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THOUGHTS ON COMMON LEARNING
AT CORNELL

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Introduction

First, I must tell you how pleased I am to be back on the Cornell campus. ^I have very fond memories of my days in the Empire State and I recall with special pleasure my relationship with colleagues at this distinguished institution.

I am especially pleased to be here with Frank Rhodes who is one of the nation's outstanding academic leaders with a rare combination of intellect, humanity and vision.

I also ^{must} tell you, at the very outset, how impressed I am that key administrators and faculty leaders are taking time to focus on the theme of common learning. ^{I'm} pleased to join you in this conversation and I know I shall receive much more than I can give.

I. In Defense of Common Learning

Wallace Stevens once wrote a poem called "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." General education and blackbirds have this in common: Both can be viewed from many different angles.

But before exploring four or five possible general education angles, I'd like to step back a bit and put my own general education bias in perspective.

In his book, The Mountain People, anthropologist Colin Turnbull describes a once-thriving North African tribal community in which, through adversity, relationships have broken down. Common values have deteriorated and traditions have lost their cohesive power. The social cement that held the tribe together--its heritage, values, and mutual relationships--has crumbled. The result, says Turnbull, is the breakdown of community.

It seems to me that, on a quite different scale, such a decline threatens us today. Today's young people have grown up in a fractured, atomized world in which the call for individual gratification is intense and social claims are weak. Students are educationally more competitive, geared toward training for jobs, and more committed to getting higher grades. They are optimistic about their own futures, believing they will get good jobs, good money, and good things, but they are pessimistic about

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the future of the nation and the world. Consequently, students are more committed to their personal futures than to the future we face together.

Sadly, most schools exacerbate this tendency toward self-preoccupation and social isolation. Electives, with their emphasis on individual interests, continue to expand while general education is in shambles. Among educators there is no agreement about the meaning of a college education. We are more confident about the length of the baccalaureate degree than we are about its substance.

Some of you may have heard me say that when I was Chancellor, I received a copy of the Stanford Daily announcing that a faculty committee had proposed a new general education program, having dropped such a requirement a few years before. The student newspaper, in a biting attack on the proposal, said in a front-page editorial that the new requirement would:

- o "remove from students the right to choose for themselves That is not to deny that courses in western culture are valuable and that most students could benefit from them. To require such a course, however, carries a strong, illiberal connotation. . . . It imposes a uniform standard on nonuniform people."

Frankly, I was startled by that statement. I found it startling that the student editor--after perhaps 14 years of formal

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education--failed to see that while we are "nonuniform," we are also dependent on each other. He seemed not to have discovered that we do have a cultural heritage, a shared engagement in urgent contemporary problems, and a common future that cannot be ignored. Uniformity and interrelatedness are not the same.

As a global society, we simply cannot afford a generation that fails to see or care about connections. To deny our relationship with one another and with our common home, Earth, is to deny the realities of existence. It is as irresponsible to suggest to students that they have nothing in common as it would be to suggest that they are all alike. ^{And} It is my own belief that the time has come for educators to focus with greater seriousness on the aims of common learning.

Here I must insert an essential caveat. To reaffirm general education, should, in no way, diminish the significance of diversity in education. The uniqueness of each individual is a fact to be cherished, not deplored. To recognize that this nation is not one culture but many; to defend the rights of minorities; to preserve the right to dissent, even to disobey, are to acknowledge the essentials of a free society. Schools and colleges must respond to the special needs of students.

Still this cannot be the limit of our focus. While affirming diversity, students also must understand the claims of the larger society that give meaning to their lives. And general education

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should be reaffirmed not as a sentimental tradition, but precisely because our future well-being, and perhaps even our survival, are linked to this larger vision.

