

**Baylor’s Bold Future:
Advancing Liberal Education in the Twenty-First Century**

Michael Beaty, Blake Burluson, David Clinton, Lorin Mathews
Theme 1 subcommittee members of the ASPIRE taskforce

In his address to the Baylor University faculty on January 13, 2011, Judge Starr emphasized the “uni” in university. Because decades ago Clark Kerr proposed that the modern university should more aptly be identified as a multiversity, not a university at all,¹ Judge Starr’s emphasis was crucial and has profound implications for the normative practices that should distinguish Baylor as a major research university, one that is resolutely grounded in Christian convictions and practices, which govern and guide our common life together. Observers of American higher education have recently come to recognize that, alarmingly, the modern multiversity is producing “stunted scholars,” graduates “who have given very little thought to matters beyond their impressive grasp of an intense area of study.”² Baylor may already be distinctive, indeed, even counter-cultural, because we embody a richer understanding of the university as an institution with a universally shared purpose: we must not merely *train* students, but *educate* them. The College of Arts and Sciences intends to build upon this rich legacy by advancing Liberal Education in the Twenty-First Century.

Just as an orchestra is made up of clearly defined sections—the strings, the woodwinds, the brass, and the percussions—yet each section plays in harmony with the others to create the whole that is the symphony, so it is with a university. Each academic unit has its clearly defined role, but it must work together in harmony with all the other academic units to create the whole that is a great university. Historically, the College of Arts and Sciences has embodied and exemplified this historic commitment to educate students, not merely train them, through its commitment to a liberal education. Herein lies one source of unity, not only for the College of Arts and Sciences, but also for Baylor University in its entirety.

For a truly distinctive education to be possible at Baylor, Baylor’s firm and longstanding commitment to a rich and robust liberal education, an essential component of our past and present, must play an even greater role in our future. A genuinely liberal education requires a thorough grounding in the humanities, visual and performing arts, the natural, the social and the behavioral sciences. And one primary end of a liberal arts education is to enable students to acquire wisdom – how everything we know fits together into a coherent whole system of belief that can guide us toward flourishing lives as free human beings made in the image of God.

¹ Kerr 1963: 103. (One among several places he uses the term.)

² Wilson 2011; the author is describing her experiences on the Rhodes Scholarship selection committee. See also Sommerville 2006; Kronman 2007; Lewis 2008. Lewis’s title, *Excellence Without Soul*, encapsulates the problem.

Without the kind of transformational experience a liberal education can provide we risk producing what C. S. Lewis calls “men without chests”: doctors who have never confronted the implications of human mortality; lawyers who have never wrestled with the nature of justice; entrepreneurs who have never questioned what material prosperity is for; political leaders who have never thought about the complexities of “freedom;” scientists who have never worried about the limits of science and the scientific method; men and women (citizens) who have never pondered about the relative prosperity they enjoy in contrast to the poverty so many endure.

A liberal education provides wholesome food for the heart and mind. Its components provide poems and plays and paintings that can nourish us emotionally, imaginatively, intellectually, and spiritually. They teach us the languages that allow us to understand and communicate with people removed in time and space. They teach us the lessons of history, without which we risk becoming a lesson of history. They teach us how natural world functions by identifying its laws, by giving us a language to speak about the various aspects of the natural world, and by providing modes in inquiry and knowledge acquisition that open up its many mysteries. They raise questions about how best to govern ourselves as we live in communities bound together by law, custom, and commerce. They encourage us to treasure the achievements of the past and present and to lament our failure and wickedness.

Indeed, a liberal education confronts us with deep and abiding questions: questions about our nature, our aspirations, our failings, our hopes, and, ultimately, our place in the universe. A liberal education is, in short, the soul of education, the animating principle that imbues all disciplines with purpose, enables fruitful dialogue among them, and helps guide us toward a full and flourishing life.

