

SALLY E. PINGREE

Bringing Theory to Practice & Liberal Education

My Perspective

FEATURED TOPIC

I am most fortunate to be in a position to support educational initiatives that are so clearly aligned with my passions

LIKE OTHERS, I bring multiple perspectives and, therefore, have multiple reasons for caring about the issues and challenges facing our students and our educational institutions. First and foremost, I am a parent of two recent col-

lege graduates, and have made it my business to communicate directly with them and their many friends now attending our colleges and universities. I do, as they say, enjoy and learn from being connected.

I have been a partner in the development of the Bringing Theory to Practice project since its inception. My involvement began with a question regarding what seemed to me to be the difference between what students were experiencing and what colleges and universities have as their priorities. This observation emerged following years of experience and service as a trustee on the boards of many fine educational institutions, from prep schools to universities.

In the summer of 2002, I posed the question of a perceived disconnection to Don Harward, president emeritus of Bates College, who had just completed his service and leadership at one of the most respected liberal arts and sciences colleges, and who had championed at Bates the cultivation of the full promise of liberal education. With Tad Roach, headmaster

of the St. Andrews School in Delaware, we began a conversation that took more definitive shape following meetings with the leadership of the Carter Center, of which I am also a trustee, and with the Center for Alcohol and Substance Abuse, a research and policy group at Columbia University. As we carried the conversation forward, we formed a committed group of advisers and fellow participants—researchers and practitioners, policy leaders and institutional leaders, scholars and counselors, faculty and students—and began explorations with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which became a partner in supporting our basic “hunch.”

The “hunch” with which our conversations began was as follows: specific educational experiences—especially those that asked of students greater and more intense involvements, experiences where they encounter their own privilege as learners and examine the application of ideas to the communities of which they are a part—could have identifiable and replicable effects on the mental health and behaviors of college students and on their civic development and involvement.

In the years that have followed, the project has developed strategies and support for the necessary research and for initiatives individual campuses have proposed to affect the multiple and troubling increases in forms of student disengagement. We have sought to understand the chasms between the academic and the other dimensions of student experience, and to reconsider what is at the center of our institutional agendas. Campuses have

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ond Pulsed Laser Drilling in GaAs

Jack G. Murphy - Bates College
Dr. David W. Snoke - U. of Pittsburgh, Dept. of Phys.

Not Perfect

Small, 100-200 μm - CRACKS
Solid, 100-200 μm - Recast
Columns and surface damage
from ejected material.

Crater in GaAs



Imaged using an atomic profiler



Figure 8: Photographs of craters at 275 μm and 100 μm diameters of 10 μm .

Recommendations

damage, minimal

10 μm - 24 μm .

cross-sectional shape of
has an expected conical

Drill with 2000 - 4000 pulses; it is
that additional pulses would increase the depth
but significant change in width.

Use scanning electron microscope (SEM) for
characterization.

Dickinson College



their own perspectives, and we have had the pleasure of supporting many of them as they address common challenges with the uniqueness of their own cultures.

Learning from those campuses with promising initiatives; holding annual conferences for faculty with attention to what the project's implementation could mean for their preparation, their expectations, and any reward structure that supports them; and developing research reports, workshops, student conferences, protocols for model initiatives, commissioned research, and the national demonstration sites have contributed to what is known and what credibility can be extended to those pursuing various means of involvement with the project.

AAC&U's partnership with the project has emphasized liberal education's commitment to understanding and strengthening the context in which students learn—including the complex relationships among the multiple aspects of a student's development and the structures and mission of liberal arts and sciences institutions. The partnership has come to reflect the promise of AAC&U's ongoing campaign, Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), which seeks to advance liberal education for the twenty-first century.

I am most fortunate to be in a position to

support educational initiatives that are so clearly aligned with my passions. Nothing has been more important to me than how higher education affects the academic success, as well as the emotional health and civic lives, of students—for my own children, for the many students at institutions where the Engelhard Foundation has been supportive, and now through the Bringing Theory to Practice project for an extended category of young people at hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the country.

The Bringing Theory to Practice project is not only about justifying contributive aspects of a possible strategy for addressing the increasing number of disengaged students, it is equally about the core purposes of our colleges. The project asks us, as educators, to reexamine what has become on many of our campuses the primary agenda—for that agenda appears to have less and less to do with students.

In similar ways, LEAP is not simply about presenting liberal education to wider audiences, or finding preferable language to describe it. I am involved because LEAP is about the effectiveness of liberal education, the need to understand its most useful nature and meaning, and then to encourage its practice and priority in colleges and universities of all sorts. We

need to encourage its centrality, especially by providing resources and leadership both from within and from external voices, to explore and to document liberal education's inherent value, and to confirm what it can make possible for all students and for the future of our democracy.

Focusing on students

The materials developed by AAC&U for LEAP, the strategic planning that has been achieved with President Carol Geary Schneider's leadership, and the appointment and functioning of a development and advancement initiative are each quite wonderful. I, however, am a firm believer in the admonition that we must be even more vigorous in communicating the importance and values of liberal education to those outside of the higher education community. My inclination would be to do so by focusing on students.

Our campuses have for purposes of admission and retention learned much. But they have shared little beyond their inner groups that would counter, or confirm, popular judgments about students, their experiences, and their expectations. Collective information, focus group data, observations and stories could be shared—as ubiquitous as “awareness pieces”—with the result of a better understanding of who students are, and which challenges they think real and which they think contrived. What do they bring with them as expectations? Are those expectations met or critiqued? We need to hear their views, their aspirations, their hopes, and their dreams. What is important to them needs to be heard and, perhaps, forcefully challenged. But the faculty and the institutional culture can only do its work of challenging if there is the receptive context of listening, respect for civility, and the pervasive encouragement of students to contribute by thought and action—stretching students to squawk, as well as to enjoy “dueling with ambiguity.”

Students and the wider public must understand how a liberal education offers them the best tools for their own emancipation and their own complex realization. Students, their parents, and the public at large are not so jaded as to conflate education with job training (important as that is), or to confuse the values of education with only economic benefits. Unfortunately, the predominant social



Syracuse University

communication mechanisms have stressed only the role of education in the preparation of “upwardly mobile” credentialing. In my experience, ask any parent what they truly want for their student and the answer is not training for a first job. Rather, they want happiness, well-being, multiple dimensions of success, and the wisdom to contribute to what is greater than themselves—the rough translation of the purpose of a liberal education.

LEAP counters the prevailing limiting perceptions. It champions the promise of our students, their candor, and their receptivity to thinking how liberal education encourages contrarianism, independent judgment, and the self-emancipation of learners and civically responsible citizens who are as comfortable with challenge and controversy as with compliance. □

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