Therefore, I suggest that the mission of general education is to help students understand that they are not only autonomous individuals, but also members of a larger community to which they are accountable. In education, as in life itself, one aspect of our being must not be allowed to eclipse the other. ~~In calling~~
~~for a reaffirmation of general education, the aim is to help~~
~~restore the balance.~~ ^{and} By focusing on those experiences that knit isolated individuals into a community, general education can have a central purpose of its own.

help restore the balance.

II. A Suggested Core

How is the vision of general educators to be converted into practice? But what are the^{se} universal experiences that should be studied by all students? Obviously, many different lists could be drawn up.

Let me comment very briefly on the six themes Art Levine and I discussed in our essay A Quest for Common Learning.

Use of Symbols. First we suggest that all students should understand that our unique use of symbols separates human beings from all other forms of life. Language gives individuals their identities, makes transactions possible, and provides the connecting issues that bind society together. All students, from the very first years of formal schooling, learn not only to "read and write," but also to read with understanding, write with clarity, and listen and speak effectively. In addition, ~~they~~^{students} should become proficient in the use of numbers, which constitute an essential and universally accepted symbol system, too. The mastery of these skills is the foundation of common learning. Without them, the goals of general education will be fatally undermined.

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We suggest that students should also come to understand why and how language has evolved, how messages reveal the values of a culture, how words and thoughts interact, and how feelings and ideas are conveyed through literature.

And they should explore, as well, how we communicate nonverbally, through music, dance, and the visual arts. They should understand how these forms of expression permit us to convey subtle meanings, express intense emotions; and how, uniquely, nonverbal symbols can stir a deep response in others.

We also suggest that every generally-educated student should learn about this pervasive signal system that increasingly controls our day-to-day transactions.

ambitions
There are, of course, ~~goals and ambitions~~; but, they are essential if students are to survive in a world where symbols provide the glue that holds the community together.

Membership in Groups and Institutions. We also suggest that all students understand our shared membership in groups and institutions. Institutions are a fact of life. They touch almost every aspect of our being--economic, educational, familial, political, and religious. We are born into institutions, we pass much of our lives in institutions, and institutions are involved when we die. The general education curriculum should look at the origin of institutions; how they

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evolve, grow strong, become oppressive or weak, and sometimes die. It would examine, as well, how institutions work, explore the interaction between institutions and individuals, and show how such interaction both facilitates and complicates our existence.

The goal should be to help students see that everyone shares membership in the "common institutions" of our culture--those social structures that shape our lives, impose obligations, restrict choices, and provide services that we could not obtain in isolation.

Producing and Consuming. As a part of common learning, students should also understand that everyone produces and consumes and that, through this process, we are dependent on each other.

General education should explore the significance of work and examine how work patterns shape the lives of individuals and reflect the social climate of a culture. Such a curriculum would ask: What have been the historical, philosophical, religious, and social attitudes toward work around the world? How are notions about work related to social status and human dignity? What determines the different status and rewards we grant to different forms of work? Why is some work highly rewarded and other work relatively unrewarded?

This is not to suggest that the nation's schools and colleges become vocational institutions. But production and consumption are central to our common experience. They are the ways we define ourselves. Their study can be a legitimate, demanding part of general education.

Relationship with Nature. As a fourth theme, we suggest that all life forms on the planet earth are inextricably interlocked and no education is complete without an understanding of the ordered, interdependent nature of the universe. General education should introduce students, not just to the "facts" of science--the basic concepts, theories and relationships--but to the methodology of science, too. All students should come to understand how science is a process of trial and error; how, through observation and testing, theories are defined, sometimes discarded, and often give rise to other theories. Students should learn about the applications of science and see how scientific discoveries have led to a flood of inventions and new technologies that have brought with them both benefits and risks.

It seems obvious that becoming a responsible human being in the last quarter of the twentieth century means learning about the great power of science, its pervasive influence in all aspects of our life, and our own shared relationship with nature. This is an essential part of common learning.

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Sense of Time. Next we suggest that an understanding of our shared heritage--past and future--should be expected of all students. General education should focus on the seminal ideas and events that have decisively shaped the course of history.

