

## **A Report on the Conversation about the Future of Liberal Education at the University of Washington**

**Gerry Philipson  
Chair, Faculty Senate**

When the idea of a conversation about the University's future was first proposed by the UW administration, a small group of faculty had, through the auspices of the Faculty Senate leadership, been talking about the values that seem to have been shaping the University's recent history. So this group of faculty proposed that they join in, in order to make a conversation led by faculty a central part of the larger conversation, one which would focus on key values of decision and action, and which might inform the future.

After an initial period of negotiation with the administration, and then with the support and encouragement of President Richard L. McCormick, the faculty group set about to organize a series of events and discussions as part of the larger conversation. There were two aspects of this series, one concerning the related issues of strategic planning and faculty participation in shared governance, and another concerning the future of the liberal arts. Here I report on the series of four forums the Faculty Senate sponsored that dealt with the future of liberal education at the University.

### Why a focus on the future of the liberal arts at UW?

1. The emphasis that the University places on the future on the liberal arts will make a statement about what the University values in terms of its approach to knowledge.

The liberal arts encompass those studies that transcend disciplinary boundaries—the arts of reasoning, calculation, invention, judgment, expression, interpretation, and the like. A university's commitment to such arts is commonly expressed through its program of general education, that is those studies that a university says all students must take to satisfy the requirements for graduation.

That a university provides for the liberal arts, and how it provides for them, expresses its calculation of the importance of general learning versus specialized training. For example, the degree of freedom that students have to pursue both a specialized major and a broad program of study in subjects outside their major field reveals a university's sense of mission in terms of disciplinary specialization versus general education.

In an era of increased specialization and commercialization of university life, it is important for a university contemplating its future to ask what role the arts of liberal learning have in that future.

2. The liberal arts are always directed toward some political ideal and thus the future choices that the University makes as to what the liberal arts shall encompass here, as expressed in particular curricular options and emphases, expresses a political commitment.

Traditionally the liberal arts encompassed those studies that educational leaders believed were necessary to equip students to perform the role of citizen in a free society. This extended not only to general skills, sometimes called proficiencies, but to areas of common content, sometimes called general education, as well. In both senses, of proficiency requirements and common content, the liberal arts have provided the

education through which students learn to speak to each other across and beyond their particular occupational, professional, or technical specialties. Thus, the choices that a university makes about the liberal arts express a political commitment.

For example, in the earliest known experiments in higher education, those of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, the moral and strategic emphasis of higher learning was to educate a person to understand and to help sustain a relatively unitary culture. And the curriculum served that strategic design. For much of the later part of the twentieth century American colleges and universities required all their students to study the history of western civilization so as to provide the students access to the best that could be known to equip them for lives of productivity and enlightenment. In our own time in our own university, we have struggled over whether to require that all students take, as part of their general education, course work that addresses historically underrepresented and under-studied peoples in our culturally and politically complex society. How we envision our future, and what steps we take to shape it, will inevitably constitute a political statement about the purpose and spirit of higher education in our time and beyond.

Thus, whether and how we, in our time, address the question of what we shall study in common will inevitably constitute a political statement of one sort or another and as a faculty and university community we need, periodically, to address that question through a sustained discussion.

3. It is a good time to conduct a conversation about liberal education at the University.

It is now many years since the University held a sustained discussion about liberal education here. Seven years ago we abolished one set of Proficiency and Distribution requirements and, at the same time, abolished the Arts & Sciences General Education Committee, a committee that provided continual oversight of general education in the University's largest college.

One area of unfinished business is that after the new proficiency and distribution requirements were implemented in 1993, there was an extended process of deliberation, ending in 1996, as to whether the University should adopt a cultural and ethnic diversity requirement for all undergraduate students. Although the proposal to adopt such a requirement was overwhelmingly approved by the Faculty Senate in open vote, it was overwhelmingly disapproved in a vote of all voting faculty. Recent events on campus suggest that the issue is still a live and important one.

Given that from time to time faculties and the public they serve reconsider what should be at the core of what it means to be an educated person, and should reconsider what should be the ends and emphases of higher education in a given institution, such a discussion should be part of the University's conversation about its future.

