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### A Community of Reason

Will small, residential liberal arts colleges survive the current crisis? Will they recruit enough students, regain enough endowment income, attract enough donors to sustain themselves? These questions crop up all the time at meetings deans attend.

Most people agree that once the economy rebounds, so will college resources-- in time. However, these immediate problems occur in the context of more significant and long lasting challenges--part economic, part social, and part cultural. Keeping in mind the economic distress of the moment, let me summarize the other, deeper issues.

Costs first. Notwithstanding the economy, a few more colleges crossed the \$50,000 a year line this fall.<sup>1</sup> That's the high end of a startling upward spiral of college and university costs over the last twenty-five years. In that period, the price of a college degree increased by 439% . That's over four times the increase in the consumer price index and just under 3 times the rise in median family income since 1982-84. Health care costs, in contrast, rose 251%. Middle-income families spent 8% of their incomes in 1999-2000 to send a child to college, not counting financial aid. In 2006-07, the figure was 25%. For families falling in the lowest income quintile, the percent rose from 39% to 55%.<sup>2</sup>

The current economic situation exacerbates these trends, as the wealthiest colleges face sharp declines in the value of their endowments, a fall off in contributions, and higher financial aid budgets. They, and the colleges which depend on tuition dollars to cover expenses, must attract students, the more "full pays," the better. That includes us.

Realistically, however, demographics conspire against liberal arts colleges as they campaign for a share of college-bound students. While more Americans attend college now than thirty years ago, post secondary education seems to be losing its allure in this country. Elsewhere that is not so. In Canada, for example, 55% of adults between ages 25 and 34 hold an associate's degree or higher. Thirty-nine percent do in the United States. Of American 18- to 24-year-olds, 34% are enrolled in college, compared to 54% in Korea. Of those who do attend college, a declining proportion opt for CC-type institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Projected forward, current enrollment trends present a still less favorable picture for higher education. Unless changes in K-12 education reduce disparities in achievement based on race, class, and location, growing proportions of the younger age group will not qualify for college, especially not for selective colleges.

Even if reform of K-12 education improved achievement for all groups, and more students decided to go to college, not many prospective students or their parents understand what a liberal

arts education is. And if they did, they probably would opt for a degree more directly connected to what they seek: a real world job.

Will residential, liberal arts colleges survive these challenges? Most people say: “yes, the best will endure.” The wealthiest and the most highly regarded stand a chance, provided that they know what they are doing. Arguably, the institutions best able to define and defend the liberal arts will have the edge.

What are these defining characteristics? That’s the fundamental question shaping these remarks. Do we know what we’re doing? Do liberal arts colleges have a clear conception of what defines them?

The president of Cornell University offered this response: “[Cornell University] is without clear-cut notions of what a liberal education is and how it is to be secured ... and the pity of it is that this is not a local or special disability, but a paralysis affecting every college of arts in America.”<sup>4</sup> He wrote that in 1908; if anything the answer is more contested and less certain now than it was a century ago.

Without a clear unifying vision, people answer the question – what defines the liberal arts -- in two ways: The liberal arts college is what it says it is or it is what you want it to be. According to the first approach, neatly described by former CC president Louis Benezet in 1943, it is “that kind of education which a liberal arts college program provides.”<sup>5</sup> In the second, observers list several desirable attributes of education and call them “liberal education.” This answer recalls the scene in the movie *Pretty Woman*, where Richard Gere asks Julia Roberts: “What’s your name?” And she answers: “What do you want it to be?” Either way, the answer begs the question.

Plenty of experts claim to provide the sought-after definition. Martha Nussbaum, professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, offers a version for our times. She puts it simply: Liberal learning means mastering critical argument. In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, she returns to Socrates and the Roman Stoics. For them, the liberalis in the artes liberalis meant freedom, specifically freedom from the ties of habit, custom, and received opinion.<sup>6</sup> Only by examining everything, beginning with their own beliefs, could people think freely. Education, then, teaches students to recognize false premises, inconsistent argument, and flawed conclusions.

Following the Roman Stoics, Nussbaum makes reasoned skepticism the defining characteristic of liberal education. Why? Because, she argues, “Our democracy, like ancient Athens, is prone to hasty and sloppy reasoning and to the substitution of invective for real deliberation.”<sup>7</sup> Democracy requires citizens capable of recognizing bombast, distortion, and cant. Just as important, learning to challenge habit and custom allows students to see beyond their locales and immediate groups. That perspective prepares them for leadership in a multiethnic and multinational world.

Properly done liberal education gives students what modern citizens most need: the habit of

critical argument. Because they expose their own traditions and values to question, they know how to look critically and openly at those of others. They recognize that there's logic behind even the most alien opinions and actions. And they know how to decipher that logic.

Most colleges and universities promise to sharpen students' critical thinking skills. It's part of the standard package. But it's not clear (not to me at least) what they (and we at CC) mean by critical and analytical thinking. The term "critical argument" gives the idea more substance. It suggests a dynamic, even conflictual process which involves at least two parties, even if the two reside inside one person's head. The argument requires confronting the current state of things against suppositions about what might be, comparing the importance of rules against the need to honor exceptions, and pitting the relative value of self against the duty to respect others. The resulting dialogue focuses attention on different premises, logics, and conclusions.

The process of self examination, the Stoics argued, carried very specific benefits. It allowed people to escape imposed or borrowed beliefs and values, or to claim them as their own. As important, it enabled them to imagine people unlike themselves and to recognize what common ground they shared.

