PART I

Principles and Practices of Integrative Liberal Learning

The concept of a liberal education has been traditionally understood as teaching and learning aimed at developing the knowledge and capacities of free individuals. In curricular terms, a liberal education has generally been seen as combining breadth and depth of inquiry through general education and the major, with the former often being seen as a prelude to the latter. Typically, arts and sciences departments have the primary responsibility for providing courses that fulfill general education requirements aimed at promoting skills and capacities for lifelong learning.

Recently, there has been increasing dissatisfaction with this simplistic approach to liberal education. Faculty believe that sharply separating general education and specialized study makes it less likely that there will be coherence, intentionality, and integration in a student's coursework and less likely that students will gain all that they might from their undergraduate education. Similarly, keeping formal academic instruction separate from learning experiences in the cocurriculum and in communities beyond the classroom misses opportunities to expand students' understanding of the meaning and application of their developing knowledge and skills. At the same time, especially as the cost of education continues to rise, students as well as parents and policy makers question the relevance of a liberal education in preparing students for the career demands of a rapidly changing global economy.

Many colleges and universities are responding to these concerns and rethinking liberal education for the twenty-first century. They are drawing lessons from interdisciplinary courses, majors, and programs to create broader, more intentional, problem-centered curricular designs that better integrate general education and the major across departments and throughout students' experiences to engage them in their learning and demonstrate its relevance. They are also experimenting with more sophisticated ways of linking cocurricular and service-learning activities to specific learning outcomes and of connecting these experiences to coursework. Similarly, they are giving greater attention to career preparation through internships, and they are engaging employers and students in recognizing opportunities for integrating classroom and applied learning. In this environment, faculty in the arts and sciences programs increasingly realize the necessity and desirability of addressing students' career concerns, and faculty in the preprofessional and vocational programs likewise realize the value of grounding their work in a broad liberal education.

As the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) enters its second century, it continues to support and further these developments. They represent a natural and positive evolution of the idea of a liberal education and an emergent ideal of integrative liberal learning. This ideal involves several overlapping principles that reflect a broader concept of undergraduate education in terms of student self-development, a view of integrated learning opportunities and experiences, and greater clarity and transparency of learning outcomes so they are understood by students and others.

DEVELOPING THE WHOLE STUDENT

PRINCIPLE—Integrative liberal learning develops the whole student, laying the groundwork for personal growth, economic productivity, and responsible citizenship. A college education should be more than the accumulation of credits in the arts, humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and sciences—the specific categories of most general education programs. Integrative liberal learning catalyzes a process of intellectual and personal growth by providing students with opportunities and guidance to make sense of the world and their place in it. Students develop and shape their identities by integrating the disparate parts of their undergraduate experience.

PRACTICE—Integrative liberal learning practices feature curricular designs that recognize the stages of student development and the importance of connecting and scaffolding learning experiences. Thematic first-year seminars, second-year community projects, upper-level interdisciplinary seminars, and capstone experiences, for example, support students as they take on progressively challenging tasks. Educational experiences include independent as well as collaborative work. Topics that engage students at both an intellectual and an emotional level lead to deeper and more lasting learning. Advisors, faculty, and staff understand that the educational impact of intellectual and social experiences both in and out of the classroom are strengthened when these experiences are developmentally appropriate and build upon one another.

EXAMPLE—A model for an integrative, developmentally appropriate curricular design includes advising, course work, and experience outside the classroom. Guiding students through the activities across programs and years supports their ability to connect their experiences.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE CURRICULAR DESIGN

Foundation Experiences

- Student self-assessment for plan of study
- Interdisciplinary first-year seminar on sustainability
- Community projects—January term
- Writing and oral communication seminar

Developmental Experiences

- General education science course with lab
- Writing-intensive seminar on contemporary issues
- Creation of a learning portfolio to apply for major and meet with faculty
- Noncredit volunteer work through campus civic engagement center

Culminating Experiences

- Major course with community-based consulting
- Collaborative undergraduate research
- Capstone project
- Internship with alumni mentoring

ADDRESSING COMPLEX ISSUES THROUGH PROBLEM-BASED INQUIRY

PRINCIPLE—Integrative liberal learning should prepare students to tackle complex and unscripted problems. Integrative liberal learning should be personalized and defined in terms of what students are actually able to do, in what context, and at what stage of their learning. Students should be addressing "big questions"—where the answer is not known, the solutions are not simple and well-defined, and the consequences matter. Students must engage with a range of challenging issues in order to develop the analytical skills to respond to them. In facing these kinds of questions, students need the capability to make intellectual and ethical judgments grounded in notions of personal and social responsibility.

PRACTICE—Integrative liberal learning practices emphasize a variety of student-centered and problem-based pedagogies. Students are most likely to engage deeply with their work when they see it as meaningful, relevant, and connected to significant questions of their own choosing. Faculty guidance in contemporary issues courses, interdisciplinary seminars, thematic clusters, service learning, and intercultural experiences encourages students to consider alternative explanations of causes and options for solutions. Problem solving at increasing levels of challenge that requires synthesizing methods, theories, and data empowers students.

EXAMPLE—Assignments for integrative liberal learning provide students with opportunities to engage their higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis and synthesis, while incorporating their own points of view. To address a given problem, students need to apply sophisticated knowledge, skills, and values drawn from a strong foundation in the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and community- or project-based learning experiences.

INQUIRY-BASED ASSIGNMENTS

To allow students to demonstrate this type of integrative liberal learning, assignments—from critical essays to theatrical performances to policy proposals to scientific inquiry—should require them to do the following:

- Identify a specific problem to be addressed, describe the relevant background, and articulate the problem's importance in a local or global context.
- Undertake additional research—outside the course material—to further define the focus and context for their topic or project.
- Take a position on the subject matter that examines his or her own assumptions and those of others.
- Consider disciplines and approaches to the problem or question other than the one they have proposed and assess the potential effects on the local, global, or scholarly landscape.
- Identify possible objections or concerns about their approach or piece of work and its local, global, and/or scholarly implications.
- Decide on their approach, defining the main point of the project or work, providing evidence supporting the strength of their approach/ideas, and considering implications for success.
- Develop, implement, or test their idea with peers, colleagues, faculty, community partners, and others to evaluate their reasoning and consider next steps and potential redesign or revision of their work.
- Reflect on their work, synthesize feedback and lessons learned, and conceptualize a new or revised idea or approach.