We believe that Baylor’s goal should be to create a unified and integrated liberal education for its students, one that reflects a capacious and creative Christian humanism, capacious and creative for it rightly orders all our modes of both inquiry and human creativity. Students should be initiated into the “great conversation”—in progress for thousands of years—inspired by humanity’s yearnings for truth, beauty, and goodness, and, in the Christian view, for God. We should help students not only to acquire knowledge and develop skills, but also to enlarge their awareness and experience of their own culture and that of others; to develop their powers of reading, writing, critical thinking, investigation via scientific reasoning and experimentation, creativity, and artistic appreciation; and to form their character and their moral and spiritual values. We suggest that mere humanism will always fall short of cultivating the wisdom that is its professed end. Baylor, by virtue of its commitment to integrate faith and reason in the pursuit of this wisdom, occupies a place matched only by a few other institutions worldwide.

I. The Role of General Education in Undergraduate Education at Baylor

One of the acknowledged strengths of Baylor University is its commitment to general education, as recognized by a study recently conducted by the American Council of

Trustees and Alumni.³ Universities that aim at increasing excellence must honestly evaluate their programs, even their strong ones. Indeed, it is wise for a university to ground its improvement on increased excellence in its strongest programs.

Aspirational Statement One of *Pro Futuris* commits Baylor to providing its students a transformational education. Essential to achieving this aspiration is “strengthening the undergraduate core curriculum” and “deepen[ing] our excellence in the liberal arts.” Because *Pro Futuris* endorses this aspiration the College of Arts and Sciences should affirm its commitment to a core curriculum that embodies the aims and practices of liberal learning. More broadly, Baylor University should undertake efforts to strengthen that core whenever possible, whether at the level of department, college, or university. To the extent possible, we should aim to have a core curriculum that is integrated and unified and thus, we should examine our curriculum in light of the unifying and integrative aims listed below.

A liberal arts core curriculum at a Christian university should accomplish four objectives:

- Address the breadth of knowledge in the disciplines of the humanities, fine arts, natural sciences, and social and behavioral sciences, and seek to illuminate the connections that unify the modes of inquiry characteristic of each discipline.
- Strengthen students’ understanding of the human condition, both our excellences and our frailties, across time and cultural contexts; help students consider how the various goods available to humans can be properly ordered; and help them to see how all of these goods point beyond themselves to a Good that is the Alpha and Omega of all objective goods as reflected in the biblical and Christian narrative.
- Help students develop the powers of reasoning, written and oral communication, and artistic creativity, which are essential to the kind of freedom a Christian liberal education encourages and nurtures.
- Enable students to integrate Christian commitments into their whole lives—individual and communal, intellectual and devotional, personal and professional.

The stewardship of a curriculum that accomplishes these ends will require careful thought and serious discussion. We contend that there is no more important task facing Baylor as we imagine the next decade and consider our strategic plan than to continue and strengthen our long-standing historical and foundational commitment to a liberal education.

³ Baylor was one of only sixteen colleges or universities out of 714 surveyed to receive an A because of its commitment to core courses in general education. Results of the study are available at this link: <http://whatwilltheylearn.com/a-list>

Selected Bibliography

- Bérubé, Michael. "Utility of the Arts and Humanities" in Bérubé, *Rhetorical Occasions: Essays on Humans and the Humanities*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 71–89.
- Brooks, Katharine S. "Close the Gap Between the Liberal Arts and Career Services," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 1, 2009.
- Brower, Aaron M., and Karen Kurotsuchi. "Living-Learning Programs: One High-Impact Educational Practice We Now Know a Lot About," *Liberal Education* 96: (2010). Available at: http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-sp10/LESP10_Brower.cfm
- Jaschik, Scott. "Call to Defend the Humanities," *Inside Higher Ed*, November 1, 2010.
- Newfield, Christopher, "Ending the Budget Wars: Funding the Humanities during a Crisis in Higher Education," *Profession* 2009: 270–84.
- Kerr, Clark. *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Kronman, Anthony. *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Lewis, Harry. *Excellence Without Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education/Does Liberal Education Have a Future?* Cambridge, Mass: Public Affairs, 2008.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Sommerville, John. *The Decline of the Secular University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Watson, Robert N., "The Humanities Really Do Produce a Profit," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 21, 2010.
- Wilson, Heather. "Our stunted scholars," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2011, A19.

You can find some summary information on this site about the work of Alexander and Helen Astin, et. al: <http://cultivatingthespirit.com/>

. Their research center also has resources: <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/>

This link seems to be most relevant to your meeting:

<http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/findings/spiritual-measures/spiritual-quest.php>