

ANTHONY MANSUETO

A Question-Centered Approach to Liberal Education

PERSPECTIVES

How do colleges and universities provide an education that is both rigorous and accessible, and that helps students understand the liberal arts tradition and the larger global context in which they will live and work?

THE PRESENT PERIOD is characterized by an unprecedented degree of global integration at the economic, political, and cultural levels. Economically, this has created a situation in which, as Robert Reich (1992) has argued, only creative problem solvers and innovators will be able to compete globally. Politically, it has begun to break down the nation-state and challenged us to rethink the meaning of democracy in what has become a global public arena dominated by powerful corporations, a single superpower, and international organizations. Culturally, the implications of global integration remain uncertain. Some observers, such as Francis Fukuyama (1989), have argued that we have, in effect, reached the “end of history”: capitalism, democracy, and a modern secular worldview have won the day, and future global interactions are likely to be dominated by technological and economic issues rather than ideological and cultural struggles. Others, such as Samuel Huntington (1993), have argued that we face a “clash of civilizations” as irreconcilably different societies vie for global power.

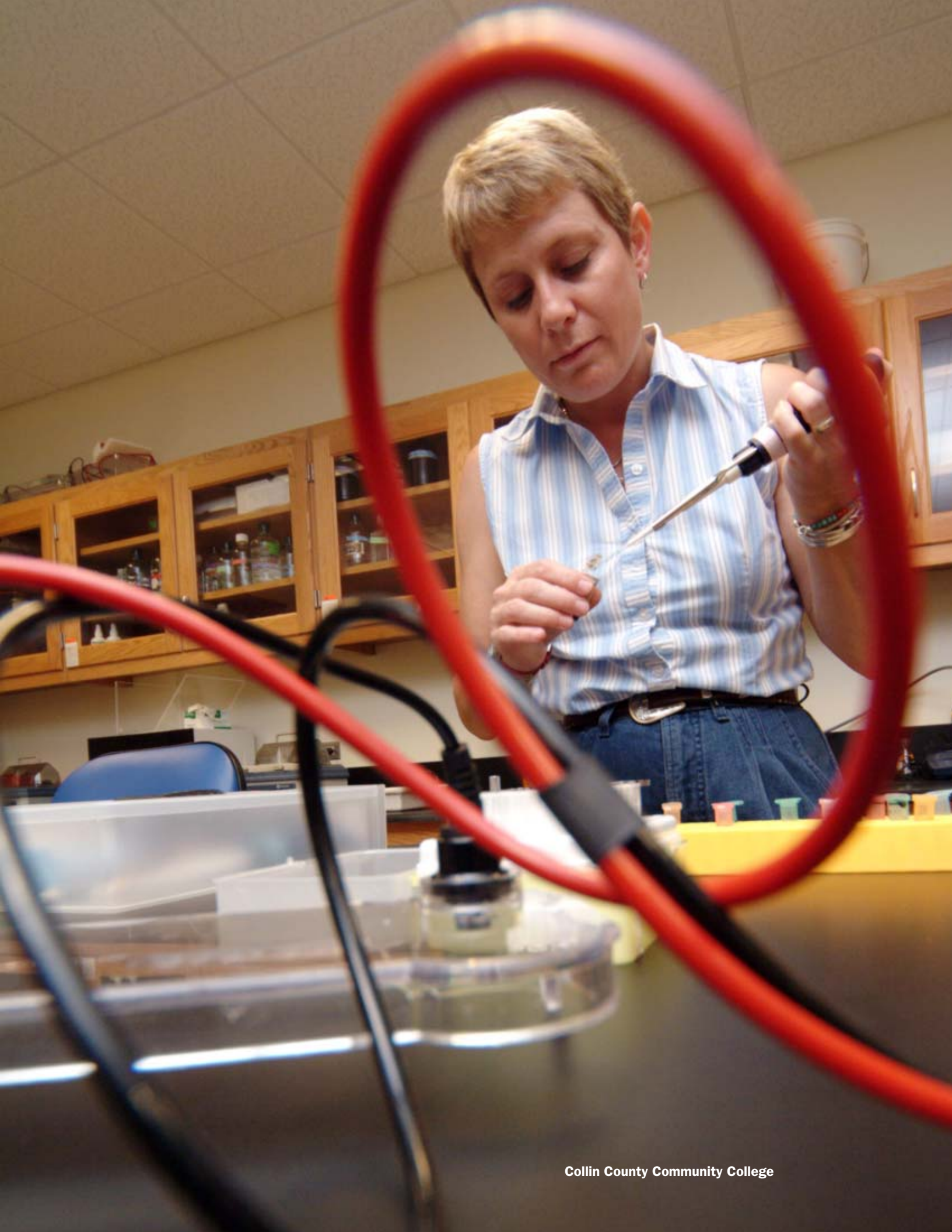
What does this mean for liberal education? There is, on the one hand, a broad consensus that liberal education is more important than ever. Strong quantitative and linguistic skills and the ability to analyze and solve problems are fundamental to economic competitiveness; the ability to make and evaluate arguments about public policy—and about

