

*Asian Studies and the Liberal Arts:  
A Paradigm for Reform*  
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The changes sweeping through higher education are without precedent in their scope and portent. Every aspect of the enterprise is in flux: mission, methods, financing, and structure. The nation's liberal arts colleges are being hit especially hard by the changes. Lacking both the resources and the more pragmatic orientation of the larger public institutions, a growing number of liberal arts colleges are struggling as never before to remain competitive and to retain their historic identities.

For several decades, with a quickening pace, the liberal arts colleges have followed the patterns of the large public universities and the top tier research institutions. Responding to heightened competition from the public campuses, many liberal arts colleges expanded their pre-professional and career programs and hired specialized staff and faculty to deliver these programs. At the same time, eager to attract and to retain outstanding young faculty, liberal arts colleges made sacrifices to offer enhanced opportunities for scholarly pursuits; and with this, productivity in research and creative endeavors acquired a much larger place in faculty evaluation.

Given the competitive pressures and the alternatives, the adaptive behavior of the liberal arts colleges made rough sense. In the bargain, however, on many campuses, liberal arts values have been increasingly marginalized both in the curriculum and in the professional priorities of the faculty. Now, faced with the dramatic changes overtaking higher education, many of the historic liberal arts colleges resemble not much more than smaller, poorer, and generally less impressive versions of the large universities. Much of their historic capital, the intellectual nest egg, has been spent on survival driven initiatives that hold only modest promise in a brave new competitive environment, where high-tech instructional delivery systems, strategic alliances linking campuses and corporations, and proprietary management values are reshaping or, better, replacing higher education. The banner of the liberal arts may still be waved and many faculty may still understand themselves as its standard bearers, but the power, stature, and appeal of the liberal arts curriculum has been significantly degraded on many campuses.

It is late, but not too late for some of the liberal arts colleges to reclaim important elements of their heritage. Ironically, just as survival needs led many to assign a substantially reduced role for the liberal arts, some institutions may now find that their survival depends on a creative revival of liberal arts values. In a time of balkanized academic programs and campuses, "value-lite" instruction, and de-personalized instructional technologies, there is a promising opening for undergraduate institutions that articulate and deliver powerful liberal arts education. The ever shrinking

half-life of "cutting edge" career fields and the threatened obsolescence of related academic programs, as well as the much noted tendency of latter-day college graduates to make several career shifts, provide strong evidence for the value of a more basic, comprehensive, and versatile educational program. The explosive growth of interest in life-long learning programs and Chautauqua-style educational opportunities also points to the promising possibilities for wider liberal arts programming.

Although the liberal arts tradition in American higher education is rooted in Western classical ideals and in the practices of the medieval university, there are important and useful parallels to be found in non-Western educational thought. In the effort to restore the liberal arts to a more influential role in the life of the institution, help may be found in a variety of quarters. Asian studies faculty may offer valuable assistance. On many campuses represented in the ASIANetwork, the Asian studies programs admirably reflect the core values of liberal arts education.

In at least three important areas, Asian studies faculty can contribute to a revitalization of undergraduate liberal arts education. First, Asian studies faculty practice a variety of interdisciplinary education that is rare among the traditional liberal arts disciplines. Asian studies faculty typically work in an interdisciplinary context, crossing disciplinary and departmental lines and linking, among other fields, history, literature, language studies, politics, religion, and the arts. This is in striking contrast to the narrow, disciplinary focus of the traditional liberal arts fields. The "divide and tunnel" pattern in higher education persists, notwithstanding many years of criticism and appeals for interdisciplinary reform. A student majoring in, say, history, philosophy, or literature in the latter-day liberal arts college will ordinarily acquire a strong foundation in the disciplinary tradition, but all too often receive little direction or encouragement in exploring connections among the traditions. The Asian studies major, on the other hand, cannot escape traveling across disciplinary boundaries and pursuing integrative objectives. Asian studies programs exhibit the power of interdisciplinary education, and, as such, they have the potential of serving as an inspiration and model for change in the traditional liberal arts programs.

