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Our Students Need Bread and Roses

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Like the periodic appearance of locusts, the urge to reform American education crops up every decade to promise a new future by transforming the present. In recent memory, the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* and the 1993 report *An American Imperative* galvanized educational leaders into action to “reform” secondary and higher education.¹ In 1995, the editor of *Change*, Ted Marchese, reviewed the impact of these reform efforts and concluded: “Despite the past decade’s flood of commission reports, foundation grants, new pedagogies, curricular innovations, and shelves of research, it’s hard to say whether American undergraduate education has improved that much.

¹ National Commission on Excellence in Education, U.S. Department of Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education (April 1983), <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>; William Emerson Brock, Wingspread Group on Higher Education, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* (Racine, WI: Johnson Foundation, 1993).

Indeed, looking across years of data on student attainment, it's possible to argue we've slipped a bit."²

The "Completion Agenda," kicked off in February 2009 with President Barack Obama's 2020 College Completion Goal, has been the overarching reform effort of the current decade. Never before in American history have so many stakeholders agreed on a common goal; never before in American history have so many foundations made so many grants to support this agenda; never before in American history has there been so much research to identify the programs and practices that lead to student success. Yet after years of some of the most intensive and focused reform activity in the history of American higher education, several reports suggest that the Completion Agenda may fall far short of its goal. In a December 2014 report *Policy Meets Pathways: A State Policy Agenda for Transformational Change*, the author concludes: "A decade of interventions and improvements have fallen short. . . . In spite of 10 years of interventions and student support initiatives, the nation's most disadvantaged adults and young people are not gaining traction towards degrees." The author even suggests that over the last decade "we've slipped a bit" (to use Marchese's words) in the percentage of students completing degrees and certificates.³

The root challenges that prevent major change and reform in higher education are many and complex, with some deeply embedded in social and economic structures about which educators can do little. There is one area, however, that we educators *can* do something about, an area for which we have been granted unquestionable authority and responsibility: the curriculum. The curriculum reflects our basic beliefs and values about what our society needs and about what our students should learn in order to be fully functional citizens. Unfortunately, whether by neglect or by design, we have allowed the curriculum to become an impotent player in reform efforts. Today's

² Ted Marchese, "Getting Smarter about Teaching," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 27, no. 5 (September/October 1995).

³ Lara K. Couturier, *Policy Meets Pathways: A State Policy Agenda for Transformational Change* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2014), Executive Summary, 1.

curriculum is little more than a smorgasbord of too many courses from which students select, with too little guidance, what sounds interesting at the moment. Instead of focusing on creating a curriculum for the 21st century, we have limited our reform efforts to adding or tweaking a new practice or a boutique program, refining the intake processes, or grafting on a new technology.

In a new monograph to be published by the League for Innovation and National American University later this year, *Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses! Bridging the Liberal Arts / Workforce Education Divide to Create a Quality Education Essential for All*,⁴ I make the case that we must create a new kind of learning experience reflected in a new kind of curriculum if we are ever to meet the goals of reform movements. My intent is to persuade educators – especially those working in community colleges – to set aside their partisan advocacy of general and liberal education or of career and technical education and to become advocates of an approach that bridges the divide. I call this an “Essential Education” – education that provides a quality experience for every student. An Essential Education is an integrated learning experience that incorporates the best content, knowledge, skills, and attitudes from both the hand and the head, the doing and the knowing, the skillful hand and the cultivated mind – in other words, an integrated learning experience that includes both “bread and roses.”⁵

In the monograph, *liberal education* is education that is designed to help us live a richer and fuller life. *General education* is a subset of liberal education, and both terms are used interchangeably. *Roses* is a metaphor for liberal and general education. *Workforce education*, on the other hand, is education that is designed to help us prepare

⁴ At the beginning of the summer, the League for Innovation in the Community College will have copies of *Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!* available for order. Check under Publications at <http://www.league.org>.

⁵ This phrase emerged from the labor movement in the early 1900s. In a speech during the Great Lawrence Strike of 1912 – which came to be known as the Bread and Roses Strike – the union leader Rose Schneiderman said: “The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too.” The metaphor was resurrected 100 years later by participants in the Occupy Wall Street movement.

for a job and a career. *Career and technical education* (CTE) is used as a current and widely accepted term for workforce education, and both terms are used interchangeably. *Bread* is the metaphor used for workforce education. An Essential Education – bread and roses – is the core learning experience that draws from the best of both workforce/CTE education and liberal/general education to create an integrated quality education for every student. As the late Bobby Fong, former president of Ursinus College, said: “Students must cultivate the ability to make a living, but also to make their lives worth living.”⁶

No educator or parent would disagree with Fong’s statement, but getting educators to agree on a common curriculum that breaches the divide between workforce education and liberal education may be one of the greatest challenges of our time. After all, we have created significant barriers to bringing the two sides together: we separate personnel by titles such as Dean of Workforce Development and Dean of Liberal Arts; we divide faculty and programs into different facilities on campus; we award degrees and certificates that differ according to the type of education. Even funding from the federal, state, and local sources separates the two sides in very fundamental ways. National organizations also champion one point of view over another: the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has been an advocate of liberal education for 100 years; the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) has been an advocate of workforce education for 89 years. Where is the organization that champions an education allowing students to “cultivate the ability to make a living, but also to make their lives worth living”? Perhaps that organization could be a special joint commission created by AAC&U and ACTE to agree on an Essential Education that bridges their divide.

⁶ Bobby Fong, “Liberal Arts and Practical Experience: A False Dichotomy,” *Ursinus College News Archive*, September 28, 2011, <http://news.ursinus.edu/2011/presidents-perspective/liberal-arts-and-practical-experience-a-false-dichotomy/>.

For colleges and faculty groups that have the vision and the courage to address this issue, in the monograph I outline seven constructs – “emerging models” – as a place to begin the hard work. For example, one construct is based on a core of common courses that bridge the divide with suggestions of such titles as Problem Solving 101, Critical Thinking 101, Collaboration and Teamwork 101, and Communication 101. Other constructs are based on Essential Questions, Contextual Learning, Projects and Problems, Activity Analysis, Applied Learning, and the Student Success Pathway. Creating curricular frameworks to bridge the divide would greatly benefit our students and our society, but first there must be a will to collaborate and a will to transform and reform the two camps we have created to keep us apart.

If we are ever successful in bridging this divide, the technology we know and the technology we dream of will play a major role. Information technology has the potential to be a powerful catalyst to leverage significant changes in the way we teach and learn, in the way we organize and communicate the curriculum, in the way we document how students navigate learning experiences, in the way we intervene to ensure students stay on the student success pathway, and in the way we recognize and celebrate the milestones they reach. Some champions of technology may hold the view that we should simply provide students with the technological skills they will need to “make a good living.” But other champions of technology understand that technology itself has great potential for probing the significant questions that confront all humans: Who am I? Where am I going? What difference can I make? These are the questions that lead us to answers about how we can make our lives “worth living.” Perhaps EDUCAUSE – with its powerful tools and partners – will emerge as a key organization to help all of us better bridge the great divide between bread and roses. As Steve Jobs once said: “Technology alone is not enough . . . it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our hearts sing.”⁷

⁷ Quoted in Fareed Zakaria, “Why America’s Obsession with STEM Education Is Dangerous,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2015.