaches to the acceleration of writing and reading in developmental education.

Substantive and sustainable reform could occur if educators would commit to creating a curriculum that integrates the best from both workforce education and from liberal education. A new monograph —*Bread and Roses*: — by this author, published by the League for Innovation March 2016, outlines an approach for such curricular reform through the concept of an Essential Education.

An Essential Education is defined as an integrated core of learning that includes and connects the key components from liberal education and career and technical education to ensure that a student is equipped to earn a good living and live a good life. It is a quality education essential to all students.

The concept of an Essential Education is based on a set of propositions as follows:

1. Liberal and general education and career and technical 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 general and liberal education and by career and technical education.
3. An educational experience that integrates the core knowledge and skills from liberal and general education and career and technical education is much more powerful and substantive in its impact than an education that is skewed to one side of the divide.
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.

There are a number of approaches that can be used by faculty to create a new, integrated curriculum that is the foundation of an Essential Education — an education that helps students make a good living and live a good life. In the monograph seven different approaches or “constructs” are introduced to help faculty frame the new curriculum. Here is one example of the “constructs” — the most traditional approach by creating a small set of core courses that bridge the divide between workforce and liberal education.

An Essential Education: The Core Courses Construct

There are plenty of clues to the most important elements in liberal education and workforce education that all students need. In the lists of outcomes and objectives created by advocates from each side, four stand out on most such lists: critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration and team work, and communication. These knowledge sets or skills cut across the liberal arts and workforce education and begin to frame a core of integrated learning valuable to every student. These four arenas of learning could be designed fresh by educators as a required curriculum for all students:

- Critical Thinking 101
- Problem Solving 101
- Collaboration and Teamwork 101
- Communication 101

The four areas could be taught as standalone courses for three semester credits each or combined into a learning community of 12 credits. Some educators will combine problem solving and critical thinking into one course.

Educators who favor this approach will, of course, want to explore additional courses to add to the core. These additional areas of essential learning might include diversity, global awareness, and information technology which often show up on lists of essential skills. The purpose here is not to determine which courses should be included in an essential core or to begin the really hard work of outlining the content to be included in each course or suggesting the teaching approaches that might be most effective. The purpose here is to suggest an approach to a new construct—maybe a new model—that bridges the liberal arts and workforce education divide and prevents relying on old models of general education and workforce education. This construct requires educators to consider what is absolutely “essential” and to be creative in combining new elements to design learning experiences that incorporate the best from both sides.

Another way to think about this approach is to answer the question: If state regulations limited the college to six basic three-credit courses to teach all students what is essential to living a good life and making a good living, what would those six courses be and what would an outline of the content of each course include?

Conclusion

Who will disagree with the statement “We want an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life”? There will not be much disagreement on the basic idea; disagreement comes, as it always has, on how to approach the solution, how best to provide learning experiences that will ensure our students are well prepared to take on a well-paying job and to become productive and satisfied citizens who can contribute to the general welfare of others. Current reform efforts to change and transform education have focused on structures and practices rather than on the curriculum that is the heart of the educational enterprise.

In this brief essay, an Essential Education that creates a new curriculum designed to bridge the historic divide between liberal education and workforce education has been proposed. And one example, from the monograph, has been cited as an approach to a new “construct” based on core courses. In the monograph six additional “constructs” are cited that may be more appealing to faculty than the traditional core course approach. In any case, if faculty and other college leaders wish to create an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life the concept of an Essential Education is the place to begin. *Terry O’Banion is the President Emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College and Chair of the Graduate Faculty, National American University. After 55 years working in the community college he continues to consult with community colleges across the country.*

This article is the continuation of a series authored by principals involved in National American University’s Roueche Graduate Center, and other national experts identified by the Center. John E. Roueche and Margaretta B. Mathis serve as editors of the monthly column, a partnership between NAU’s Roueche Graduate Center and Community College Week. For additional information send emails to mbmathis@national.edu or, call 512-813-2300.