Asian studies programs may also have a helpful influence in a second area where the traditional liberal arts appear to have lost much of their following, if not their way. The liberal arts disciplines have become increasingly disengaged, self-absorbed, arcane, and devoid of useful news for the wider world. While it may be unreasonable to expect the liberal arts disciplines to define their central task as the illumination of contemporary life, it is not too much to ask for some light on the subject. In assessing the involuted proceedings of mid-twentieth century moral philosophy, H.D. Aiken once remarked: "What we require is not metaethics but 'betta' ethics." Arrested by the fashions, imperatives, and intellectual politics of the professional subcultures, too many liberal arts faculty ignore opportunities to engage contemporary social issues and to think

systematically about scholarship and teaching in rough and occasional service to human need. Bruce Kimball, in his landmark study of the origins and development of the liberal arts ideal, *Orators and Philosophers*, argues that there are two major currents running through the history of the liberal arts tradition: the philosophical school, associated initially with Socrates and Plato, and the oratorical school, founded by Isocrates and sustained by Cicero and Quintilian. While the former school showed a relative indifference to the study and cultivation of practical citizenship, emphasizing instead truth for its own liberating sake, the orators made political service and social values the cornerstone of enlightened education. In our time, faced with planet engulfing challenges—seemingly intractable poverty in many parts of the third world, mounting environmental degradation, dangerous new terrorist movements, and revolutionary technologies whose full implications are little understood—one hopes for a revival of the emphasis on social values associated with the oratorical liberal arts heritage.

In complex ways, Asian studies programs provide some of the elements of social engagement that are underdeveloped in the contemporary liberal arts disciplines. To some extent, this is a natural function of the non-Western focus of Asian studies programs. Coming to terms with other cultures both rewards serious engagement with such traditions and stimulates, however indirectly, fresh comparative understanding of one's own cultural heritage. Asian studies programs offer exciting opportunities to reflect on the relationship between the values and cultural institutions of Asian societies and the present-day challenges they face. To be sure, many Asian studies courses lie at a considerable distance from contemporary social problems. Taken together, however, the elements in a strong Asian studies program promote an integrated understanding of one or more non-Western cultures and an appreciation for both cultural diversity and our common humanity.

One of the most stubborn criticisms of the liberal arts tradition in contemporary higher education is that it focuses too heavily on the talented few, intellectually stranding the larger number of students who are not destined for graduate study in the discipline. The future graduate student may well come to know the satisfactions of the initiate, but the balance of the class too often find themselves without any passion for the discipline and lacking both mastery and meaning. This third area of concern with the practice of the liberal arts derives in part from peculiar teaching values and methods, but it also owes to the already noted disciplinary parochialism and social disengagement.

Asian studies programs offer rich opportunities for a more comprehensive enlistment of student interests. The interdisciplinary character of the field and a vital engagement with non-Western cultures appeal to the student's imagination and appetite for intellectual discovery. In addition, allied language programs and study abroad experiences may contribute to levels of interest and personal meaning rarely found in traditional liberal arts programs. There are, to be sure, bored and unsuccessful Asian studies students, but the

very nature of the field and the creative ways in which many undergraduate programs have been designed provide helpful resistance to such failure.

There is no claim here that Asian studies programs are abstractly utopian or uniformly excellent, nor that Asian studies can or should save the traditional liberal arts disciplines from the ravages of time, the shifting patterns of educational purpose, or themselves. What I am suggesting is that Asian studies faculty and programs on many campuses represent the liberal arts at their best: connected, engaged, and meaningful. In making the case for both the importance of the liberal arts and the need for fresh thinking about how the liberal arts should be taught, it would be useful to train a light on the impressive work to be found in our Asian studies programs. Much can be learned from these programs about creative liberal arts pedagogy and about more powerful means of reinventing the liberal arts curriculum.

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