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An Innovation That Could Transform the Community College World

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By accelerating changes already underway in the workforce and adding new options for how we learn, work, and live, the COVID-19 pandemic has renewed attention on a classic dilemma in education: Is the purpose of education to prepare students to make a good living or to live a good life? There are many unresolved educational issues, but this thorny one has cast a long shadow ever since humans struggled to make sense of the world.

Perhaps this quandary began 17,000 years ago around a campfire at the mouth of Lascaux cave near what is today the village of Montignac in the Dordogne Valley of France, where members of a Cro Magnon clan painted animals on the walls and other members ridiculed them for dabbling in "art" rather than dealing with the "real world" by training the young to sharpen spears and snare rabbits. The line between liberal education and vocational preparation likely appeared early in the evolution of the species, for it seems to reflect a division in human nature—heart versus head, nature versus nurture, right versus left, and doing versus being. We sometimes seem innately cursed to relive this tug-of-war generation after generation. Apparently, no one in that cave paid any attention to the old woman huddled in the corner who asked, "Why do we have to choose; can't we have both?"

Not that past leaders ignored this divide; outspoken advocates of integrated approaches to learning stretch back to ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and bubble up in every age of human history. More recently, Calvin M. Woodward, who in 1879 created the St. Louis Manual Training School of Washington University (the first school-based job training program in the United States), greeted the first class of 50 boys with an inscription 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."

Today's advocates of liberal learning and those who champion job preparation tend to ignore Woodward's wisdom. Higher education has been deadlocked in this classic quarrel for centuries, and even though the partisan devotees often recognize the narrowness of their agendas, they do not seem able to collaborate with one another to answer the old Cro-Magnon woman's question: "Why do we have to choose; can't we have both?"

Many educators have an interest in this issue. There are dozens of regional, state, and national organizations that champion either liberal learning or workforce education, but few champion each one equally. The League for Innovation in the Community College (League) is an international organization that advocates for both. For many years, the League has sponsored national and international projects in career and technical education as well as in liberal education for community and technical colleges with millions of dollars from foundations, corporations, and governments. With the advent of major educational reform efforts in the last several decades, the League has begun to address the issue of bridging this divide more directly. The organization's approach was most recently laid out in the 2016 monograph, *Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good*

Life (O'Banion, 2016). More recently, an *Inside Higher Ed* article (O'Banion, 2020) suggested, "An Essential Education for All Students."

Community Colleges as Crucibles: Making a Good Living and Living a Good Life

Community colleges are the ideal crucible for collaborating with K-16 educators, foundations, and national organizations to devise solutions for bridging the divide between vocational and liberal education. As the middle child in the education family, community colleges are natural collaborators, and their general studies programs call for collective attention. A recent study of general education programs in the nation's community colleges by the authors of this article reveal the sad situation in these core programs. In every college sampled, students must choose from lists of hundreds of courses to meet a general education requirement of 8 to 15 courses (O'Banion & Miles, 2021). Students are starving to death while trying to eat at these "cafeteria community colleges." Those who find easy nourishment often come with privilege to help steer them through the maze.

Currently, community colleges across the country are swept up in the latest student success and completion reform movement, Guided Pathways, aimed at remodeling the self-service cafeteria of disconnected courses, programs, and supports that has confounded and weeded out students—especially low-income students, students of color, adult learners, and other vulnerable populations—for decades. Interdisciplinary teams are doing the hard work of creating clear, highly structured program maps aligned with clusters of academic majors, bolstered by targeted support services to give students more coherent, intentional, informed experiences. Good progress is underway.

Still, most community college students continue to face the forced choice of further education or career, and the historical divide between liberal and workforce education has not been breached. Plus, the tangle of general education courses remains largely uncharted, save instructions to, for instance, "choose two from the following options." The rational way to remove this confusion for students is for colleges to create a true common core of learning that takes the guesswork out of having to select 12 general courses from lists of hundreds. While colleges are at that task, they might as well create a core of common learning that bridges the liberal and workforce education divide.

The task is easy to describe and enormously difficult to achieve. Such reform is particularly challenging because the architecture of higher education, with its conventional structures and policies, is deeply woven into organizational culture. In the community college world, this embedded architecture serves as a formidable barrier to change and, too often, a structural impediment to equitable student success, whether measured in academic or career terms.

