

# Advancing Liberal Education in the Core Curriculum

## A White Paper

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Lee Nordt, Dean  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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A central pillar in the construction of a major research university with a commitment to transformative education is a dynamic and robust undergraduate core curriculum that provides broad grounding in the humanities; visual and performing arts; and the natural, the social, and the behavioral sciences. This broad grounding, commonly referred to as liberal education, complements the student's major—a specialized achievement in a field of interest. Baylor University's renewed commitment to liberal education as expressed in its 2013 *ProFuturis* vision (and reaffirmed in *ASPIRE*—the College of Arts and Sciences' Strategic Plan) may seem counter-cultural, as many of today's political leaders at the highest levels of our state and nation call for affordable four-year bachelor's degrees with practical skills for today's marketplace. Parents who are financing their children's education, likewise, often ask hard questions about how a particular major leads to future employment. Many observers of American higher education assert that societal pressure will diminish liberal education across the country as more emphasis is placed on professional, specialized college education. At Baylor, however, many of us believe this societal direction is short-sighted and agree with scholars who caution that the modern multiversity is becoming a place that produces "stunted scholars," graduates "who have given very little thought to matters beyond their impressive grasp of an intense area of study."<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Baylor provides a rich liberal education that does not merely *train* students, but *educates* them broadly and deeply in ways that form and transform the mind and heart. Thus our graduates often become leaders who serve their families, communities, nation, and world.

The College of Arts and Sciences (A&S) is well-positioned to build upon its strong tradition of liberal education. Great undergraduate teaching and mentoring, as embodied by our A&S Master Teachers Robert Baird, Jochem Burckhardt, Tommye Lou Davis, Thomas Hanks, Roger Kirk, Ann Miller, Rachel Moore, Harold Osborne, Robert Packard, David Pennington, Robert Reid, Alden Smith, James Vardaman, and Ray Wilson, have long been a hallmark of Baylor University. In recent years this noteworthy distinction has been recognized by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.<sup>2</sup> A 2014 survey of our A&S departments indicates that all of our core courses are meeting at least one of the general education outcomes—*Communication, Critical Thinking, Christian Perspective, and Civic Engagement*—

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Wilson, "Our stunted scholars," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2011; the author is describing her experiences on the Rhodes Scholarship selection committee. See also John Sommerville, *The Decline of the Secular University* (2006); Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (2007); Harry Lewis *Excellence Without Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education/Does Liberal Education Have a Future?* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Baylor was one of only sixteen colleges or universities out of 714 surveyed to receive an A because of its commitment to general education. Results of the study are available at this link: <http://whatwilltheylearn.com/a-list>

cited in the undergraduate catalogue.<sup>3</sup> In fact, most of these courses meet at least two of these outcomes and many meet all four outcomes. Consultation with the Chairs, Undergraduate Program Directors, and other faculty members in A&S's twenty-four academic departments made apparent to me and other A&S leaders that there is a deep and abiding sentiment that the Baylor brand should continue to be transformative liberal education.

Yet I am also convinced—following discussions in November 2014 with over 70 A&S faculty members who either teach or manage core courses—that we can do even better in teaching the students enrolled in our core curriculum. If we are to continue to require that approximately half of the hours earned by A&S majors are in the general education category, then we must be on the cutting edge of liberal education pedagogy. Recognizing that of the 100 top major research universities in America, only a handful will take the path to which we have committed ourselves, we must teach our general education core with renewed vitality, commitment, and intentionality.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, whether we are seasoned veterans with decades of experience or graduate students teaching for the first time, it is incumbent upon us to develop and administer the core curriculum classes in ways that promote liberal education. Whether teaching American History, British Literature, Christian Scriptures, Elementary Spanish, Constitutional Development, Calculus, Modern Concepts of Bioscience, or the Basic Principles of Modern Chemistry, we must consider how each course *serves the larger purpose of general importance to students beyond a particular discipline*. As we teach the fundamental vocabularies and basic intellectual skills required in our fields, we must be aware of the fact that many students in general education classes are in majors outside of Arts and Sciences.

