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## The Habit of Seeking: Liberal Education and the Library at Berea College

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### ABSTRACT

IN 1993, BEREA COLLEGE INAUGURATED a new general studies program that includes seven courses with faculty-approved goals relating to communication and research. The program's course-integrated library instruction is designed collaboratively by instructors and their library liaisons. Library assignments are intended to introduce the logic of the library and its tools gradually and cumulatively so that students' understanding, use, and evaluation of the library's resources become increasingly sophisticated as they proceed through their general studies classes. The article begins with an overview of Berea College and its commitment to liberal education then argues that there is a natural connection between a liberal education and a curriculum that emphasizes regular use of the library's resources. A description of the library's role in Berea's new general education program follows.

### BEREA COLLEGE AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

general education is not a smorgasbord curriculum from which a student may select at random samples of tidbits. Its purpose is to stretch and stimulate the student's mind, not stuff or entertain it. All of the courses are aimed to aid a student in developing a coherent and enlightened pattern of values, a personal ethic, and some good standards of taste and discrimination, so that he can find his way with a degree of sureness through a world of shoddy, shallow, conflicting, unworthy and unjust claims upon his attention, his participation and his loyalties. (Hutchins, 1963, p. 15)

This passage comes from a speech delivered to the Newcomen Society in 1963 by Francis Hutchins—Berea College's sixth president; son of Berea's fifth president, William J. Hutchins; and brother of the University of Chicago's Robert Maynard Hutchins. It expresses Berea College's commitment to liberal education, a commitment inextricably intertwined with its aim of carrying on "many forms of education at once—teaching the people how to get a living, and how to live" (Frost, 1937, p. 75), as an earlier president of the college, William Goodell Frost, put it in his 1893 inaugural address.

Unlike many colleges that are the product of nineteenth-century social activism, Berea cultivates communal memory of its past and attempts to develop in a way that is consistent with its roots. Founded in 1855 by Reverend John G. Fee on land donated by Kentucky abolitionist Cassius Clay, Berea was dedicated to offering interracial education to students of limited means. Those students came primarily from the mountains of Kentucky and neighboring states, and shortly after the Civil War, the school explicitly identified this area as its primary field of service. Berea has tried to remain true to the leading ideas and principles of its founders. By design, 80 percent of Berea's students come from Kentucky and Southern Appalachia. Only students with low to modest family incomes are admitted. No tuition is charged, and every student is required to work at least ten hours per week in the college labor program.

Berea has always included vocational training among its courses of study. Today its majors include agriculture, education, technology and industrial arts, and nursing, as well as the standard liberal arts programs in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. However, the option of majoring in a "practical" field does not allow a student to avoid a liberal education. From the beginning, Berea has had "a spade and a spelling-book in one hand, and a telescope and a Greek Testament in the other" (Frost, 1937, p. 76), and since the 1940s, all students have been required to take a course of general studies, a requirement based upon the belief that a liberal education is of fundamental value whatever one's occupation.

The library program described below is largely a function of the particular character of Berea College. It was shaped by the convergence of insights gleaned from the literature and practice of librarianship, sensitivity to the needs of Berea's students, and reflection on the nature of a liberal education. The idea that libraries are warehouses of books and magazines or clearinghouses for new information technologies misrepresents their symbiotic relationship to the communities they serve. The materials and services a library provides are sure to be inadequate and inappropriate unless they are developed in response to the mission and needs of the larger body. Of course, those needs, and perhaps the mission as well, may be manifold, resulting in a delicate balancing act on the parts of librarians so that time, energy, and resources are not squandered, thereby endangering the general well-being of the community.

Librarians should, of course, be lively participants in charting the course of their institutions, and they may initiate discussion on a wide range of educational and technological issues. However, they must guard against embracing and promoting the latest and greatest out of an unreflective fascination with novelty. Librarians abdicate one of their basic responsibilities if they are not sensitive to the defining characteristics and distinctive purposes of the communities they serve. To fail in this regard is to become alienated, ineffective, and marginalized.