This approach would be something more than a collection of facts. It would emphasize the convergence of social, religious, political, economic, and intellectual forces in the study of a few carefully chosen themes. Students should learn that the chronicle of humanity is by no means a swift and straight march in the direction of progress. It is an endlessly varied struggle to resolve tensions over freedom and authority, conformity and rebellion, war and peace, rights and responsibilities, equality and exploitation. At bottom, an inquiry into the roots of our civilization should be seen as a study of continuity and change, with leaps forward and spills backward.

The fundamental question must be: What has the past to do with us? How does it shape our world today? In looking to the past, we gain a new perspective on the present and shape visions of the future.

Values and Beliefs. Finally through general education, all students should examine shared values and beliefs. They should understand how values are formed, transmitted, and revised. They should examine, too, the values currently held in our society, looking at the ways such values are socially enforced, and how societies react to unpopular beliefs. General education should

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introduce all students to the powerful role political ideologies, and particularly religion, have played in shaping history.

And each student should be able to identify the premises inherent in his or her own beliefs, learn how to make responsible decisions, and engage in a frank and searching discussion of some of the ethical and moral choices that confront us all.

• • •

These, it seems to me, are consequential themes around which a general education ^{curriculum} ~~courses~~ might be clustered. And its interesting to note that the ~~approved~~ general education courses offered this spring by the College of Arts and Sciences fit neatly into the categories just described.

- o Consider, ^{the course} Language, Mind and Brain
or Thought and Intelligence or The History of the Book
or The Computer Age or The Japanese Film.

^P All of these are marvelously related to language and our shared use of symbols.

- ⁷ o Consider also Elites and Society or Conflict and Cooperation--clearly ^{that is} thoughtful inquiry into our membership in groups and institutions.
- o Or consider The Solar System or Theories of the World or the Origins of Life or Mineral and Energy Resources and Society. These ^{cannot seem obvious} ~~clearly~~ relate to an inquiry into our interdependent relationship with nature.

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- o Or consider Introduction to China or Afro-American History or The Origins of American Civilization. These put our shared heritage in perspective.

I'm suggesting that when Cornell's Arts and Science general education curriculum is examined important themes emerge. It is interesting to note, however, that some themes--language and heritage for example--^{are well represented in Cornell's general education program}~~offer many options~~ while others ~~common~~^{rare} experiences appear to be less frequently presented. ~~Suggesting perhaps that some of the important human experiences should be emphasized still more.~~

III. Common Learning at Cornell

This brings me to the theme of our discussion, Common Learning at Cornell. (Is it possible for this marvelous and complex institution--with all of its richness and diversity and with seven "independent" colleges--to contemplate a common experience for all students? Indeed, is there a "Cornell education" that goes beyond the obvious fact that ~~in~~ ^{here} all students spend most of their time in Ithaca, New York and that all ^{scholarship must take w/ course} have met the ~~university's requirement that all students take physical~~ ^{is graduate} education. If there is such an education, how might it be described?

Most realists will immediately conclude that such a question is simply unreasonable to pursue. Students are too different in their interests, ^{fields & I truly have become too complex extended} ~~and knowledge is too broad~~ and the Cornell's administrative structure is ^{too} ~~too complex and academic turf is too~~ ~~closely guarded~~ to permit curricular cohesion.

Further, many argue that general education cannot be pre-packaged and that students will have to work it out themselves.

All of these complications are very real,--~~and I respect them very much~~ ^{a mild} Still, I must confess ~~my~~ [^] discomfort at the thought that we expect students--in some marvelously mysterious way--to work out their own general education vision when we ourselves seem so hesitant and unclear about the goals of common learning.

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therefore, in the spirit of this conference I'd like

This leads me to comment on several common learning options for

Cornell. moving along a spectrum from conservative to creative.