Thus, from the confusion of elements called the liberal arts, Nussbaum takes two: a goal—preparing citizens—and a means—liberating students from received opinions. She calls on all American institutions of higher learning—community colleges, universities, small colleges—the lot—to embrace the liberal arts. To do so, they need a diverse curriculum, a faculty prepared to incite students to question, and classes designed to foster deliberation.

Nussbaum admits the obstacles to meeting her call: transient teachers, large classes, student indifference to what doesn't get them a job. And while she offers some heartening examples of innovative classes and teachers, she knows that in most colleges and universities, they are rare departures from ordinary practice.

Residential liberal arts colleges, however, make it their business to promote this type of education. In these colleges, the campus-centered environment, rich curricula, and small classes encourage the practice of critical argument. That is certainly the case at CC where, for example, the Critical Perspectives requirement asks all students to examine outlooks and systems outside the dominant tradition. The rationale echoes the Stoics' call to know the other in order to sharpen one's sense of self. The Block Plan also enables critical argument by shifting the focus from dispensing information to examining it, from answers to questions.

However, it's not enough to engage in critical argument in class and dorm rooms. The best liberal arts colleges try at least to practice their values as a community. They insist on applying the standards of critical argument to all their business. That is, they foster the continual examination of premises, logic, and conclusions. And in the process, they build a "community of reason."<sup>8</sup> I would hope that we all share that goal here.

Without critical argument, Nussbaum reminds us, people "talk at one another but never have a genuine dialogue. In such an atmosphere bad arguments pass for good arguments, and prejudice can all too easily masquerade as reason."<sup>9</sup> Such sloppy thinking disables a democracy; I believe

it does the same thing to the colleges like us that value self-governance. Even though we value critical thinking in our students, we—faculty and staff-- leap to conclusions, accept rumors and hearsay as fact, and surrender to personal animus with astonishing frequency. Admit it, we don't always make the effort to verify reports, to stop and figure out the logic behind some "misguided" opinion, or to pursue objectivity.

Even if we did take the time, critical argument demands more than good intentions. It requires a congenial context. It thrives when the culture, or the structures, of an institution favor deliberation. Genuine deliberation involves 1) obtaining good information, 2) evaluating it critically, 3) identifying all plausible options, 4) deciding which ones conform to values and goals. It illuminates what initially appears illogical, narrow, or stupid, and it encourages separation of personal interest from institutional needs..

Some parts of the college already do business that way. Academic departments and committees tackle specific agendas and typically engage in genuine deliberation. The Block Plan also privileges deliberation. Three-hour classes reduce lecturing and increase direct student involvement. Over time, students get a lot of practice collectively hammering out answers to complicated problems, whether in the lab, the field, or the classroom. Ideally, they expose their own views to criticism, and work to grasp the logic of what others say. In the process, they identify the essentials and as a group work their way to plausible solutions to the questions at hand.

I say, ideally, because it is very difficult to listen hard enough to hear the views of others, to examine one's own and others' views on the fly, and to bring disparate points together. Too often, students retreat and faculty fill the breach. Yet, relentless practice in deliberation, whether inside one's head or around a table, characterizes a liberal arts, and a CC education, at its best. It fosters critical argument, the basis for understanding how other people think.

College-wide, however, we could do with even more deliberation especially when we're in crisis mode. We held it together last year, but likely with less grace and more damage than necessary.

What could we do to make deliberation more the norm? We should begin by extending "lateral decision-making". Imagined as an alternative to the corporate and bureaucratic modes, the lateral model emphasizes the horizontal over the vertical and the collective over the directive. It sets people across divisions to work on problems, building solutions from the bottom up. Lateral decision making, in turn, depends on deliberation to be effective.

The recently-established all-college budget committee takes a positive step. The college could, in my view, benefit from similar groups for other pressing problems. Taking a lateral and deliberative approach matters the most when attacking substantive issues. But it does no harm when addressing less significant and more routine matters.

Will liberal arts colleges survive? That answer is surely "yes," many will. All reasonable indicators point to resilience in our case. That is, CC's still hot (it topped the cyber mention charts for the second year in a row), it's solvent (thanks to your sacrifices). Due in no small

measure to the block plan, it attracts talented, imaginative, and off beat students, and it enjoys an energetic and creative faculty. We also have the advantage of a committed staff, each taking care of some vital piece of the whole enterprise.

It seems that we have the basic equipment. But that likely will not suffice to sustain liberal arts colleges, generally, or CC in particular. We must also show that we know what we're about. We should graduate students who preach the benefits of the liberal arts, and to do that, we need to practice its essentials, each of us, consistently. Nussbaum constructs a compelling defense of the liberal arts for our time. It coincides with what we insist we prize, and that is a community of reason. If we do as we say, we will strive to make critical argument a habit, deliberation the standard mode of operation, and lateral-decision making the dominant formula.

Susan A. Ashley  
Professor of History  
Dean of the College/Dean of the Faculty

#### Endnotes

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1. At \$35,844 tuition and fees, \$9,096 board and room, \$988 books, \$972 other expenses, CC comes in under \$50,000.
  2. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, "Measuring Up, 2008: The National Report Card on Higher Education," 2009. Consumer price index between 1982-84 and 2006 106%, median family income, 147%, p. 8.
  3. National Center, 6.
  4. Abraham Flexner in *The American College: A Criticism* (New York: Century, 1908), 7 cited by Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 2.
  5. Louis T. Benezet in 1943 in *General Education in the Progressive College* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1943), 28 cited by Kimball, 4.
  6. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 8.
  7. *Ibid.*, 10.
  8. *Ibid.*, 19.

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9. *Ibid.*, 19.