underlying questions of meaning and value—is essential in a democratic public arena and a complex global cultural landscape. And yet most curricula seem poorly designed to foster these abilities. A handful of extremely conservative institutions insist that students master a canon that looks increasingly narrow in a world in which China and India are fast becoming great powers, while most other institutions simply ask that undergraduates sample, generally in watered-down form, the work of humanistic and scientific disciplines that have become focused on narrow, specialized research. Only our most effective colleges and universities are teaching students to analyze and solve problems in a way that draws on the full range of humanity’s intellectual disciplines; almost none are cultivating the capacity to reflect on fundamental questions of meaning and value.

This essay will argue for an alternative, question-based approach to liberal education. Situating liberal education in historical context, it will ask how we got where we are, and will show how the earliest organization of liberal education—the medieval *quaestio* form—remains the best. It will conclude with some practical suggestions for restoring this approach.

The liberal arts in historical perspective Perhaps we should begin by defining the liberal arts. The term “art” translates the Latin *ars*, which in turn translates the Greek *techne*. There are, generally speaking, three different sorts of art or *techne*. The **instrumental arts** involve making things that are useful—things that are a means to some other end. The **fine arts** involve making things that are ends in

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themselves—hence “fine,” from the Latin *fine* or end. The liberal arts are those that make a human being free. The question is just what one can make that, in the course of the making itself, sets one free. The answer is simple: an argument. The liberal arts train us to make arguments and to evaluate arguments made by others, and thus put us in a position to make decisions for ourselves.

In medieval Europe, the liberal arts were based upon the trivium and the quadrivium. The trivium included grammar, which teaches us to use language correctly; rhetoric, which teaches us to make persuasive arguments; and logic, which teaches us to make arguments that are consistent and complete and in which each term follows necessarily from the others. The quadrivium included pure and applied mathematics: arithmetic, geometry, harmonics, and astronomy. These disciplines were regarded as preparatory to the study of physics or natural philosophy (the term was used to describe both the physical and the biological sciences), and of metaphysics, ethics (including politics), theology, medicine, and the law, all of which depended on a finely tuned ability to make and evaluate arguments.

The Renaissance, the Reformation, and the scientific revolution changed liberal arts education in three ways. First, a revival of interest

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in classical and scriptural texts accelerated development of the hermeneutic disciplines and focused attention, in what came to be called the humanities, on the meaning of those texts, as opposed to the fundamen-

tal questions of meaning and value that the texts addressed. Second, the scientific revolution marked a profound change in the way we do science. Where medieval science sought to *explain* the physical universe teleologically and thus terminated in metaphysics, modern science *describes* the universe using rigorous mathematical models. Third, philosophy was reduced to the status of one discipline among many and pushed to the margins of the academy. By the middle of the twentieth century, schools and departments of theology were the only places within the academy where a significant number of professors still addressed fundamental questions.