~~First, one possible arrangement would be a university-wide policy~~
~~requiring general education with each college implementing~~
~~its own number of required courses for graduation. As I~~

understand it, the only university-wide requirement is physical

education. Beyond that each college or school is free to decide
 requirements for graduation which may or may not include general ed.
 on common learning and, if so, how such a program will be

shaped. In some general education seems to be pretty much

ignored while in others--the college of arts and science for

example--the program is much more elaborate. Specifically, I

understand that only 3 of the 7 undergraduate colleges at Cornell

have taken a position on general education. Although most

require freshman seminars of one sort or another. Would it be

possible for the entire Cornell community to agree on the

essentialness of general education and shape perhaps a common

goal that might be called "the essential Cornell experience."

Under such an arrangement each of the separate colleges or

schools still would determine how such a policy would be

implemented, shaping a cluster of general education courses for

its own students.

The first might be called the "Common
 Goal" Approach

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Next, the ~~combined~~ ^{combined} ~~courses~~ ^{approach might} be considered

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^{are the separate colleges}
The ~~second~~, ^{university-wide} approach would not only identify ^{agree upon} common goals but would also build a cluster of ^{general drawn} courses to which ^{from} all seven colleges would contribute. Each college would select several courses from its own curriculum that ^{for the common pool} meet the test of common learning. These courses would most likely be introductory or survey courses ^{the most} that would have broader appeal.

^{lists are 5000 courses}
In the current Cornell viewbook, when all seven colleges are combined over 5,000 are listed. ^{it does not seem unreasonable} I suspect that among these courses within each college there are general ^{many} education courses that fit neatly into the common learning themes and that would have university-wide appeal.

- o The College of Agriculture has such courses as Agriculture, Society and the Environment and Food Population and Employment.
- o The College of Architecture, Art and Planning offer courses in The History of Architecture, Architecture in Cultural Context and American Urban History.
- o The School of Hotel Administration offers Management of Human Resources
- o The College of Human Ecology has such courses as Housing and Society, Time as Human Resource and The Family in Modern Society

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- o The School of Industrial and Labor Relations offers Society, Industry and the Individual, and The Study of Work Motivation.

Another^A variation of this theme might be called the "cutting edge" approach. Instead of each school nominating its broad survey course, perhaps each could pick its most characteristic course¹ reflecting the uniqueness of its specialty. This course would likely be quite advanced--at the cutting edge of the profession. And yet isn't this what we want students to understand^{what a profession is about} about the field? Isn't this what all the preparation^{was about--getting to understand what it means to be your professor's colleague?} was about--getting to understand what it means to be your professor's colleague? It reflects the wisdom of Flannery O'Connor short story entitled Everything That Rises Must Converge.

Having chosen the course (or the problem or area), each school should figure out how to adopt it to the common learning program. Scientists obviously can't require that every undergraduate know calculus or polynomial theory, but it may be possible to get across to everyone what "elegance" means, or what the quantum theory is about. This would be ^{valuable} a way of having university-wide conversations^{not at the level of generality -} (which specialists within the discipline look down on anyway), but at the highest level of sophistication. It would be very difficult to design ^{specialized} these courses^{for general ed}, but it may be worth the effort.

To be sure

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There is one more variation on this theme I've called the Window Shopping strategy. ~~It is still more wreckless and irreverent.~~
 Instead of having each college select the general education courses it would like to offer, the process would be turned around. Faculty from other colleges would choose the general education courses from other schools they wish to have offered.
 This ^{appeal} would permit faculty to think ^{not} as specialists, but as broadly educated, curious members of an academic community. It urges them to ask, What--outside of my own field--do I most want to know? Since faculty members have been specialists since college, it allows them to speculate: If I had a chance to spend time as an undergraduate again, becoming broadly acquainted with a whole range of subjects, what would I learn about?--realizing that I'll never have as good a chance again to gain knowledge outside my specialty.

Another strategy might be called the faculty-team approach.

