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What Can I Do with My Liberal Arts Major?: Liberal Arts Education and Curricular Transformations in America

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“A liberal arts degree is worthless in the job market,”

“All you can do with liberal arts degree is to teach, go to graduate school, or hope for a wealthy spouse.”

“Maybe a liberal education was OK generation ago but today's technological society requires specialization in college.”

I.

As the above comments on humanities major are so common among liberal arts students,¹⁾ those students yearn for some satisfactory answers to the question, “What can I do with my liberal arts major?” Met with the pressure of “vocationalism” among students, liberal arts faculty members often remain defensive (“no need to worry about careers”), resistant (“it’s not my job”), or indifferent (“let’s talk about it some other time”).

Within the swirl between the claim of the traditional merits of liberal arts education and the social pressure to keep up with the times, many scholars tried to prove that liberal education prepares a person for employment in a way that transcends the titles of courses: “Students trained in the liberal arts are better able to formulate valid concepts, analyze arguments, define themselves, and orient themselves maturely to the world.” (*A New Case for Liberal Arts*) On the other hand, many liberal arts colleges began to offer a more vocational curriculum to attract the new career-minded students. Liberal arts graduates,

1) In the United States, most humanities departments belong to the college of Arts and Sciences. Arts and Sciences and Liberal Arts are used synonymously and interchangeably, this is not the case in this paper.

however, fear that they are destined to become second-class citizens in the job market. As a result, "What can I do with my liberal arts major?" persists to be their main concern.

In response to these concern and students' desire, American undergraduate institutions did their best to meet this challenge in several ways. They made new arrangements for concentration such as interdisciplinary majors, student-designed majors, and career-oriented majors. Now, let's see in detail how American liberal colleges do this.

II.

The term 'liberal arts' is derived from the Latin *artes liberales*, the higher arts, which in early Roman times were accessible only to freshmen (*liberi*). As the origin of American undergraduate institutions such as Harvard was liberal arts college, so it was believed that liberal arts college students learn basic principles of problem solving (science), logic (philosophy), research (history), and analysis of human motivation (literature). Believing that university should teach only the knowledge that has endured the test of time, traditional scholars argue that the purpose of the undergraduate experience is to expose students to the time-honored truths of the society. Accordingly, employers would expect from college graduates the followings: clear and imaginative thinking, diverse communication skills, and the ability to work well with variety with people. And many humanists (wish to) believe that these skills (not the specific skills of vocational education, but the adaptive skills of liberal education) are best revealed in the humanities:

I would describe the humanities as the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the human experience. The humanities tell us how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled with life's enduring questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended?... We should want all students to know a common culture rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage (Bennett, 6).

As Charles William Eliot suggested in his inaugural presidential address at Harvard in 1869 that "the institutions of higher education...are always a faithful mirror in which are sharply reflected the national history and character," American institutions of higher education have tried to actively respond to the prevailing trends and social values of the day. As the world has become increasingly complex and interconnected, it is natural that one must not only keep up with current knowledge but also learn to deal with the

unanticipated challenges of future. Let's see how American universities set the goal of liberal arts education to meet these needs. The student guide book of the College of Arts and Sciences in Northwestern University says about the goal:

Exactly what should you expect from a liberal education? You can acquire genuine literacy: the ability to write and speak with clarity and force and the corresponding ability to interpret the written and spoken word with nuance and insight. Being exposed to many disciplines and the ways they interact gives you a vivid picture of the complexity of the world...you learn how to acquire knowledge and understanding. A liberal arts education gives you the capacity to make well-reasoned ethical and aesthetic judgements. While your sense of morality was shaped mainly at home during your childhood, your ability to form moral decisions is guided by your growing knowledge of the world and your sharpened powers of reasoning (*Liberal Education: A Guide for Students in the College of Arts and Sciences*).

Many traditionalists further argue that if students are to learn the truths of their common culture, the university must provide programs which enables them to pursue the goals:

Awareness of the classic—particularly important for our innocents; an acquaintance with what big questions were when there were still big questions; models, at the very least, of how to go about answering them; and, perhaps, most important of all, a fund of shared experiences and thoughts on which to ground their friendships with one another (Bennet, 344).

Without these fundamental truths, traditionalists maintain that students will lack the necessary knowledge needed to be informed citizens in American society. They think that students cannot learn to ask critical questions, to think creatively about the past or about their own lives unless they have sufficient background knowledge. Through the study of the humanities and the great thinkers of the past, the traditional curriculum is designed to provide students with the essential "background knowledge," which will enable students to become accomplished individuals and responsible citizens. To them knowledge exists "out there" and can be discovered through objective and empirical means. From this view, knowledge is seen as a series of lawlike, absolute, universal truths that exist independent of a certain context. The scholar's task is to act as a detached observer in the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

These traditional view of knowledge, however, came to be challenged. Challenging view considers knowledge socially constructed within a cultural and historical context. While knowledge was viewed as a series of absolute and universal truths that exist independent

of time, new voices expressed their points-of-view that knowledge is partial, incomplete, and relative. They assume that reality is defined through a process of social interchange. Based on the assumption that there is no one single objective truth, they propose that the purpose of an undergraduate education should be for a full understanding of the works of human beings in the present and the future, thus including various cultural and theoretical perspectives.