This transformation of liberal arts education had a rather paradoxical relationship to the democratic revolutions. Classical caution about extending participation in the public arena was based on the conviction that unless one can make and evaluate arguments regarding fundamental questions of meaning and value, and thus regarding the ends of human life, one cannot decide freely what ends to pursue and will inevitably follow ends presented



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by others, whether coercively or by persuasive means. Nor will one be able to participate freely and fully in debates regarding our common ends as a species and as a civilization. Conversely, the idea that it might be possible to extend participation in the public arena to a wider circle of citizens was always bound up with the conviction that it must be accompanied by an extension of education in the liberal arts tradition. Those among the American founders who were most committed to broad democratic participation—such as Jefferson—were also most insistent that it be accompanied by a broad extension of education. And yet as democracy advanced, the academy evolved in a way that made it less and less adequate to this task.

Indeed, most expansions of higher education and extensions of educational access in the modern era have been driven by economic considerations. This was true of the establishment of the land-grant universities in the nineteenth century, which provided the research and development that was necessary to an advanced industrial economy. It was also true of the enormous expansion of educational access after the Second World War, which met the country's economic need for people who could carry out the complex but subaltern and not especially creative work involved in applying existing scientific and technological innovations and administering state and corporate bureaucracies. In neither case was there a real effort to provide those granted access to colleges and universities an education that would transform them into real innovators—much less the kind of education that might allow them to engage fundamental questions, or to question existing social structures.

The current expansion of higher education is also economically driven, but with a difference. As Robert Reich has demonstrated in *The Work of Nations* (1992), globalization has created a situation in which not only industrial production but also highly skilled intellectual services are being traded on the global market. Today, essentially anything that anyone in the United States can be trained to do can be done just as well and far more cheaply by workers in India or China. This includes most routine software engineering and even such traditionally elite services such as legal advice. Indeed, the only services that cannot

be traded globally are those that must be performed in person.

The implication, Reich argues, is that in the future only highly creative innovators and problem solvers will be able to demand anything above third-world wages. This means that people must be educated both to understand existing ideas and techniques and to develop new ones. Successful innovators thus need not merely to master a certain structure, but also to be able to reason from a structure to its purpose and back again—to develop new structures that serve the purpose in question better, and, at the highest levels, to reason regarding ends themselves. And that is what a traditional education in the liberal arts trained people to do.