4. Liberal education might need protection in a conversation about the University's future.

For all its centrality to the mission of an American institution of higher education, such as the University of Washington, liberal education could be vulnerable to exclusion from such a conversation and therefore vulnerable to diminution in the future of an institution engaged aggressively in strategic planning. As American higher education in general and the University of Washington in particular look increasingly to funding support for initiatives that are marketable, who will speak for liberal education, which does not always enjoy the same ready access to corporate support and federal research dollars

that other aspects of the University do? The support for liberal education must come, the faculty group concluded, from within, and must be grounded in an internal commitment to something that is central to our mission.

Thus, given the climate of funding in higher education today, it is important to include in a conversation about our University's future a discussion of its commitment to liberal education.

### The Conversation

The Faculty Senate sponsored five related forums about the future of liberal education at the University. In the first three, a distinguished scholar was invited to campus to talk about liberal education and in each of these two UW faculty members responded to the visitor's talk and then there was a discussion that drew in members of the assembled audience.

The visiting speakers and local respondents were selected so as to represent a diversity of views. These participants are listed in Appendix A.

To provide a brief narrative of the process, we can begin with a consideration of the three outside speakers. The first, William Sullivan, spoke about the university as citizen, the second, Michael Leff, spoke about the ancient and enduring liberal arts tradition of educating students to speak in public with prudence and intelligence, and the third, Carol Geary Schneider, spoke about diversity in liberal education. A day after these presentations, a forum was held in which seven members of the University community took stock of what had been said and made suggestions for the future. Finally, in the fifth forum, four UW scholars, drawn from different disciplines, discussed the importance for the future, of the humanities and the sciences, and of education for technical competence versus education that cultivates the capacity of judgment.

Given that, over the five forums, there were twenty people who gave prepared addresses or responses, it is difficult to encapsulate every view that was expressed. It is impossible to formulate an absolute unity of thought from these diverse expressions of opinion and recommendation. Nonetheless, a careful auditing of the extended conversation permits the formulation of a few observations of shared emphases and common concerns, and to that I now turn.

1. Liberal education is that education that helps to make the person who experiences it free (from the Latin liber 'free'), free in two important senses.
  - Liberal education consists, in part, of education in and for those arts that are essential to the lives of all free persons, free in the sense of free to engage in the life of a democratic society. They are the arts, as Cicero would say, that endow those who study them with freedom to participate in power.
  - Liberal education consists, in part, of education that is broad enough that those who experience it are freed to see and think beyond the perspectives of a particular discipline, profession, or specialty.
2. Liberal education should not be conceived in terms of a specified set of courses or lists of readings but rather should be conceived in terms of a set of competencies or experiences that define the educated person.

Outside speakers as well as UW speakers and respondents were of nearly one voice when asked what courses of study should be required to enhance liberal education at a university. Our speakers and respondents proposed that the content of liberal education should focus on the liberal arts themselves, as intellectual arts. Thus, rather than taking a course or two in, say, social science, students should be expected, and given the opportunity, to learn to think as a social scientist, think as a humanist, think as a scientist, think and feel as an artist. It was the engagement in intellectual and artistic work, and the attendant arts that such engagement would imply, that our speakers advocated and advocated quite passionately.

At one moment in the conversation, a group of UW faculty, administrators, and students was asked to respond to the question, "What should the educated person of the twenty-first century be expected to know?" Those who replied emphasized that the question should be re-stated as, "What kind of educational experiences should the educated person have?" They answered that question by saying that the educated person should have experiences in reflective thought, writing, speaking, engagement with significant texts, engagement with a discipline, and engagement with disciplines and persons that are different from oneself and one's specialized field of study.

### 3. Liberal education is inherently an education in experiential social practice.

Each of the three outside speakers made a principled argument for the liberal arts as a study in engaged social practice.

William Sullivan, a philosopher of higher education with the Carnegie Foundation argued that the public mission of a university is to bring the tradition of the humane and civic arts to bear on the problems and concerns of the present. He proposed a university that would serve a larger public purpose as a citizen within civil society than being simply a self-aggrandizing creature of the market. Universities, he said, educate students for citizenship to the degree they become places for cooperative dialogue and interaction among diverse groups of citizens from the larger community.

