Revitalizing General Education: Closing the Gap Between Teaching and Research

To resolve the contemporary crisis in liberal education, educators must meet the transformed realities of a modern research university by re-envisioning the nature and function of so-called "general education." Our Big Idea presents a pilot program for a dramatically revitalized Gen Ed at the University of Oregon.

A few weeks ago, just hours after an article appeared in The New York Times bemoaning the demise of the Humanities, Stan Katz, former ACLS president and current director of the Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School, blogged back a sharp rejoinder: "this is not a 'humanities' problem but a 'liberal arts' problem." Katz's blog diagnoses a generalized decline in liberal education overall; in terms of attracting students and conferring BA degrees, he avers, mathematics and physics aren't doing any better than literature. Yet the matter is in our hands, Katz suggests; we educators need to get our message across more effectively. "The case we need to make is that a free market democracy needs liberally educated citizens in order to function optimally."1

We agree with Katz's conclusion wholeheartedly. The endlessly cited "crisis of the Humanities" is, in truth, the crisis of liberal education. Over the past few decades, liberal education has come increasingly to define itself defensively, by way of polarized contrast with vocational training and professional education. This debate helps us understand what liberal education is not (it's not "utilitarian," not focused on specific job skills, not part of specific career tracks) -- but it does little to tell us, positively, what liberal education is.

At the same time, in response to a public that is increasingly concerned -- and rightfully so -- with the returns on its investments in higher ed, we educators have tended to focus our attentions on the skills that liberal education provides (e.g. in critical thinking, in writing and verbal communication, in ethical reasoning, in research and scientific method). The market value of liberal education, we have repeatedly argued, lies in its indispensable practical value for whatever career or life path students ultimately choose. However, this focus on a generic, content-independent skill set has contributed to the devaluation of liberal education; liberal education has, in the public eye, become divorced from the production, preservation and transmission of knowledge -- as well as from the research activities of our own faculty. We have defined liberal education as "general education" and have allowed gen ed to become the mere "service" arm of the university.

Our proposal is to develop a pilot program that would replace the current system of distribution requirements with curricula organized by faculty who have affiliated into cross-disciplinary "Teaching Institutes." Currently students satisfy their Gen Ed requirements with twelve "group-satisfying" courses, a two-term Writing requirement, two years of language and/or math, and a two-term Multicultural Requirement. For now,

our proposal addresses only the group-satisfying aspect of Gen Ed. Students participating in the pilot program would complete their group-satisfying gen ed requirements via twelve courses and/or other opportunities within a Teaching Institute, organized around a compelling question or theme.

Curricula for these Teaching Institutes would, for the most part, be drawn from existing gen ed courses -- but funding for these institutes would enable the development of a very wide array of other educational opportunities within the Institute: e.g. sophomore and junior level tutorials, internships/externships, study abroad, team-taught courses, new advising and mentoring structures, colloquia, summer research projects (analogous to the McNair Fellowship research program), etc. The opportunities within an Institute would comprise a menu from which a student could select his or her twelve options to satisfy the University's Gen Ed requirement. Taken together, a student's immersion in the life of the Institute would enable in-depth and multidisciplinary exploration of a broad topic or question: the Institute's "focus."

For us, this immersion gracefully and sufficiently takes the place of a "bean-counter" approach to distribution requirements. Guidelines could be established to ensure that all Teaching Institutes include roughly the same type and same general variety of educational opportunities -- but within that variety, students would be able to experiment and meander, discovering in their own lives the transformative potential of a truly liberal education. This immersion, we believe, will serve to deepen students' investments in their own learning, while at the same time creating a vital new context for advising: advising with a vision.

Much attention will need to be paid to developing Institute foci that are immediately and transparently relevant -- capable of functioning across many disciplines and learning styles, and able to feed into a variety of different Major specializations and career aspirations. Example foci like "Global Citizenship," "Sustainability," "Entrepreneurship and Leadership" communicate their relevance immediately to a broad constituency, both on and off campus. Such foci could easily bridge the existing gap between specialization in Majors on the one hand, and our existing conception of general education on the other. The big questions that have historically motivated liberal inquiry could also be the foci of institutes, for instance "What does it mean to be human?" "What are the rights and obligations of an individual?" "Where have we come from?" "Can we see into the future?" "Art vs. technology: is one more important?" In these Institutes, the associated educational opportunities would let students discover the relevance of the questions to everyday life.