Over the past fifteen years, an increasingly pluralistic environment has emerged both within and outside the academy. Grounded in social changes, the international trend toward a global economic marketplace, and the growing recognition of the world as a global village, pluralistic perspectives have had a profound influence on the American undergraduate curricula in the hope that the study of these diverse perspectives may enrich students with a broader and new context. To achieve this purpose, they argue that the traditional canon must include a balanced view of multiple knowledge perspective to be integrated into undergraduate curriculum.

Between 1983 and 1987, 95 percent of American colleges and universities were either currently reviewing their undergraduate curriculum or had completed fundamental revisions of their undergraduate program(Conrad & Haworth, 13). These curricular transformations are based on the changing view of what knowledge is most worth knowing. It is this development, we believe, which has stimulated and signaled a recent transformation in the undergraduate curriculum.

III.

All American undergraduate institutions, as far as I know, require their students to declare a major and to become formally affiliated with a department or a program before the end of their sophomore year. We can classify major programs into four options—departmental major, interdisciplinary major, student-designed majors, and career-oriented majors. While departmental majors has been traditional programs of specialization long before, the other three belong to new arrangements for concentration.

Since most students seek areas of specialization that will lead to an attractive job, many traditional departments are confronted with a question with which they are ill-prepared: "What can I do with my liberal arts major?" As a consequence of these developments, many universities introduced a variety of new programs of specialization or concentration.

For example, some schools introduced double, or interdepartmental majors. While there are many variations, most of the innovations can be grouped under three broad categories: interdisciplinary majors, student-designed majors, and career-oriented majors. These are examples of curricular transformations in response to new trends of academism and recent changes in social or consumers' concerns.

(a) Interdisciplinary Majors

Interdisciplinary majors have increased remarkably in popularity during the past several years. The interdisciplinary major became the most prevalent alternative to traditional majors; 79 percent of the colleges of arts and sciences in the 270 institutions offered interdisciplinary majors. For example, the College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University offers 13 interdisciplinary majors. Among them are cognitive science, science in human culture,²⁾ comparative literary studies, and international studies.

Like interdisciplinary general education programs, the common denominator of the interdisciplinary majors is a focus on a problem, theme, or issue which cuts across two or more academic disciplines. A seemingly endless variety of interdisciplinary majors has been adopted throughout the country. Some of these majors are psychobiology, sociolinguistics, medieval study, and area studies(e.g., African Studies). They have likewise incorporated these new theoretical views into the undergraduate curriculum (from the needs of students and society).

Interdisciplinary majors which deserve special consideration will be cited as follows: environmental studies, women's studies, and ethnic studies.

Environmental Studies Majors:

Perhaps the most well-known of the new interdisciplinary majors, this field has grown rapidly because of society's interest in providing protection and control over the quality of man's environment. A student could, for example, major in English, art history, anthropology, or physics, and coordinate his major with the Environmental Studies

2) According to the brochure, this program prepares students to: "confront the impact of science, medicine, and technology on society and on their own lives. It welcomes students in the humanities who seek to understand the fragmentation of modern culture that attended the rise of science. It also welcomes science students interested in thinking beyond the problem sets assigned in their specialized courses."

Program. At the end of their sophomore year, students meet with the chairman of their department and the Environmental Studies coordinator to plan their academic program.

Women's Studies Majors:

From only two programs in 1970, the number of women's studies programs has grown to 112 in 1974 and 270 in early 1977. In the area of women's studies alone, more than 500 programs and 39,000 courses have been offered in American universities and colleges since 1970. Students can take this program for concentration either through dual majors, or interdisciplinary concentrations.

The major factor for these programs has been the efforts of women to achieve equality and personal freedom in education and American society by offering an alternative to the male-centered curriculum. Feminist thought has generated enormous influence in a number of traditional social science and humanities disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, history, and English. Literature scholars, for example, have begun to investigate why thousands of novels by American women have been excluded from the traditional canon of literary classics. Feminists and critical theorists do not view knowledge as static and objective any more. At the departmental level, many faculty have made attempts to integrate feminist perspectives into their courses.

Ethnic Studies Majors:

This major is designed to encourage the understanding of and appreciation for the cultural, intellectual, social, and economic contributions of various minorities. Three ethnic studies programs are prospering especially: Black Studies, Mexican-American Studies, and Native American Studies. Black or Afro-American Studies, for example, aims to provide background courses on the history, art, literature, music, and cultural characteristics of black people.

