

**ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES**

Institutional Award Winners' Retreat

Friday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010

University of Prince Edward Island

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

**Faculty Development Bulletin**

**Fall 2010**

**Participants:** *Dr. Gerard Curtis, Art History, Department of Visual Arts (Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University, Newfoundland), Dr. Suzanne Seager, Department of Mathematics (Mount Saint Vincent University), Dr. Dale Keefe, Department of Chemistry (Cape Breton University), Dr. Barry Gorman, Sobey School of Business (Saint Mary's University), Dr. Greg Doran, Theatre Studies, Department of English (University of Prince Edward Island), Dr. Janine Rogers, English Department (Mount Allison University), Dr. Norman Goodyear, Plant and Animal Science (Nova Scotia Agricultural College)*

**Facilitators:** Dr. Peter Williams, Acadia University  
Dr. Adam Sarty, Saint Mary's University

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Prior to the meeting, the facilitators sought input from the participants on what topics they wished to discuss. An initial suggestion to discuss the apparent abandonment of liberal education was circulated and it generated several additional questions. Ultimately, we endeavoured to have a discussion that focused on what the goals of a university education should be and how those goals are reflected in our degree structures, our departmental curricula and our individual teaching practice.

To begin the discussion participants were asked to introduce themselves and specifically address whether they felt they were the products of a "liberal education." The retreat participants came from a wide range of backgrounds, spanning the spectrum from a very small affiliated college to a large engineering school. Interestingly, very few of the participants felt that they were products of a liberal education.

We considered the definition of a liberal education as provided by the American Association of Colleges and

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Universities (Appendix I) and we were also read an article entitled “Why university?” by Mark Mercer, Department of Philosophy, Saint Mary’s University, that appeared in the September 22, 2010 issue of *The Journal*, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary’s (Appendix II).

While there was broad consensus on the desired outcomes of a liberal education – to “empower individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change”, the group did not agree that this could only be achieved through a traditional “liberal arts” approach to the curriculum. Further, the group agreed that these outcomes can and are achieved in a variety of curricular approaches and via a variety of disciplines. This conclusion emphasizes the need for support of diversity at all levels – from a single academic unit to the entire university system. The more diverse we can be, the greater the chances are that we will be able to meet the diverse needs of the learners that come to us.

The group did perceive that there exists a tension between the economic forces that drive the system and the goals of a liberal education. Because the cost of a university education is now so high there is a lot of pressure to demonstrate the subsequent financial

benefit to participants and the group felt this was driving enrolment patterns. There was particular concern that students were leaning away from the humanities and social sciences and tending more towards the sciences and professional programs. Our recruiters “sell” university by the jobs they will get for a given discipline. There are also societal pressures that compound this - we tend to associate income with contribution to society and this is seeping into our academic structure (what kind of job can you get/how much money can you earn with an English degree?).

It was felt that some of these pressures influence students’ attitudes towards the “liberal” components of their degree programs. Some students do not take “seriously” the course they are required to take that are not directly related to their primary field of study and simply perceive them as something they “have to do.” Some students may welcome opportunity for creativity/interdisciplinary content. Other groups of students resent being asked to work outside of their program and may see professors as impediments to reaching their goal of a job at the end.

Current students come pursuing “a job” and not knowing what’s out there for them. In some cases, their full university education is devoted to

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getting that job. If universities cater to this as first objective, then are they universities or trade schools? It should be job of the university to provide sufficient breadth of areas that students find something new to them...then they worry about technical training afterward.

We also discussed the effect that economic pressures are having in the research sphere and how that may trickle into the curriculum. If we accept that research informs teaching and recognize that research is being funded to a greater extent than ever by private companies, does that mean needs of private companies are filtering into our curriculum designs? We are even seeing this type of pressure from NSERC - students are counted as "HQP" - we are being funded to train people into jobs.

Some members of the group were uncomfortable with the apparent avoidance of the word "skill" in our discussion of education and felt that there are in fact some skills they want to convey:

- personal skills
  - time management
  - dealing with pressure
  - dealing with stress

- managerial skills
  - writing
  - organization
  - task oriented
- content
  - within each discipline, the content is not meaningless and knowing/remembering things is important)
  - content is something that "nobody can take away" (e.g. we hope doctor's remember!)
  - need to have enough knowledge to look something up
  - AND to synthesize knowledge, you have to know what to look up - that requires content knowledge.
- Creativity: the ability to synthesize and make connections. Come to grips with something new.

We spent some time discussing the balance between general process outcomes and discipline specific outcomes. Some felt that all "information" could be looked up while others felt that a basic grounding in certain facts was needed to form a basis for what to look up. Somehow the process and the content have to work together. A nice example from a 3000-level Math class where the professor is no longer "doing proofs for students." Instead, they are going through the

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\*process\* of “asking 30 questions” to tackle a proof. This does require knowledge of content (otherwise always looking up definitions), but also is teaching the students “how to question”.