As we see it, the principal strength of the Institute approach is that it is built on direct interaction among faculty. The kind of intellectual interaction we imagine is the basis of many research collaborations on this campus, but it is rarely on view in the classroom. A few faculty across CAS divisions have collaborated to team-teach, but often at their own cost. Moreover, based on observations in the FIG (Freshman Interest Group) program, where this does happen, we think that faculty will enjoy it and students will benefit. We don't imagine that all faculty whose courses contribute to an Institute would work closely
together, but rather, that Institute functions and decision-making would bring faculty in diverse disciplines together and natural partnerships would form. We expect the result to be greater enthusiasm for teaching General Education courses, as faculty create the intellectual framework of an Institute and discover new connections between their own and other courses. We anticipate that most of the faculty in an Institute would come from the College of Arts and Sciences, but we would urge inclusion of as many professional school faculty as possible. This would promote interaction among faculty who are ordinarily isolated from each other, and would help students see the links between their professional work and core elements of the liberal arts and sciences.

There are four key assumptions behind our proposal:

1. A truly "general" or "liberal" education must be at least as deep as it is broad. Such education nurtures "the full development of human talent" and "prepares students for full participation as citizens in a free, democratic society" (to quote our Academic Plan) by enabling sustained engagement in a set of enduring, intrinsically meaningful questions.

2. The "general" of "gen ed" must entail interdisciplinarity. Built into every Teaching Institute -- through team teaching, colloquia, etc -- would be the commitment to a robust cross-disciplinary dialogue. The goal would be for students to discover both common and distinctive features in the ways different disciplines go about making sense of the universe and ourselves.

3. You can raise money for general education. "Teaching Institutes" might easily become endowed entities, allowing us a way to fundraise effectively for broad-based teaching initiatives. Such fundraising will help us offset the effects of increased enrollments.

4. The classroom is our laboratory. The very notion of a "Teaching Institute" challenges the distinction between teaching and research. This distinction will need to be challenged, if we are to communicate the vibrancy of our research agendas to a public that seems to have lost faith in liberal education.

Practical Considerations:

This proposal should be considered a place-holder for a fully-developed plan that will require more time and a far more consultative process in order to construct. Gen Ed reform affects every teaching unit on campus and potentially shifts enrollment patterns and resource allocations. Any move forward will require sensitivity, dedication and patience. Questions that must be addressed during construction include the following:

1. How will Institute foci and participating faculty be identified? We imagine a process that combines a call for faculty ideas with an outreach effort that suggests possible foci and faculty associations, based on the content of
existing courses. The intellectual affinities necessary for success can’t be created administratively; they must develop naturally among faculty. The administrative role would be to create opportunities for faculty to consider the idea, and if it appeals, act on it. We suggest beginning with a pilot phase consisting of a small number of Institutes.

2. How will the number of courses associated with an Institute be determined? We can imagine organizational structures that differ in size and flexibility. At one extreme, an Institute would include 30-40 courses and other opportunities (e.g. internships, colloquia, etc), from which students would choose 12. The courses would be drawn from the 3 traditional disciplinary areas (Arts and Letters, Social Science, and Natural Science) and students would work, term-by-term, with an Institute adviser to ensure course and opportunity selection that achieved a good sampling of each area. (Part of our aim here is to move away from a checkbox approach to general education: distribution requirements would give way to advising.) The course offerings would include both lower-division (100- and 200-level) and upper-division (300-level) courses, encouraging students to pursue an interest at a more sophisticated level. At the other extreme, an Institute could be quite small – consisting of something like 8-12 courses, all of which would be taken by the students who selected that Institute. In this case, the Institute focus could be more specific, and participating faculty could interact more intensely than they would in a larger, looser Institute. Institutes of 8 courses could be designed to complement Arts and Sciences majors by including courses only in the 2 areas outside the major. For instance, a small Institute designed for science majors would include only Arts and Letters and Social Science courses.

