

## point of view

# Defending Liberal Education: The Essential Questions

The champions of liberal education and its stand-in, general 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 usually rests on the assumption that the world and its students are becoming too vocational and that without perspectives, values and skills that come from liberal education, they will enter the world as incomplete citizens.

One of the challenges of making the case for liberal education is the problem of language and the propensity of educators to wallow in nuances of words. Last May 15, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the foremost champion of liberal education in America, sponsored a webinar for a few leaders who are participating in a Gates-funded initiative, General Education Maps and Markers (GEMS), the purpose of which is to “reimagine or remap” general education. In the webinar discussion, two incidents occurred that illustrate the challenge we face in communicating. At the beginning of the conversation participants wrangled with whether the project should use “proficiency,” “competency,” or “mastery” as indicators of student achievement and progress. The dispute ended when it was generally agreed that this issue was a topic for continuing consideration.

The other incident — a typed message in the chat room when one participant could not access the discussion by phone — targeted one of the major problems of why educators remain defensive in making a case for liberal education. The participant



pointed out that if we wanted to be persuasive, we must make the case for liberal education in language that can be easily understood by students, parents, legislators, vocational faculty and leaders from business and industry. That is a task we have yet to accomplish.

It is easy to make the argument that we have failed to make our case about the value and necessity of liberal education, in part, because we have failed to communicate in clear language and have settled for a conversation and an advocacy agenda based on our own jargon. There is nothing wrong with having our own in-house voice, Liberal Education, where we share trade secrets with the converted. And most of us can herd our way through the tangled pastures of documents we create to secure grants, make reports and offer visions for the future. It really is okay for us to have a private language. But we cannot use that same language to communicate with constituencies who do not know what we mean by liberal education. Can a first-generation college student distinguish the difference between “proficiency” and “competency”? Does the

CEO of a small manufacturing firm in Peoria know what “rubric” means?

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 in 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.

A major hurdle in creating a set of Essential Questions is creating a set of categories under which to list the questions. If educators find this idea of any value and agree to explore it, there will be a great deal of discussion and possible dissension because every person, every committee and every institution will have a preference and an opinion. The task of creating the Essential Questions is likely to engage a great many stakeholders because it clearly reflects what matters most to us and is stated in a powerful form that makes us begin thinking immediately about our own personal answers.

Even though the language needs updating, W. E. B. DuBois succinctly states the challenge: The final product of

training “must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man.” Here in this draft we attempt to create serviceable categories and list the provocative questions that could provide the foundation for a liberal education for human beings, an education that will fulfill the purpose of education stated by Charles and John Collins in 1968 in *The Case for the Community College: A Critical Appraisal of Philosophy and Function*.

The purpose of education is to help each human being to experience more fully, live more broadly, perceive more keenly, feel more deeply and to pursue the happiness of self-fulfillment and to gain the wisdom to see that this is inextricably tied to the general welfare.

#### Personal Development

Who am I? Where am I going? And what difference does it make?

What values and ideals have I accumulated so far, and what values and ideals do I want to work on for the future?

Do I believe in some kind of god? Why or why not?

Who so far has influenced my personal philosophy of life, and how do I describe my personal philosophy?

What is happiness for me and to what extent am I reaching that goal?

#### Economic Development

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

What are the rewards for working that are important to me?

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?

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?

When I die what do I want my family and friends and coworkers to say about the work I have done?

#### Civic Development

How much do I understand and appreciate being a citizen of a major democracy?

Why should I vote? How do I make a case that my vote counts?

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?

Through what means can I make a difference so that I leave my country better than I found it?

What magazines, news channels, blogs, critics, analysts, and books do I follow to obtain a balanced perspective on current events?

#### Cultural Development

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?

Am I more knowledgeable of popular culture or historical culture? What difference does it make?

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?

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?

What do human beings around the world hold most in common?

#### Social Development

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.?

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?

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. It is quite likely that some employers and legislators will not view these questions positively. Selected legislators will raise the issue that some of these questions are not the responsibility of education, but of the family and the church. Building a case for the value of liberal education that makes sense to employers and legislators needs a different approach. But for faculty and students these kinds of questions may be a breath of fresh air, suggesting new perspectives for what constitutes a common core of education for all.

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.

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Consider how these questions could become the milestones and indicators of progress along the Student Success Pathway.

These Essential Questions might help us to “reimagine” liberal and general education. Consider how you can improve these categories and questions by sending me your suggestions for both to me at [obanion@league.org](mailto:obanion@league.org). Thanks for your interest and assistance. ▲

*Terry O'Banion is the President Emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College and Chair of the Graduate Faculty and Distinguished Professor, Roueche Graduate Center, National American University. After 55 years working in the community college he continues to consult with community colleges across the country and is a prolific contributor to the literature on community colleges. This article is the continuation of a series authored by principals*

*involved in the Roueche Graduate Center, National American University, 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 the Roueche Graduate Center and Community College Week.*

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Q What categories and questions would you add to Terry O'Banion's Essential Questions draft?

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