### THE NATURAL CONNECTION BETWEEN LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE LIBRARY

There is no way of arriving at any sciential End but by finding it at every step. The End is in the Means: or the Adequacy of each Mean is already its End. Southey once said to me: You are nosing every nettle along the Hedge, while the Greyhound (meaning himself, I presume) wants only to get sight of the Hare, and Flash—strait as a line! he has it in his mouth!—Even so, I replied, might a Cannibal say to an Anatomist, whom he had watched dissecting a body. But the fact is—I do not care two pence for the *Hare*, but I value most highly the excellencies of scent, patience, discrimination, free Activity; and find a Hare in every Nettle I make myself acquainted with. (Coleridge, 1979, p. 143)

In this typical Coleridgean passage—replete with his exuberant punctuation and genius for metaphor—we find memorably expressed an understanding of human beings that, if accepted, should have profound consequences for education. Coleridge's emphasis on the powers, or "excellencies," that are quickened and developed by engaging in certain activities is echoed in much of the finest thinking about the value of a liberal arts education (see, for example, Oakeshott, 1989). The current interest in "lifelong learning," "independent learners," and "resource-based learning," is compelling to the extent that it corresponds to the depth and complexity of human abilities and longings.

What, then, distinguishes a liberal education as worthwhile and distinct from learning a specific discipline or from training in particular skills? This question is of perennial significance to liberal arts colleges like Berea, for if they cannot provide a cogent answer, their very *raison d'être* is threatened. Career-oriented training in skills and procedures is of fundamental importance to individuals and society. However, if it is the exclusive, or even the chief, goal of education, then many liberal arts colleges offer an overpriced, and often inferior, version of what could be obtained down the road at the state university, community college, or technical school.

This is not to say that only graduates of liberal arts colleges experience the adventure of learning and the personal empowerment promised by a liberal education. It is possible, and all too common, for students

at liberal arts colleges to remain blind to the benefits of the education they receive, to resent it as irrelevant to the practical concerns of making a living. On the other hand, one of the most striking—and liberating—things about a liberal education is that, once its nature is recognized and appreciated, one is disabused of the idea that it is a secret hoarded by professors at expensive schools and doled out only to the privileged few fortunate enough to sit at their feet. Although one does not have to attend a liberal arts college to become liberally educated, such institutions provide an important service to society by guarding the distinction between occupational training and the education of the entire person.

A liberal education is designed to create active, engaged, wide-awake learners. Its opposite is what Freire (1970) calls the “banking concept” of education in his devastating critique of educational systems that view students as vessels to be filled. This point of agreement between Freire’s education for socioeconomic liberation and a liberal education is instructive in light of the charge of elitism that is sometimes leveled at the liberal arts. There *is* a sense in which a liberal education is conservative or, more accurately, conserving (Postman, 1979). Genuine self-understanding is impossible unless an individual is conversant with the language, traditions, ideas, and institutions that have shaped his or her own values and beliefs. Though it requires respect for the shaping power of the past, it also encourages students to develop the habit of self-examination. Unquestioning acceptance of what we have inherited is akin to indoctrination, which is among the most dangerous enemies of liberal education. The active learner analyzes, assays, and exercises critical judgment before assimilating values and beliefs of past generations.

A liberal education is also sometimes accused of being ethnocentric. Again, there is a conserving element present, a recognition of the massive impact of European thought on our society. But the liberal arts claim to enhance our ability imaginatively to stand outside ourselves and to foster open-mindedness and tolerance. By promoting such abilities, they serve as a corrective to what William James (1967) called a “certain blindness in human beings”—namely, our inability to see and feel things from another’s perspective.