3. Will students have sufficient access to Institute courses? It will be essential to work out the relationship between the anticipated need for these courses and the schedule and scale of offering them. To optimize the potential for students to fit these courses into their overall academic plans, we should probably not specify any sequence in which they should be taken. This arrangement will limit the cohort character of the Institute students, but will free the initiative from the constraints that made the Pathway program impractical.

4. Will departmental budgets be affected? We are sensitive to the tight linkage between General Education courses and essential departmental funding. If the Institute model were adopted for all group-satisfying coursework, 2 principles should be applied:

a. The full array of Institutes should be examined carefully with an eye to maintaining the balance of course types that is in place now.

b. The budget model would have to be manually adjusted for the first few years to ensure that units were not damaged by the change.
A prototype Institute: As a guide to considering our proposal in its present embryonic state, we have sketched out a prototype Institute called "Global Citizenship" in Appendix 1. This example should be viewed with caution, since it is not based on consultation with any of the relevant faculty and represents a sampling only of the many potential classes that might fit such a theme. Moreover, since the prototype includes only of formal courses, it lacks the richness of the other educational experiences (study abroad, internships, and so forth) that would be associated with the real Institute. One first step to developing that richness might be partnership with other Big Ideas authors: a Teaching Institute on "Global Citizenship" seems particularly consonant with the Gen Ed reform goals articulated in the "Global Oregon" proposal. In general, we hope this prototype will serve stimulate further dialogue. The example is of the large, loose Institute type, but it’s possible to imagine small Institutes within it. Following a brief description of the focus, the "Global Citizenship" courses are listed by title.

Response to Big Ideas Criteria

1. Aligns with UO’s mission and the general goals in the Academic Plan.
2. Addresses the core missions including teaching and learning, impact on general education, the student experience, research and engagement.

Our proposal was conceived in direct dialogue with the Academic Plan. At the heart of our deliberations was this overriding question: how can we sustain our central "quintessential identity" in an environment of rapid cultural and institutional change? Of particular concern was the impact of increased undergraduate enrollments on every aspect of the student experience. At the same time, we were inspired by our extraordinary cultural moment, with its myriad challenges and opportunities: liberal education must be reconceived for the 21st century. Our very institutional life depends upon it.

3. Builds on existing UO academic strengths, including disciplinary or interdisciplinary programs. Demonstrates a "critical mass" of faculty interest and participation.
4. Fosters new cross-institutional collaboration and partnerships with other units at UO.

As one of the smallest AAU universities, Oregon has long nurtured a reputation for excellence in teaching; we pride ourselves on bringing the values of a liberal arts education to life in the context of a comprehensive research institution. This proposal takes such pride as its point of departure.

Furthermore, this proposal presents a mechanism for assembling "critical mass" and catalyzing interdisciplinary innovation at the level of general education. For the key structural element of our proposal, we chose the title "Teaching Institute" advisedly, aiming for a resonance with the existing notion of the Research Institute. Our goal here is to address the gap between the teaching and the research missions of the University. This gap, we feel, has seriously hobbed the very notion of a liberal
education, and fails to capture the true vitality of university life where the classroom is -- sometimes quite literally -- our laboratory.

5. **Strengthens some existing disciplines.**

   Our proposal may be particularly useful for our colleagues in Arts and Letters. Intensive collaboration is central to the UO's current strategic planning process, the "phased focus approach" addressed in the Academic Plan. For scholars and artists in the humanities and fine arts, however, such collaboration may occur exclusively in teaching. For such colleagues, the mode of inquiry and creativity undertaken in the classroom doesn't simply communicate knowledge: it actively generates it.

6. **Links to fundamental societal opportunities, challenges or needs.** Incorporates assessment and communication strategies to articulate benefits and impact.