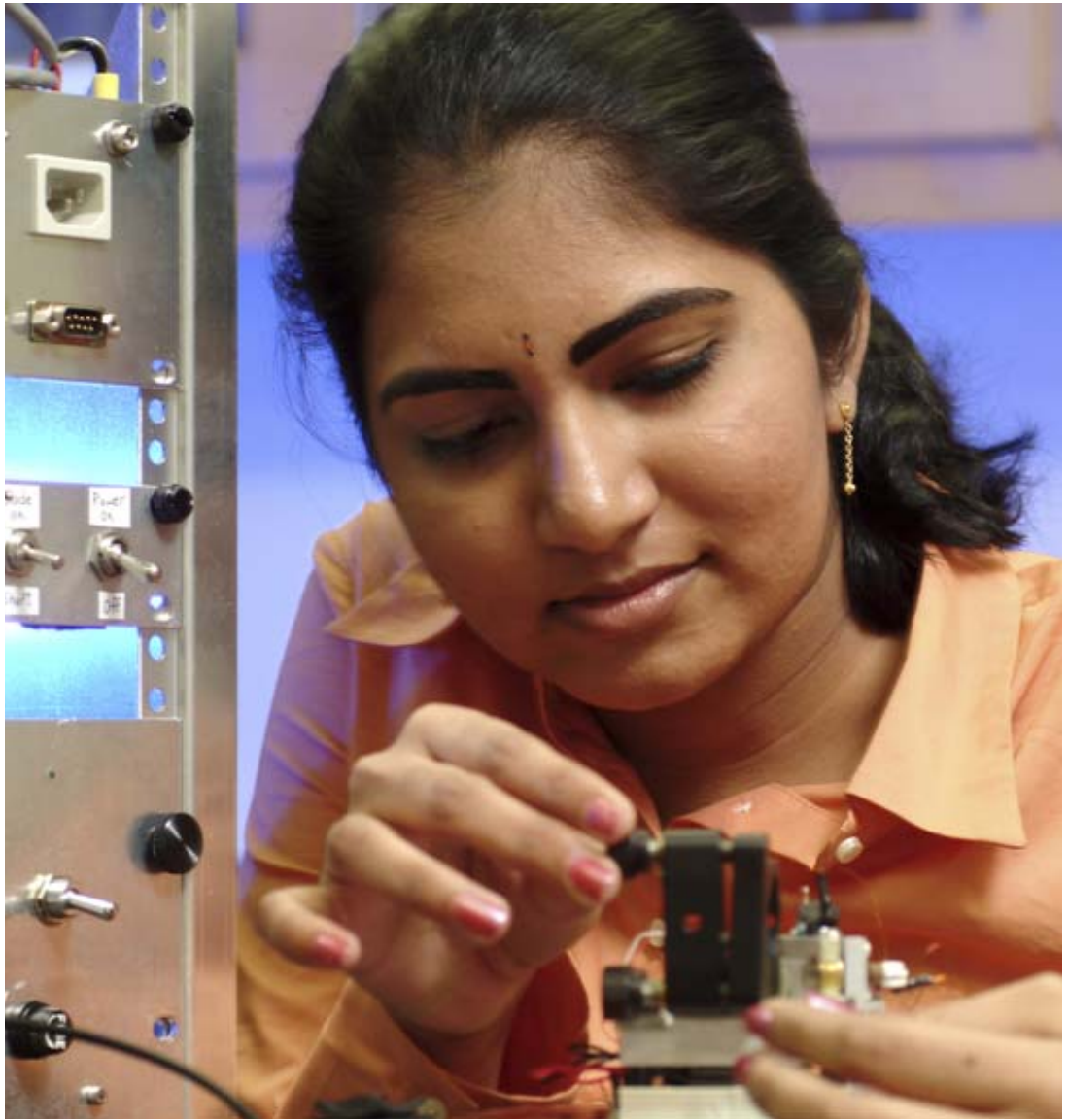
This said, it must be noted that today's students need much more such a traditional education in the liberal arts. It is no longer enough for students to be able to make and evaluate arguments in their own language, across disciplines but within a single civilizational tradition. Nor is it sufficient for them to be humanists with a general knowledge of the sciences, or scientists with a bit of broadening humanistic perspective. They must, rather, be able to analyze problems using a complex combination of disciplines, and be able to do so in as many different languages and with respect to as many different civilizational traditions as possible.

A question-centered approach

How do colleges and universities provide an education that is both rigorous and accessible, and that helps students understand the liberal arts tradition and the larger global context in which they will live and work? I would like to suggest an approach that is actually quite ancient—it was the approach used in the medieval universities of Europe, but it is uniquely adaptable to the new global context. It is the *quaestio* method, or, if one prefers an English name, a question-centered approach to liberal education.

In the medieval universities where this method was used, each class session was organized around a question, such as “Does God exist?” or “What is a law?” Students would “study” by repairing to the local tavern and developing clever objections to the professor's position on the question, which they would present in class next day. The professor would

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then present the dominant position on the question, citing a major authority, as well as his own (which was not necessarily the same), backed by an extensive argument. Bachelors of Arts—the medieval equivalent of teaching assistants—responded to the objections presented by the undergraduates.