Under this scheme, each of the university's schools would select faculty members who would jointly teach (a few) courses focusing on common problems or issues. These would be university-wide ~~lectures or~~ seminars on topics broad enough to merit treatment by the various departments. ^{general ed seminars} They could be methodological ("Modes of Inquiry") or topical ("Growth and Its Limits") or historical ("The Paradox of Pluralism") or problem-oriented ("Energy") or theme-oriented ("Ethics and the Professions")--anything as long as they were big enough for each school to approach fruitfully as a contribution to the goal of common learning.

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This approach has advantages: It is closer to the way life is actually experienced. It draws faculty out of their familiar disciplinary grooves and challenges them to cut paths through less terrain. Students under the provisions of this plan are likely to gain far greater depth of understanding about at least a handful of topics than would have been the case had students studied established course materials in the context of any one school.

The disadvantages in this approach to ~~general education~~ is that it asks faculty members to engage in a practice that gains them no advantage in the competition within professional guilds. Also, it is contrary to the traditions of most disciplines, where tighter and tighter specialization is the norm. The result is that interdisciplinary studies are usually "multidisciplinary" that is why it is probably better to call this approach "cross-disciplinary." The challenge is for the specialist to come from his subject-matter enclave out to the borders of his discipline where, hopefully, contact can be made across the lines with a colleague who has carried out a similar maneuver from his base.

IV. The Schedule at Cornell

Before closing, I'd like to say a word about the schedule. It's just assumed that general education is achieved through courses offered 2 or 3 times a week for one semester. Courses are, after all, the currency of academic life and this is a reasonable approach. It seems to ~~be~~ ^{be} that general education objectives can be achieved in other ways as well. At some colleges, seminars are held in residence halls and in the student lounge. On other campuses, all-college convocations occur throughout the academic year. On these occasions, distinguished faculty and guest lecturers address topics that cut across the academic specialties.

Would it be possible for Cornell to build its general education structure around a faculty lecture series. Several times each year, university-wide lectures would be given by faculty from the separate colleges on general education themes.

Also, some colleges devote the midyear term to general education. When the so-called 4-1-4 calendar was introduced about 20 years ago, it offered colleges a marvelous opportunity for innovation. Although hundreds of institutions now have such a calendar, the interterm is often simply a lightly disguised vacation period, or an interval filled with a grab bag of electives. With more careful planning, the mid-year term could, I believe, be used effectively for general education. It can be

a time when faculty and students move beyond their narrow academic interests, focus on the broad themes and engage in common discourse.

Finally a word about organization:
 Clearly, for any of these new strategies to work, new ^{Board} organizational structure would be needed--a University Based on General Education perhaps. - modeled of the Arts & Science Board.

seem to
 All of this may ^{seem to} be impractical at a time when pressures of retirement and survival dominate the day. And yet there is something exciting about the prospect of the faculties of the seven schools coming together to ask--as intelligent citizens--to name the things ^{all} at Cornell students should know in order to be responsible participants in the world to come. What knowledge do you most want your fellow-voters and future neighbors and Senators and entrepreneurs and doctors to know? And what can any college contribute to that goal to move beyond its specialty and put knowledge of the university in the service of society.

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Conclusion.
~~Conclusion~~

In the end, general education is not a single set of courses. It is a program with a clear objective, one that can be achieved in a variety of ways. And while there may be great flexibility in the process, it is the clarity of purpose that is crucial.

Good party
→

It seems to me that education at Cornell would be enriched and the academic community strengthened if students in the various colleges would find that there are areas of common experience to be probed. The result, I believe, would be an uncommon approach to common learning.

Nearly forty years ago in Liberal Education, Mark Van Doren wrote:

The connectedness of things is what the educators contemplates to the limit of his capacity. No human capacity is great enough to permit a vision of the world as simple, but if the educator does not aim at the vision no one else will and the consequences are dire when no one else does. . . The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected, even if he revises his view with every succeeding year, has begun the life of learning.

Seeing "the connectedness of things," is the goal of common learning.