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# The Essential Questions

Making a case for liberal education to new constituencies requires using language they understand

BY TERRY O'BANION

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

If we are to make an irrefutable case for liberal education to constituencies we have not yet addressed or included in our efforts, we must do so in a language they understand. One way to achieve that goal is to “reimagine” liberal education framed through a series of Essential Questions—the key questions that most human beings struggle to answer as they navigate the rough waters of life. Such questions can clear away the fog of pedantic learning and focus on the deeper needs of human beings. The questions may be able to frame learning outcomes and areas of knowledge; they may even translate into a curriculum. At the very least, exploring the Essential Questions may stimulate fresh thinking about redefining and organizing a common core of learning for all.

Even though the language needs updating, W. E. B. DuBois succinctly stated the challenge: The final product of training “must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man.” In this brief article I attempt to create serviceable categories and list the provocative questions that could provide the foundation for a liberal education for human beings.

### **Personal Development**

1. Who am I? Where am I going? And what difference does it make?
2. What values and ideals have I accumulated so far, and what values and ideals do I want to work on for the future?
3. Do I believe in some kind of god? Why or why not?
4. Who so far has influenced my personal philosophy of life, and how do I describe my personal philosophy?
5. What is happiness for me, and to what extent am I reaching that goal?

### **Economic Development**

1. What are the basic talents and skills I have that can translate into a good career?

2. What are the rewards for working that are important to me?
3. What is my dream job, and what kind of educational experiences will it take to get me there? Am I currently working on that plan?
4. What is more important to me—satisfaction in the contribution I make to society through my work or the money and benefits I will earn? What can I do to make sure both goals are met?
5. When I die, what do I want my family and friends and coworkers to say about the work I have done?

### **Civic Development**

1. How much do I understand and appreciate being a citizen of a major democracy?
2. Why should I vote? How do I make a case that my vote counts?
3. What are the basic values and policies of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents; and which party best represents my own values? Are any of the values of these groups relevant to my own values?
4. Through what means can I make a difference so that I leave my country better than I found it?
5. What magazines, news channels, blogs, critics, analysts, and books do I follow to obtain a balanced perspective on current events?

### **Cultural Development**

1. What are my most creative urges and talents that could produce something worth sharing with others, and to what extent have I been exercising those urges and talents?
2. Am I more knowledgeable about popular culture or historical culture? What difference does it make?
3. How do I or can I use art, music, dance, theatre, poetry, etc. to enrich my life? Which of these do I like most and why?
4. What do I know and appreciate about other cultures in my country and around the world? To what extent do I have questions and doubts about other cultures that some may identify as racist, ageist, homophobic, etc.? What am I doing to correct these perceptions?
5. What do human beings around the world hold most in common?

## Social Development

1. What is my responsibility for my fellow human beings? How have I demonstrated that responsibility so far? What do I need to work on to become a better companion, spouse, parent, member, friend, worker, etc.?
2. Do I like people in general? Who are my best friends I can depend on in a crisis? How would friends describe my character and personality? Of my current friends who is most likely to attend my funeral?
3. What contributions am I making or planning to make to improve my family, friends, school, workplace, church, organization, community, or country?

These categories and questions are a first rough draft. Consider the challenge and the fun that faculty groups might experience in workshops and seminars to further develop the categories and questions. Consider how faculty, once they agree on a basic set of categories and questions, might begin to translate this framework into learning events and opportunities—curriculum and instruction. Consider how faculty might use the basic framework to enhance and enrich existing learning and teaching practices and programs. Consider how students might explore these questions as more meaningful than many we currently use. Consider how these questions might stimulate continuing conversations among students after class, face-to-face, and through social media. Consider the activities of collaborative and active learning that could emanate from these questions. Consider the possibilities of enhanced motivation on the part of students—and of faculty—because of the relevance of these questions to a sound education. Consider how these questions could become the milestones and indicators of progress along the Student Success Pathway. Consider how these Essential Questions might help us to “reimagine” liberal education.

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