

Connecting Thought and Action

The Challenge for Liberal Arts Presidents

ELIZABETH COLEMAN



These are times of great stress and urgency for our nation and the world—the importance of an educated citizenry is ever more compelling. Our failures in this regard hardly need more documenting. What is encouraging is that complacency is increasingly being replaced by a sense that we need to move beyond business as usual. This is particularly relevant to the future of the liberal arts, which have always had a radical edge, a restlessness, a stubborn refusal to relinquish sky-high expectations.

In this climate, an overwhelming challenge for presidents of liberal arts colleges is to discover those ideas that have both the power to transform curriculum by getting people to think freshly and the capacity to generate the financial and human resources necessary for their implementation. Then there is the equally challenging task of design—how to go about translating ideas into action. Underlying all this is the ethos of the institution itself: is there a culture of innovation or of protecting the status quo? The president does not create this culture, but he or she can certainly influence it.

Developing and sustaining the habits of debate, openness and self-criticism while engaging substance of profound importance is the perpetual challenge facing liberal education. A liberal arts curriculum must make these two aspects inseparable—the depth, flexibility and openness of our thinking and the importance of what we are thinking about. Decades of professionalizing the disciplines, of emphasizing expertise as the sole form of intellectual prowess, of treating technical competence as the exclusive intellectual virtue have enabled us to avoid this challenge. Methodological sophistication—often referred to as *critical thinking skills*—is treated as if it is an end in itself, disconnected from the urgencies, passions and values associated with matters of substance. Where once the task of liberal education was thought to be the disciplining of our passions, it is now more akin to eliminating or neutralizing them.

To redress this imbalance is no simple matter. As the urgency of a subject intensifies, so does the potential for confusing ideas with ideology and of turning inquiry into advocacy. Achieving a continuum between thought and action has never been easy—on the academic side is the fear of diluting intellectual rigor matched on the practical side by the fear of paralysis. If anything, the increasing specialization and narrowing of academic disciplines over the past decades has deepened the divide. The failure to accommodate a reciprocal relationship between thinking and doing carries a high price. Academic rigor is increasingly reduced to technical competence, narrowness of focus and perpetuation of the status quo, while action is equated with mindless activity.

This dichotomizing is especially evident and especially costly in our attempts to address questions relating to civic education.

Despite a huge expenditure of effort and resources in recent decades, attempts to bolster civic values in colleges and universities through scores of community service programs have failed to influence curriculum. This is no small thing because the curriculum is where the most profound values of an education reside, creating a dangerous disconnect between what we say (proclaiming the great value of civic virtue) and what we do (wariness about exploring these values where it really counts). Work within the classroom remains “uncontaminated” by any serious engagement with efforts connected with civic responsibility, which in turn, tends to be limited to activities that are self-evidently virtuous.

This focus on activities whose value seems beyond question diminishes the need for students to wrestle intellectually with these choices, to deepen and enlarge their understanding of civic responsibility, or to address the huge challenge of connecting a commitment to activities associated with public virtue to the values and ambitions that shape the rest of their lives. Civic values are aggressively promoted, but in a context detached from those educational experiences most closely connected with one’s future intellectual and professional identity. In effect, we have institutionalized

the divide between intellectual and professional development on the one hand and civic responsibility on the other, between one's own interests and the interests of others, between youthful energy and idealism and adult responsibilities and realism.

Democracy Project

The Democracy Project at Bennington College addresses fundamental questions about the organization of curriculum and the stranglehold of the academic disciplines while it takes on issues related to the continuum between thought and action. For these reasons, not despite them, it is a project that is very likely to enhance the institution's access to resources, both human and financial.

We are witnessing a nearly universal interest in the possibilities of democracy accompanied by a great deal of debate and honest difference as to the means for achieving them. These differences have to do with profound variations in history, traditions, religions, social compacts and natural, human and financial resources. Understanding these differences is crucial, both in addressing the intolerable inequities that persist in established democratic societies like our own and in fostering the conditions that new democracies require to thrive. Moreover, the surge in efforts to realize in practice the ideals of democracy in remarkably divergent settings around the world is likely to define the history of the coming decades.

The Democracy Project makes democracy the animating principle of an area of concentration (or a major) with traditional academic disciplines entering insofar as they illuminate this subject rather than as ends in themselves. While no teaching strategy is foolproof, focusing the curriculum on democracy is especially compatible with the need to generate fusion among thought, passion and action. There is an indisputable urgency to this subject and it most certainly engages our passions. At the same time, conflict and dissent are its life-blood, making it particularly averse to the doctrinaire and the flight from thinking. Democracy's emphasis on mediating conflict gives it a quintessentially open-ended and intellectual cast. Plus, it has the remarkable characteristic of providing a rationale for seeing its own limitations no less than its strengths. Like the liberal arts at their best, a mix of restlessness, self-criticism and visionary possibilities replaces the hope of achieving fixed structures and the quest for ultimate truths.

The enormity of these issues is reason enough for democracy to assume a prominent position in a liberal arts college. Moreover, this great intellectual invention in its prior, current and potential configurations has the breadth and depth that can profitably engage an extra-

ordinary range of intellectual traditions—historical, philosophical, cultural, psychological, political and economic. It similarly engages the dialectical oppositions that have informed human efforts to comprehend human society—freedom and order; rich and poor; old and new; individual and society; familiar and strange; thought and action. The very inexhaustibility of the subject, daunting as it is, constitutes a strength in the context of an educational setting. There is ample room at the table for faculty and students with a wide diversity of interests, temperaments, proficiencies and objectives. In addition to providing a unity of focus while accommodating a virtually limitless diversity of interests, the study of democracy provides a context for bringing thought and action into fruitful interaction.

There are two additional concerns that this focus on democracy raises when the object is to fulfill the ambitions of a genuinely liberal education. One is parochialism and the other is complacency. With the recent expansion of democracy globally, a whole array of assumptions born of the American and the European experience about pre-conditions for democracy have lost their authority, to be replaced by more flexible and more dynamic analyses and a more global frame of reference. This transformation in our understanding of democracy precludes chauvinism, without diminishing the importance of the history and traditions of Europe and the United States. On the contrary, their role in effecting this global phenomenon adds yet another dimension to their value.

Finally, whatever values and accomplishments we attribute to democracy at any given moment, an informed view of its history makes the complacencies of the ideologue unthinkable. As Bronsilaw Gieremek, former foreign minister of Poland, reminds us: “[Democracy] is by no means a process that goes from triumph to triumph nor is it exempt from creating the very conditions that undermine it. On the contrary, the history of democracy is also a history of moral compromises, downfalls, economic crises and ‘flights from democracy’ in places it seemed to have sunk lasting roots. Democracies have had slaves and colonies, voted for Hitler and refused to die for Gdansk.”

The last several decades have made one thing clear: It will take fresh ways of addressing curriculum if the big questions are to resume a privileged position throughout the course of the undergraduate experience, not only in the broad introductory courses, and if we are to embed within the totality of our academic experience the urgencies and values of civic life. To confront this challenge does not make the job of a liberal arts college president easy; it is most certainly what makes it a very special privilege.

Elizabeth Coleman is president of Bennington College.