Thus, even the study of one’s heritage as a key aspect of self-knowledge requires an active imagination and a knack for asking tough questions. The past is valuable insofar as it continues to impinge upon the present and future, either through direct influence or by offering enriching alternatives to contemporary ways of thinking and acting. Expansion of present possibilities is the chief, though often unacknowledged, touchstone of the liberal arts. Thus, a liberal education is not a deposit of dry data or a narrow ideology that an older generation tries to force feed a younger one. It is an education that, properly understood, strengthens one’s present being through vigorous wrestling with what has come before. As Alfred North Whitehead (1949) observed:

the understanding which we want is an understanding of an insistent present. The only use of a knowledge of the past is to equip us for the present. No more deadly harm can be done to young minds than by depreciation of the present. The present contains all that there is. It is holy ground; for it is the past, and it is the future. (p. 14)

The fact that the liberal arts are chiefly concerned with active learning, responsible freedom, and discerning fruitful connections does not mean that content is unimportant. The habits and dispositions that are at the heart of this education cannot be imparted directly. The intellectual counterpart of hands-on education is deep engagement with significant challenging content. The prevalence of the *Iliad*, *King Lear*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Invisible Man* on college reading lists is not due to the machinations of a cabal of literary critics and self-appointed canon-makers. Rather, it is because such works simultaneously offer students the cultural literacy Hirsch (1987) calls for, and more importantly, because they demand that students exercise judgment, analyze with care, and diligently seek connections to mine their latent riches. Colleges and universities should be the testing ground of the "great works," the classroom a crucible in which the prime expressions of our forebears are subjected to the refining fire of the present to see what persists as worthy of our effort and attention.

The point of such education is not that students be able to recognize literary allusions that occasionally appear in newspapers or in a snippet of a politician's speech that finds its way onto television. Instead, a liberal education is based upon the conviction that grappling with texts, paintings, scores, ideas, arguments, and concepts enlarges one's imagination, judgment, and aesthetic sensibility. It is a means by which the full range of one's being—intellectual, moral, spiritual, and emotional—is developed. The purpose and telos of such an education was described by William Cory, a classical master at Eton:

you are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism . . . you go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice, a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. And above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge. (Cited in Oakeshott, 1991, p. 491n)

If Cory is correct, if education is chiefly about the development of arts, habits, and dispositions that will equip students to make wiser decisions and thereby live fuller lives, then it follows that the library plays

a central role in a liberal education. For the library is the place *par excellence* where the implications of ideas can be traced, where contextual connections can be filled out, where propositions can be tested, and where a community of learners may be established through interaction with their preserved heritage and collaboration on fresh projects. Among the many implications of the view of education here adumbrated is that it cannot be cut to fit three fifty-minute sessions per week without gross distortion. Those regular plenary gatherings will, for most classes, remain important moments for discussion and instruction but, if education is to fulfill its promise, it must transcend the spatial and temporal constraints inherent in the model of a classroom headed by a subject expert lecturing to pencil-poised students. The more successfully schools encourage students to develop the habit of seeking—i.e., the commitment to questioning, analyzing, synthesizing, and making well-informed decisions—the more indispensable the library becomes. It can, and should, be the site where what Robert Maynard Hutchins (1952) calls the “great conversation” is joined by those who wish to embark on the adventure of learning.

#### THE LIBRARY IN BEREА COLLEGE'S NEW GENERAL STUDIES PROGRAM

Berea College inaugurated a new general studies curriculum during the 1993-94 academic year. This curriculum, which is taught by faculty across the disciplines, runs through a student's course of study and thus cannot be “gotten out of the way” during the first two years. General studies have been a central part of a Berea education for more than fifty years, and at least since the last major revision of the curriculum in 1972, the library's key role in general education has been recognized. The new program represents an awareness that the habit of seeking must be developed over time and is not a simple content or procedure that can be handed to students during their first year and then neglected. The guiding principle here is well-expressed by Grudin (1982): “Philosophically speaking, ‘to learn’ is a verb with no legitimate past tense” (p. 110).

The college's rationale for requiring each student to engage in general education beyond the specialized education of the departments is expressed in the following statement of aims and purpose:

Central to Berea's aims for liberal education is the liberation of the individual in a life-long pursuit of truth. This pursuit is undertaken for pleasure as well as for practical reasons. Berea's General Education Curriculum seeks to join the student in gratitude to the past and in obligation to the future. The General Education Curriculum, which is shaped by the Great Commitments of Berea College, includes the aims of:

- developing knowledge of and gaining appreciation for the liberal arts: their histories, limitations, and inter-relationships.