This brief introduction to new interdisciplinary majors is far from comprehensive, yet is suggestive of recent developments. There are, of course, pros and cons of interdisciplinary majors. Arguments against the establishment of separate interdisciplinary majors are often voiced by those who are most committed to the traditional academic department. It is frequently pointed out that departments, which are based on well-established traditions for organizing and communicating knowledge, are best equipped to offer programs of concentration. Another argument is that since most faculties are trained in traditional

academic perspectives, interdisciplinary majors often lead to the creation of second-class faculties and educational experiences.

Proponents of interdisciplinary majors point to a number of positive characteristics of the programs. Perhaps most important, an interdisciplinary program often serves to focus attention on a field of knowledge which the existing departments have long tended to ignore. Moreover, such a program can lead to increased interaction between the institution and the outside community, thereby breaking down barriers in the process. Thus, by its very existence, a new program may promote individual and social change. In the process, students may be better able to relate their education to the outside world, both in terms of employment and in preparation for their future lifelong-learning.

(b) Student-designed Majors

According to a recent survey, roughly one-third of all colleges of arts and sciences now offer student-designed majors. For example, Northwestern University explains this program (which is called 'Ad Hoc Major' in this university):

Occasionally students with well-defined interests are led to programs of study that do not fit nearly into the mold of a traditional major. They may develop an ad hoc major by bringing together courses from various departments. Ad hoc majors must be approved by the CAS faculty's Curricular Review Committee. Ad hoc majors approved in recent years include organizational behavior, ethnomusicology, and environmental policy....

Of course, the program is based on the idea that students should be responsible for planning their own programs of concentration. Usually, as the above quotation says, a student, in concert with a faculty member or faculty committee, identifies an area of interest and then outlines a course of study. In short, his program of specialization may be as unique as he wishes to design it, as long as the school is willing to permit the program.

A student can design the program himself and receive credit if what he proposes is considered academically worthwhile. Usually the student's proposal explains why he has chosen this area and addresses the major in a general way. The main parts of the proposal consist of the student's objectives of the program and its justification. The proposal should demonstrate that the choice of courses is consistent with the objectives. One advantage of student-designed majors, as the title suggests, is that through individualization of the major, students are often given considerable flexibility or freedom under the assumption that they are responsible for planning their own programs. Instead of being confined to a

relatively narrow departmental offerings, they have the option of designing programs more suited to their own particular interests. As a result, student motivation for learning is probably enhanced as students become active participants in the shaping of their area of specialization.

On the negative side, such programs are difficult to integrate effectively. Most of the criticism is similar to those of new interdisciplinary majors. In other words, they are time-consuming for faculty, costly to administer, and sometimes inadequate for graduate school admission.

(c) Career-oriented Majors

Career-oriented majors comprise another new arrangement for concentration. While many of these programs sound interdisciplinary, it is characteristic that all career-oriented majors share the attempt to relate a student's specialization to the world of practice. In most cases, a school identifies a career area which it does not offer in its own programs. In turn, (an) existing department(s) offer(s) a new major which is directly related to that career.

It is important to emphasize that this program is usually offered within colleges of liberal arts and sciences. It would also be misleading to identify these majors with vocational education programs. Rather, many of the majors represent new syntheses of liberal and career or professional education. Among the new career-oriented majors are:

Art Therapy	Arts and Science and Business
Arts for Children	Biomedical Ethics
Human Services	Industrial Arts
International Business	Music Merchandising
Music Therapy	

Let's take an example. At the University of Cincinnati, the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Business Administration made an arrangement by which the departments of English, German, and Romance languages offer two programs for students interested in business. A four-year program leads to a B.A. in English, German, French, or Spanish from the College of Arts and Sciences and a Certificate in General or International Business from the College of Business Administration. Students of this plan major in one of the four languages and simultaneously follow a selected schedule of business courses. A five-year Co-op Program leads to a B.A. in English, German, French,

or Spanish, a Certificate in General or International Business, and a Certificate of Professional Development.

Though some defenders of the *status quo* warn that direct relation between academy and the world of practice may result in disaster, undergraduate concentration is becoming more closely linked to the marketplace by establishing new career-oriented majors, incorporating career-oriented minors into traditional major programs, and allowing students to design their own career-oriented majors.

IV.

As we have seen, liberal arts education, between the conflicting claims of liberal arts education and societal pressure, tried to prove that liberal arts education provide students with critical and logical thinking, and creativity. Even though most universities made new arrangements for concentration to meet the changing demands and expectation, they never forget the dangers of "a failure of liberal education." They did not seek a drastic change: they tried to find a golden mean between tradition and innovation.

Through this harmony within innovation, universities made it possible for students to function as a contributing member of diverse and technologically advanced society. The curricular transformations are based on the changing view of what knowledge is most worth knowing. Henry Adams, in his *The Education of Henry Adams*, acutely felt the need that education should reflect prevailing trends and social values of the day: "Education should try to lessen the obstacles, diminish the friction, invigorate the energy, and should train minds to react, not at haphazard, but by choice, on the lines of force that attract their world." In this sense, liberal arts education in America gives students a sense of common culture, thereby preventing them to experience "a rupture in historical sequence."

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