We had a very interesting and wide ranging discussion on how we as individuals worked to achieve our goals in our classes. An incredible diversity of approaches was discussed but some common themes did emerge.

It was felt that students should be informed of the rationale being used by the instructor. I.e. what we are doing and why we are doing it. Since we agreed that most of our goals can be achieved in a wide range of disciplines, there must be an emphasis on the process of learning rather than the end result of the specific exercise. The content is the raw material we work with in order to reach the higher level skills of critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, communication, etc.

We also discussed the role that failure has in learning. Many of us have been strongly conditioned to avoid failure. However, the group felt it was important for students to see professors’ fail” as this emphasizes that learning is a process, that it is difficult, that it’s ok to “try and fail”, and that ultimately that is how we all learn. One

of the group was an agriculture professor who intentionally makes “errors” in his teaching garden in order to get students to think critically about what they are seeing.

We also felt it was important to give students an opportunity to teach each other and the professor.

In summary, we had a fascinating discussion that was approached from a broad range of perspectives. The most striking outcome for the facilitator was the incredible diversity of personalities and approaches that was represented by the institutional award winners and by the institutions they represented. Clearly there is no “one size fits all” institution or pedagogical approach and we all must work to preserve the diverse range of opportunities we as individuals and as institutions offer to the students in our university system.

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## Appendix I

### What is Liberal Education?

Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

The broad goals of liberal education have been enduring even as the courses and requirements that comprise a liberal education have changed over the years. Today, a liberal education usually includes a general education curriculum that provides broad learning in multiple disciplines and ways of knowing, along with more in-depth study in a major.

American Association of Colleges and Universities -  
[http://www.aacu.org/press\\_room/what\\_is\\_liberal\\_education.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/press_room/what_is_liberal_education.cfm)

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## Appendix II

### Why university?

The Cranky Professor, *The Journal*, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's  
September 22, 2010

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Why should a young person want to go to university? Why should taxpayers pay any of the cost of her going?

These are always good questions, but they are especially pressing for Nova Scotians right now, as we study the O'Neill report on the future of post-secondary education in our province. That report, commissioned by the province in January, and prepared by economist Tim O'Neill, was released last Friday.

Only if we have a good sense of what a university education is for and why people should care about universities will we be able to evaluate whatever recommendations the report contains.

A common view is that a young person should go to university in order to prepare herself for a career. On this view, taxpayers should be happy to foot at least part of the bill, for they will benefit economically from the skills the university graduate will eventually bring to the workplace and from the taxes she will pay on her higher income.

One problem here is that most of what's taught to undergraduates at a university, especially in arts, has little if anything to do with jobs or careers. Moreover, whatever knowledge or skills a student might gain that would be relevant in the workplace could be acquired elsewhere—from parents or mentors, in college, in professional school, in the workplace itself.

The view that getting a bachelor's degree is about preparing for a career has had bad effects on students and universities. It's at least partly responsible for the high percentage of university students who don't care much about their studies but just want to have a degree to show to prospective employees. It's also responsible for the tendency of universities to try to find ways of making what they offer relevant to the workplace, by, for instance, tailoring academic programmes to the perceived needs of employers or professional schools or instituting co-op

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education, in which students gain credit for job experience.

This tendency to make university relevant to jobs harms universities by distracting students from what universities are really all about and diluting the experience they provide.

What universities are really all about, of course, is liberal education. The only sound reason a person could have to attend university is that she wants an education—better, that she wants the experience of becoming educated.

Liberal education concerns both understanding and taste. At a university, a young person gains knowledge of the world, of the natural and the social world, and, more, gains the ability to explore the world for herself. Her knowledge consists in theories, theories backed by arguments and evidence. She understands competing theories of the world and possesses the resources needed to criticize and extend those theories. And she possesses the sensitivity required to respond aptly to the world as she understands it.

Liberal education produces a critical cast of mind, including habits of circumspection and open-mindedness, and a concern for argument and

evidence. An educated person wants first to understand. She always approaches things in the spirit of investigation, even if her ultimate concern is to reform what she finds.

That attending a university is about becoming educated can make it difficult for people to see why they should support students financially. Clearly education is good for the individual student, so long as she cares to travel on an intellectual journey and to acquire the skills and habits of mind of an intellectual. But why should taxpayers care to fund her journey?

The primary reason why the public should support those who wish to cultivate their intellect and taste is that education is also a social good. The habits of mind and action that university students acquire are not just habits of intellectual life. They are also habits central to responsible citizenship.

When we study the O'Neill report, our task will be to take its recommendations one at a time and ask, would following this recommendation enhance the universities in this province as places of liberal education? We should then seek to enact any recommendation to which our answer is yes. And we should firmly set aside any that threatens liberal education, whatever else can be said in its favour.

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