- mastering skills of abstract and logical thinking, critical analysis, literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening, information-seeking) and numeracy.
- enhancing imagination, sense of personal authority, ethical, religious and historical consciousness, and habits of inquiry, service, and creativity.
- developing appreciation of and respect for the experiences of others, especially in terms of race, gender, religion, language, class, cultures, and societies.
- shaping a community which encourages discussion, reflection, creativity, and action; and which embodies and values freedom, justice, purposeful activity, personal responsibility and constructive leisure. (Berea College, 1993)

Berea has a significant history of course-related instruction (see Hughes & Flandreau, 1980; Rader, 1984; Taylor, 1991). The new program attempts to extend that tradition into a coherent curriculum-integrated program. The commitment to incorporating the library into courses in a way that complements and enriches what the class is designed to achieve continues unabated. The new scheme aims to ensure that all students have a variety of research experiences across the curriculum so that they will come to realize that going beyond the processed information of textbooks, and thus becoming responsible for their own education, lies at the very heart of education and is not a one-time exercise.

The program is conducted by four librarians who devote from one-fourth to one-half of their time to instruction. Liaison assignments are made each year for each course. The same librarians also have departmental liaison responsibilities, but these do not determine which faculty members the librarians will work with in the general studies courses. By working with different librarians, faculty are more likely to develop confidence in the program and not merely the person.

The following core courses, which are distributed over the student's four years, are designated as courses in which communications and research abilities will be developed:

Stories: Encountering Others Through Literature (first year, first semester)

U. S. Traditions: Texts of Justice and Freedom (first year, second semester)

Western Traditions I and II (second year, first and second semesters)

Arts in Context (second, third, or fourth year)

World Issues Since 1945 (third or fourth year)

Christianity and Contemporary Culture (fourth year)

These courses constitute a common framework of studies for all Berea students, while simultaneously allowing enough flexibility for individual instructors to make the course their own. For example, in the first two

years of the *Stories* class, Maya Angelou's (1969) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was on the reading list for all sections. The balance of the required reading for each section was determined by the individual instructors, who are responsible for giving the course thematic coherence within the general guidelines laid out by the course planning committee. Each of the core courses follows a similar pattern: one or more common readings for all sections and substantial freedom for the instructors to find their own ways of meeting the course goals.

Among the goals delineated by the planning committee for each course are those relating to communication and research. Students are required to maintain a portfolio of writing samples from these courses. For each portfolio piece, they are asked to include a copy of the assignment and a page or two of reflection upon their writing and research processes. The portfolios allow students to chart the development of their various literacies: reading, writing, listening, and library research. They also offer a means of evaluating the program itself, since they are available to Berea's Center for Effective Communication and to the library to assess whether the courses are meeting the communication and library goals. Below are the research goals as articulated for each course.

### *Stories*

*Stories*, the first course in the general studies program has, as its chief communication goal, the development of critical reading and listening skills. While there is a substantial amount of writing in the class, it often takes the form of journal entries or brief reading responses rather than formal essays. The library goals for the course are basic and introductory: to become acquainted with the library building and with the location of resources and services; to learn to do basic searches on BANC, Berea's online public catalog; to become acquainted with library human resources by working with their library liaison; to use specialized reference works that will help students read resonantly and with deeper understanding. The orientation to the building, services, and OPAC is achieved by means of a forty-five-minute audio tape tour. The other goals are generally met through one or more sessions with the library liaison. By being introduced to an array of general and specific dictionaries and thesauri, students can become more alert to the power and subtlety of words and to the consequences of the choices writers make when they create a character, depict an event, or express an emotion. Topical encyclopedias, thematic atlases, and biographical sources help students fill out the contexts of their readings, thereby "broadening the framework" of their understanding and response (Rosenblatt, 1983).