Michael Leff, a Professor of Communication Studies at Northwestern University, also argued for liberal education as engaged social practice. Drawing from the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero's works, he articulated a vision of liberal education that is quintessentially social. In Leff's Ciceronian view, students become broadly educated in preparing for and engaging in the art of speaking about consequential matters to their fellow citizens. For this task of civic communication, broad, general learning—much of which might at first glance seem useless—is necessary for prudent and informed discourse among free people. At the same time, the experience of speaking to others in dialogue is an activity in and through which students learn an art that is essential to civil discourse—the art of contemplating two or more sides to a complex issue.

Carol Geary Schneider, a historian who is President of the American Association of Universities and Colleges, also proposed an inherently social view of liberal education. She argued that liberal education is the process through which students acquire civic or democratic capital and that liberal learning prepares and inspires them to take social responsibility in their lives after graduation. Like Leff, Geary Schneider emphasized learning to see more than one side to a question. She asked, "How well prepared will UW students be to deal with fundamental questions of opposing values?"

To summarize, the speakers, the respondents, the participants in dialogue who together constituted our conversation, affirmed three important principles:

- The function of liberal education in helping to educate people who are free to participate in power and free to think beyond their narrow specialties,
- The nature of liberal education as education in the arts of learning and civic participation, and
- The function of liberal education in serving the ideal of democratic aspirations and practices.

If there is one conclusion that can be drawn from the conversation as a whole it is that the faculty, students, and administration of this university spoke with a nearly unified voice in support of the importance of the kind of broad, general, and socially grounded education that falls under the heading "liberal education."

### Some Moments in the Conversation

In addition to the general conclusions presented above, the conversation—ranging over five different occasions—had many poignant moments. A few of these are as follows.

- In the session on diversity, a UW faculty member asked whether students in the natural sciences and other technical fields have room in their schedule for further general education such as would be required if we adopted a cultural and ethnic diversity requirement. A graduate student in a natural science department stood to say that she had taken a broad array of studies at her undergraduate college, which emphasized breadth of learning over specialization, and that when she came to the UW as a graduate student she was initially behind her colleagues in the amount she knew, but had by the winter caught up, and would forever have a rich liberal education because her undergraduate institution provided and supported it.
- Professor John Palka of Zoology, in responding to a philosopher's appeal for education for civic involvement, pointed out ways that UW students in environmental studies are learning and applying their knowledge of basic science in field projects that engage the students not only in theoretical training but practical involvement as well.
- In the session on the humanities and sciences, Professor Keith Benson of Medical History and Ethics, reported that when UW students apply to the UW School of Medicine they are interviewed by an admissions committee. The UW students, he reports, excel in the amount of specialized training they have but fall far short of students from other institutions when asked to speak about the ethical and social aspects of matters of life and death.
- Professor Michael Leff of Northwestern University was asked about opportunities for student research and replied that research can be the right thing for some students but it is not a substitute for broad learning in a wide range of subjects and Professor Hazard Adams of English distinguished between research, as investigation into a particular problem, and scholarship, the sustained search for broad and integrated knowledge.
- Secretary of the Faculty and Professor of Law Lea Vaughn called for the abolition of all machine-graded tests, so that students would have to write—or speak—their answers to complex questions and so that faculty would have to read or hear the complex expressions of thought that our students produce.
- Professor Maynard Olson of Medicine proposed that the University organize its resources so that every UW undergraduate could take an extended, interdisciplinary course that

sketches human history over the past million years, a course that would bring together scientists, humanists, and artists into one sweeping view of human life on the planet.

#### One positive step taken as a result of the conversation

An important part of the liberal arts conversation was the participation of the students and instructor of a course organized to play a role in the conversation. Dr. James Clowes of Comparative History of Ideas conducted a course titled, "Rethinking the University" and offered it to undergraduate and graduate students from many parts of the University. The students in the course attended all the sessions of the liberal arts conversation, met with many of the guest speakers for intensive discussions, participated in all of the forums, and at the end produced a report that was submitted to President McCormick.

President McCormick met with the CHID class to discuss and respond to their report and recommendations. What began at that moment was continued later in a series of small-group discussions with McCormick, the students, and Clowes. At the end of these discussions, plans were established for future offering of a CHID course on the nature of the University. Thus, this very concrete step was made directly as a result of the conversation. Next year, and there is a projection for future years as well, students from every corner of the campus will have an opportunity to take a course in which they study and reflect on the nature of universities in society and, in particular, on the nature and future of this University.

August 3, 2000