To this end, I encourage you to join me in this challenge:

- As instructors, help students understand how your core class is **interconnected** with other classes in the core and in their major field of study. Faculty should consider re-examining their syllabi with an eye towards an interdisciplinary perspective. This goal can be achieved in many ways—through guest lectures, cross-disciplinary assignments, and extra-curricular opportunities, just to cite a few. Faculty in other departments are interested in collaborating with you in order to bring diverse perspectives into the classroom. Consider soliciting at least one other faculty member in another discipline for this collaboration. Chairs and Undergraduate Program Directors should encourage and support such efforts on a consistent basis.
- As instructors, consider the many benefits that would accrue to students by your consistently demonstrating the importance and **relevance** of your course content to real world issues and current challenges in the discipline. What are fundamental ideas that will be important for the student to know following graduation, as a citizen? Ask yourself why linear equations, literary criticism, inductive reasoning, quantum mechanics, aesthetics, or libertarian theory matter to undergraduates. Of course, all of these intellectual concepts matter greatly. But how? Contextualizing them can be an important aspect of every class period.

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<sup>3</sup> “At Baylor University, we strive to prepare graduates with the knowledge and skills essential to worldwide leadership and service and to foster in them a commitment to a lifetime of learning. As a result of a thorough grounding in the liberal arts and coursework in their majors, Baylor graduates should be able to: 1) communicate clearly and effectively in writing and speaking in a manner appropriate to the subject, occasion, and audience; 2) think critically, demonstrating proficiency in evaluating evidence, articulating arguments, justifying conclusions, and identifying and presenting multiple perspectives; 3) demonstrate knowledge of the Christian scriptures and heritage that enables engagement with others from a Christian perspective; and 4) demonstrate an awareness of the challenges of a global society through a commitment to social and civic responsibility and service among diverse communities.” 2014-15 Undergraduate Catalogue, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Of the 2014 top 100 Major Research Universities according to USNWR, only Baylor University, Pepperdine University, and the University of Georgia received an “A” rating for general education from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

- Where helpful, appropriate course content and pedagogy that both challenge and enable students to integrate **Christian commitments** into their whole lives—individual and communal, intellectual and devotional, personal and professional. As a community of Christian scholars we are in a grand experiment in higher education. You have the freedom at Baylor to express your calling before God through your teaching and mentoring in creative and insightful ways.
- As departments, consider writing a one-page **vision statement** that expresses how liberal education outcomes should be promoted in your core courses. This vision statement could set forth basic literacies (whether quantitative, literary, rhetorical, scientific, artistic, or others) that the student who completes the course(s) should possess. For example, a department might want to include in this statement certain liberal education outcomes such as inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork, or problem solving. As you write your vision, ask yourself how a student in the School of Business or the School of Nursing might benefit from your courses. This vision statement could be given each year to all new faculty members in your department who teach in the core. Faculty may work with Undergraduate Program Directors to review their core course syllabi to see if they support the department's vision.

When Baylor University was founded in 1845 under the motto of *Pro Ecclesia, Pro Texana*, we set ourselves on a course to produce graduates who would serve communities far and near. We have been successful for 170 years in shaping physicians, lawyers, entrepreneurs, political leaders, educators, ministers, engineers, social workers, and scientists who serve others with compassion, integrity, vision, and skill. All of these graduates have benefited from a liberal education that has shaped their character. It has done so by fostering the intellectual and moral habits of mind and soul, by fostering the virtues (practical wisdom, courage, moderation, faith, hope, love) that bring our students to flourish in the way that the Creator intended human beings to flourish. Indeed, a liberal education is formative and transformative, for it is a catalyst for students becoming better, wiser people. Liberal education helps students become more informed citizens, superior professionals, and devoted family members and friends. The core courses we teach in the College of Arts and Sciences are the building blocks of this education.<sup>5</sup>

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