In *U. S. Traditions*, readings, discussion, and expository writings focus on issues of unity and diversity in such key American texts as the *Declaration of Independence*, *Federalist 10*, *Civil Disobedience*, the *Gettysburg Address*,

the *Seneca Falls Declaration*, and *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The writing assignments in this course require students to analyze texts and issues, but they are not expected to do extensive research. This is the place in the program, however, where students are introduced to the nature, use, and evaluation of periodical literature and indexes. Annotated bibliographies are a popular assignment in this course, though some instructors devise assignments that lead to oral presentations or to detailed critical evaluations of only one or two articles. Assignments vary greatly from section to section, offering various paths to the common goal of ensuring that students understand the role of periodical literature in scholarship and research, how to choose indexes that are most likely to lead them to pertinent articles, and how to evaluate the located articles as to audience, authority, and cogency.

#### *Western Traditions*

*Western Traditions* is a full-year course that emphasizes engagement with primary texts. All sections use a standard textbook to give students a historical backdrop for the discussion of foundational works of the Western heritage. Students write what the course planners call “documented, scholarly essays.” In the first semester, these essays do not necessarily require students to work through the entire research process—i.e., from topic selection to final draft. Instead, instructors often ask for essays that respond to a specific question or directive (How is Agamemnon’s taking of Briseis similar to David’s taking of Bathsheba? Discuss Dante’s use of Virgil’s depiction of the Underworld in the *Aeneid*) requiring students to incorporate perspectives drawn from critical secondary literature into their papers. In the second semester, a full research paper is assigned, with the instructor, sometimes with the aid of the section’s library liaison, monitoring students’ progress in topic selection, thesis formation, information gathering, marshaling of evidence, rhetorical competence, and attention to academic conventions of documentation and style. The essays of *Western Traditions*, like the assignments in the first-year courses, are not isolated exercises in following a general formula for research but are ways of enhancing and deepening understanding of the subject.

#### *Arts in Context, World Issues Since 1945, Christianity and Contemporary Culture*

*Arts in Context, World Issues Since 1945, and Christianity and Contemporary Culture* give students opportunities to hone the skills and reinforce the habits introduced during the first four courses of the general studies sequence. Each course requires students to do independent work that makes them increasingly responsible for their own learning. A research paper per se is not mandated in these courses; research may result in creating a play, leading a seminar session, designing a museum exhibit, or organizing a mock debate between leaders of industrialized and

developing nations. Again, assignments emerge from the convergence of common goals and the particular decisions of individual section instructors.

The general studies curriculum sketched above arose out of sustained collective reflection on the values and purposes of the liberal arts. The library instruction aspect of the curriculum intends to respect the growing power of students by being "progressive," which simply means that the logic and promise of the library and its resources are introduced gradually and cumulatively. Students are asked to become increasingly sophisticated researchers as they move through the general studies courses. The library goals are ordered to yield a cumulative effect as students build on previous experiences. They issue from the conviction that sound method arises through reiteration:

Every teacher, whether he knows it or not, teaches three things at once: the subject under investigation, the art of investigation and the art of teaching. The two latter teachings, which concern method rather than matter, are more subtle, more lasting and more important. We teach them by patient and unadvertised repetition, showing through time how the same method works in a variety of cases. Only through this combination of coherence and variety can the student grasp the nature of method—abstract it and see it as something distinct from the specific subject matter and the specific character of the teacher. (Grudin, 1982, p. 110)

Library instruction in this scheme is also intent on being organically related to what happens in the classroom. Aside from the initial tape tour of the library, there are no canned presentations in this program. Librarians and instructors must collaborate to create projects and assignments that students recognize as relevant to specific goals of the course. When library skills are tied to activities designed to yield a fuller, more penetrating, comprehension of topics integral to the course, students are more likely to see their research as relevant and potentially useful in other situations. This requires close working relations between librarians and teaching faculty, a partnership based on recognition of the complex nature of learning and on the advantages of pooling expertise (see Baker, 1989).