7. **Proposes a viable funding model from a combination of revenues such as private fund-raising, General Fund dollars, and/or competitively awarded grants or contracts (budgets not necessary, just discussion, workshop available on this one). Include infrastructure investments needed.**

8. **Is sustainable beyond the three to five year "focus phase."**

   President Obama has spoken in forceful and inspiring terms about the importance of higher education. A revitalized model for gen ed is essential, we feel, for the future of American universities. Oregon can, and should, emerge as a leader in such reform. With a well-articulated vision, we could compete successfully for federal and private funding to achieve our goals. Moreover, the "Teaching Institute" concept provides a convenient mechanism for private endowment.

   Ultimately, however, the proof of this particular pudding will be the appeal it achieves for faculty, students and the general public alike. If the Teaching Institutes prove attractive to enrolling students and teaching faculty, they will sustain themselves in the long run via robust enrollments and improved retention statistics.

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APPENDIX 1.

Prototype Teaching Institute:

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Focus Description:

At an exponential rate, our world is becoming increasingly interconnected and inextricably interwoven; transfers of information and technology, shared economic and ecological systems, cultural exchanges and porous, political boundaries are all rapidly defining a new awareness of our common global reality. Now more than ever, understanding one's place in the world and one's role in our nation's future requires an expanded sense of human identity. We must strive for an international understanding of our cultural heritage, political influence and economic opportunities; now more than ever, we need to embrace a collective understanding of our global citizenship. Nonetheless, if the phrase is new, the idea is an old one, embracing not only our lived present but also our historical past. The link between political empowerment and responsibility begins in antiquity and is expanded to global dimensions through early empires from Sumeria to Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, China…. The Teaching Institute in Global Citizenship provides a solid background for Majors in everything from Economics to History to Environmental Studies. Students will emerge from the Institute conversant with the manifold realities of the world community.

"Global Citizenship" Course Titles:

SOCIAL SCIENCE

ANTH 161 – World Cultures
ANTH 280 – Introduction to Language and Culture
ANTH 326 – Caribbean Societies
ANTH 331 – Cultures of South Asia
EC 101 – Contemporary Economic Issues
ENVS 201 – Introduction to Environmental Studies: Social Sciences
ES 101 – Introduction to Ethnic Studies
GEOG 142 – Human Geography
GEOG 201 – World Regional Geography
GEOG 342 – Geography of Globalization
GEOG 343 – Society, Culture, and Place
HIST 104, 105, 106 – World History
INTL 240 – Perspectives on International Development
INTL 260 – Culture, Capitalism, and Globalization
JDST 213 – The Jewish Encounter With Modernity
LING 101 – Introduction to Language
LING 295 – Language, Culture, and Society
PS 101 – Modern World Governments
PS 204 – Introduction to Comparative Politics
PS 205 – Introduction to International Relations
PS 321 – Introduction to Political Economy
PS 324 – European Politics
PSY 366 – Culture and Mental Health
REES 315 – Politics of Language

**ARTS AND LETTERS**

ART 382 – Art of the Silk Route
COLT 101/02/03 – Introduction to Comparative Literature (I, II, III)
DAN 301 – Dance and Folk Culture
EALL 209 – Language and Society in East Asia
ENG 107/08/09 – World Literature
FR 150 – Cultural Legacies of France
GER 223 – Germany: A Multicultural Society
HUM 254 – The City
ITAL 150 – Cultural Legacies of Italy
JDST 212 – Medieval and Early Modern Judaism
MUS 358 – Music in World Cultures
REL 101 – World Religions: Asian Traditions
REL 353 – Dark Self, East and West
SCAN 340 – Emergence of Nordic Cultures and Society
SPAN 150 – Cultural Legacies of Spain

**SCIENCE**

Anth 367 – Human Adaptation
BI 130 – Introduction to Ecology
BI 308 – Freshwater Biology
BI 357 – Marine Biology
ENVS 202 – Introduction to Environmental Studies: Natural Sciences
GEOG 141 – The Natural Environment
GEOG 143 – Global Environmental Change
GEOG 321 – Climatology
GEOG 323 – Biegeography
GEOG 360 – Watershed Science and Policy
GEOL 103 – The Evolving Earth
GEOL 310 – Earth Resources and the Environment
PHYS 161 – Physics of Energy and Environment
PHYS 155 – Physics Behind the Internet
PHYS 361 – Modern Science and Culture