Just how would such a model be adapted to the current situation? First, it presupposes a rigorous prior training in the trivium and the quadrivium—i.e., in languages and mathematics. Students preparing for college should be expected to master at least a few world languages. They should also come able to do algebra (which is the mark of rigorous, formal, abstract reasoning), calculus (which is necessary for even a rudimentary grasp of most physical sciences and economics), and perhaps statistics, and should have a good grasp of the formal foundations of mathematics (philosophy of mathematics, set theory, formal logic, etc.) of the sort now rarely acquired except by advanced students in mathematics.

This sort of intellectual “basic training” should replace what we now understand by high school. It is well established that languages are more easily learned at a young age, and students in their teens should be polishing off their training in several languages by learning to read literary, historical, scientific, and philosophical texts in those languages, and should be regularly consulting newspapers and journals of public opinion from around the world. Most developmental psychologists, furthermore, believe that the capacity for formal abstraction begins to develop around the age of eleven or twelve (Piaget 1972; 1990). As students show evidence of this breakthrough, they should be introduced to abstract mathematics and to mathematical treatments of the physical and biological sciences.

Second, the range of questions and texts examined needs to be global. This is less of a modification than critics of Eurocentrism might imagine. Medieval education was “global” and “multicultural” from the very beginning.

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The arguments addressed came not only from the traditions of Hellenic and Roman antiquity, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the New Testament, but also and especially from Jewish and Islamic philosophers. Today, of course, we would want to include questions and perspectives from all of humanity’s civilizational traditions.

Third, we need to split the difference between the still semi-oral culture of the Middle Ages and the textual culture of modernity. Medieval education did not rely heavily on texts. The advent of the printing press radically increased the importance of textual scholarship and probably led to the emergence of text-based approaches to the liberal arts. Today, however, there are simply too many texts that can make a reasonable claim to be part of the global canon to organize undergraduate education around complete mastery of all of them. What we can do is to use carefully selected excerpts from these texts to “represent” questions and answers to questions from humanity’s various civilizational traditions. In engaging these texts, students will also engage the differing linguistic patterns and forms of thinking characteristic of those traditions.

Finally, we need to ensure that students have the basis in experience for this kind of study to make sense. Alexandr Luria’s work on cognitive development (1974) shows that the development of formal abstraction depends not only on age but also on social context. People who are actively engaged in making decisions develop the cognitive capacities they need in order to do so. This is why civic engagement is so critical to liberal education.

There are, to be sure, disciplines that are probably not easily adaptable to the *quaestio* format, and where excerpts from texts simply won’t do—the fine arts (including literature) come to mind. Here, the best approach seems to be simply to expand the canon as much as possible so that students engage great literature and other artistic works from around the world.

Where do we begin?

The approach that I have suggested is a real departure, not only from current patterns at the community colleges and state universities where most students receive their education, but also from the way students are being educated in elite liberal arts colleges and research universities.

It will require changes in the curriculum, in scholarly agendas, and in the way institutions are organized.

The best way to promote a vision is to show that it works. And the sort of approach I am proposing could easily be piloted within existing institutional structures. The logical place to start is in honors and preparatory programs. Students in honors programs often already follow an alternate curriculum and could be exempted from existing core requirements in order to pilot the *quaestio* approach suggested here. Students who come unprepared for college-level work should, meanwhile, be directed into preparatory programs that help them understand the importance of the liberal arts while introducing them to reading and interpreting texts, using scientific method, and debating fundamental questions of meaning and value. Preparatory programs might also be used to recruit students from working class and ethnic minority communities into honors programs.

Piloting this approach in special programs can produce the sort of results that will prepare the way for broader structural changes in colleges and universities. It will be a difficult battle. But too much is at stake not to try. Only a question-centered approach to education will allow people both to have a shot at survival in a competitive global economy and to transcend the narrow consumerism that such an economy promotes, enabling them to live full, free, creative, and meaningful lives. □

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