Cooperation between teaching faculty and librarians is fostered by the programmatic nature of the relationship. There is an institutional expectation that library research be incorporated throughout the general studies program. The institutional aspect is evident in the librarians' role in the course planning process, in the validation of those course plans by vote of the entire faculty, and through librarians' participation in the workshops conducted for general studies instructors. Several positive consequences flow from this communal commitment to the library and to the type of learning it enhances. The shape and success of the library instruction program are not the responsibility of one or two librarians but of the entire campus. This significantly reduces the time

and energy librarians must invest in “marketing” the resources and services they offer. It also lessens, though does not eliminate, the problem of what Thompson (1992) has called “recalcitrant faculty.”

The distribution of library experiences across the curriculum means that librarians need not try to tell students everything they need to know about the library in each class session. In fact, it sharply reduces the number of sessions devoted predominately to librarians lecturing. Because the librarians know students will be returning and will be asked to utilize library resources in a wide range of situations, library instruction sessions can afford to be very precise and, often, quite brief. A typical instructional session in the new program might include a sharply focused presentation of ten to twenty minutes, distribution of a bibliography tailored to the specific assignment of that particular section, then a working session in which students can get started, with the librarian and instructor available for consultation when questions arise. This assumes that the habit of seeking is best developed through asking students repeatedly to extend their inquiry beyond the classroom in ways that expand comprehension of their courses’ subjects.

#### OPEN QUESTIONS

Does the library program described above work? Does it in fact help students become better equipped to make wise choices, encourage them to become responsible for their own education, effectively instill in them a habit of seeking? The easy answer is that it is too early to say since the program has not been tried in its entirety. The first students under the new curriculum will not graduate until 1997. A more searching answer must also be indirect. One of the most crucial challenges not only for the instruction librarians, but also for the college as a whole, is determining what we need to know to answer this vital question.

The general studies program includes faculty workshops for mutual support and communication in the areas of course design and development. These workshops, along with the course planning process and the general studies portfolio, signal the importance of working together to make well-informed decisions about the general studies program. Such structures of reflective exchange allow for mid-course corrections of the program and for regular conversation with one’s colleagues about how best to achieve the promise of a liberal education. Such regular communal reflection and analysis is indispensable to an educational program that truly values what it professes—namely, a commitment to deepening self-knowledge and to the pursuit of truth. The initial responses of the faculty to the new program have been very positive. Most faculty have shown themselves willing, sometimes eager, to work collaboratively with librarians to make their assignments more responsive to students’ needs,

interests, and abilities. The librarians' efforts to make instruction directly relevant to the courses' central aims are appreciated by the faculty as well as by the students, according to the anecdotal feedback garnered so far.

But as valuable as such opportunities for communication and reflection are, and as gratifying as faculty approbation is, they do not constitute an adequate way of determining whether the program is actually doing what it intends to do. Devising a means of evaluating the program will be done in concert with Berea's campuswide plan for effectiveness and self-examination. Evaluation of Berea's former instruction program was conducted using pre- and post-tests, faculty attitudinal surveys, focus group interviews, and analyses of senior students' research paper bibliographies (see Henthorn & Royse, 1993). Such standard instruments of evaluation will almost certainly be utilized again as the new program unfolds. However, the construction of a flexible multifaceted evaluation process that does not succumb to distorting quantification remains a task to be achieved.

What impact will the Internet and other electronic resources have on the role of the library in the general studies curriculum? At this point there is very little use of the Internet or other online searching options in conjunction with the general studies courses. Given the basic philosophy of the liberal arts and the way the library can enhance that type of education, this is not a major concern. The commitment to course-integrated instruction means that there is no intention of using the general studies curriculum as a place to "teach the Internet" unless such training is essentially tied to a class project. For students interested in expanding their awareness of, and sharpening their ability to use, the Internet, there are campus workshops that offer such training.

The general studies program, if true to its commitment to the type of reflection characteristic of a liberal education, should be a place where students train a critical eye on their entire tradition, including society's often unthinking embrace of technology. If students complete the general studies curriculum without recognizing that "technology giveth and technology taketh away" (Postman, 1992, p. 5), then something has gone awry. The beneficiaries of a liberal arts education should heed Suber's (1992) warning about the grave danger of confusing access to the bedazzling wealth of information made available by computers with education. Perhaps such sober questioning and critical evaluation will become second nature to those who have cultivated the habit of seeking.

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