

EXCELLENCE FOR EVERYONE AS A NATION GOES TO COLLEGE 

as Liberal Learning

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types of learning in order to better understand and deal with open-endedness. Through a problem-based approach in class, students are challenged to see that we are constantly rethinking how we know things and to participate in that rethinking.

It does not require much of an analogic leap to see how, through a problem-based learning approach, advising can be reconceived as a collaborative process of teaching and research. Advising as problem-based learning can challenge students' narrative imaginations and make them question what they value in their own learning. What do they think they know about studies in the major? Are faculty members simply "generic" professors in their majors, or are they field specialists whose interests span disciplinary boundaries? How does student learning in the major integrate with learning in the core and other studies across the curriculum? Would students engage their learning differently if they could see how their personal

educational goals are reflected in the courses they take? Most importantly, depending on how the problem is posed in advising scenarios, a problem-based learning approach to advising can put the learning outcomes that students value least into real-world contexts that help them realize the importance and the practicality of a liberal education.

Let me briefly give a few examples. In advising premed students, I am often struck by how many of them are biology or chemistry majors. The first question I ask them is why. Invariably, they respond by saying that they want to go to medical school—a fair enough answer. But then I always come back with, "I am a bit confused. Can you help me? I thought you wanted to be doctor, not a biologist (or chemist). What do doctors do?" This is usually a stumper, but I do not leave it there. I try to pose a provocative problem: "Let's say you are a doctor now. How would you relate to the difficulties a traditional Islamic woman faces



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end, students are challenged to rethink and take ownership of how they formulate their own learning, beliefs, and values.

In these advising scenarios, students are challenged to put themselves into different situations vicariously and asked how they can use their learning to understand and empathize. Equally important, they learn that what they glean from their courses is akin to any reader response; that is, it is necessarily “filtered” through the alembic of their personal experiences and the immediacy of their educational goals. Most of the students I have worked with have asked some version of this question: why hasn’t someone talked to us about this before?

Conclusion

The problem is not that students are averse to the liberal learning outcomes AAC&U member institutions hold important. Rather, it is that we have been remiss in introducing and orienting students to the nature of liberal learning and university study. We have not equipped students to engage their learning intentionally, nor have we helped them to understand how their learning engages their lives. We have not demonstrated to them the interdisciplinary nature of liberal learning, and we have not modeled that ourselves.

None of this will be corrected through advising as students now experience it. Too often, advising has been considered the sorry stepchild in the academy—and perhaps rightfully so. But if we hope to address the issues raised by our students’ own understandings of and attitudes toward liberal learning, then we must rethink advising; we must redefine advising as a practical liberal learning endeavor.

I have outlined just one possible iteration of advising as liberal learning. Through a problem-based learning approach, we can help students “encounter” the communities they live in locally, nationally, and globally. We can help them understand through experience that the ways we socially construct meaning

are the same as the ways we learn to understand our own personal meanings. We can help them understand that the incongruities they encounter through liberal learning—incongruities that they might not otherwise encounter—are as open-ended as their daily experiences are.

This kind of advising can help students realize how their contextual and critical thinking continually helps them examine and be sensitive to new contexts that challenge their ways of understanding. Finally, we can help students understand that the liberal learning outcomes they say they value least in their undergraduate education are the very same ones that can help them examine their personal commitments to learning and to themselves. This is advising as it could be. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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