From inception, community colleges have split their mission and curriculum between academic education (transfer, university-parallel, general education, collegiate) and vocational preparation (vocational, occupational, job training, career and technical education/CTE, and the now obsolete terminal education). Organizational structures are typically split along the same lines, with a unit dedicated to academic affairs and another to CTE—separate departments led by separate deans, sometimes reporting to separate vice presidents. Facilities and faculty are divided along the same dimensions, with college maps noting a CTE building here and liberal arts department there. The A.A. degree and the A.A.S. degree reflect this division. Funding at local, state, and federal levels is almost always split between liberal and workforce education, and, tellingly, in the last few decades, funding for workforce education has greatly exceeded that for liberal education. These

differences present daunting challenges to reformers, but the outcomes for students and for the future of work may be worth taking on this reform effort.

A Proposal to Education Leaders Who Dare to Disturb the Universe

Educational leaders at all levels who accept this challenge to disturb the status quo should begin with the proposition that the primary purpose of education is to help *all* students make a good living and live a good life. We propose an integrated learning core to actualize this transcendent value proposition that we call Essential Education—core learning experiences that draw from the best of both liberal and workforce education to generate a holistic education for every student. (See [*Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life.*](#)) To create an Essential Education for all students, organizations and faculty committees should also commit to a core of values such as the following:

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 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. (O’Banion, 2016, p. 25)

Grounded in their combined 95 years of working in the community college field, the authors offer two approaches—one national, one local—to advance the precepts of Essential Education. At the national level, interested community college advocacy, research, and advancement organizations could partner to (a) establish a national commission to co-create innovative, scalable approaches to bridge the divide between liberal and workforce education, and (b) establish a project for a diverse group of community colleges to field test transformational linkages between academic and career education in service to student and societal needs. Participating organizations should avoid classic labels of liberal education and workforce education, since these terms have become somewhat pejorative and divisive. Nomenclature such as “An Essential Education for All Students” might avert old impediments of language and provide a fresh framework for generating solutions.

An individual college approach will require sufficient interest and support from institutional leaders to create a strong cross-functional committee charged with the task of generating

an Essential Education solution—be it curricular, structural, experiential, or some combination—that can be endorsed by primary stakeholders. The values noted above are a beginning point for committee deliberation. *Bread and Roses* (2016) was written with such committees in mind and includes brief introductions to the histories of general education and workforce education followed by seven constructs that capture some of the known ways that new programs and new curricula are created. College committees will, of course, need to navigate the barriers and gateways found in every college’s culture, particularly in the hard work of shaping consensus for transformational change beyond classic curricular and structural protocols. If given a solid charge and ample support, we believe courageous community college faculty, staff, and administrators who are passionate about expanding equitable work/life opportunities will step forward to champion this student-centric reform. The value and necessity for student voice in this endeavor cannot be understated.

Whether the endeavor is a national partnership or an individual college effort, the place to begin is with a common set of values that provides a sound foundation for reform. From this common grounding, we recommend a design thinking approach, as advanced by the Stanford University d.school (n.d.), whereby participants from diverse disciplines and backgrounds practice “radical collaboration” through an iterative, creative process to develop collective solutions to complex real-world problems. We cleave to Einstein’s maxim that new thinking is needed to solve old problems.

Finally, national and local reformers should build on a growing consensus regarding essential competencies that have been advocated by leaders in both liberal and workforce education [see, e.g., Carnavale et al. (2020) and Hood et al. (2021)]. Various called workforce basics, essential learning outcomes, career competencies, and core competencies, the lists for what a contemporary student needs to meet the world, from those who champion liberal education or workforce education, overlap a good deal. Four overarching skills, validated by numerous studies and national leaders, stand out:

- Problem Solving
- Critical Thinking
- Written and Verbal Communication
- Collaboration and Teamwork

These skills arm a student with the ability to dive in and dissect the knowledge arenas of the human and natural world that undergird the liberal arts. They also pave a path for students seeking competence in a career. We argue for strong focus on a fifth dimension: Cross-Cultural Competence. Also called cultural competency or intercultural learning, this is the ability to live and work effectively in culturally diverse environments; to identify and address social inequities; and to promote relationships, workplaces, and communities that foster respect and belonging. This interdisciplinary capacity answers the call of the clarion—remembering its Latin root *clarus*, meaning *clear*—to promote clear eyes and compassionate hearts to accompany the ready hands and smart minds needed to actualize our democratic ideals.

Some may wish to add Ethics, Civic Learning, Professionalism, Digital Literacy, or Adaptability to the topics, but the final list should remain small to serve as a nucleus of cross-cutting learning essentials. Supported by a common base of values, this set of skills is an encouraging place to begin an exploration of a universal core of learning that will bridge the great divide and prepare all learners for the full benefits of a good living and a good life.

At its roots, an Essential Education for All Students is an equity-minded agenda to assure universal access to vital lives and careers in a rapidly changing and complex world. It is an innovation that could transform the community college world.

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