

Authentic Liberal Arts Education

Background

What are the components of a liberal education in the 21st century? The roots of this definition date back to Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. *Artes liberales* focused on logic, rhetoric, and grammar to instill values necessary for free people to participate in “civic life”.¹ The disciplinary framework of a liberal education has evolved and expanded over the years to include the fine arts, humanities, social and behavioral sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics. These disciplines provide the foundation for most other majors and professional areas of study. The purposes of a liberal education have changed to the goals of enhancing students’ communicative, creative and critical thinking processes, and cultivating “ethical leaders” who will “improve the world.”² Today, a liberal arts education supplements a liberal education by adding the disciplinary requirements from degree programs in the fine arts, humanities, or social and behavioral sciences.

The Issues

Assessment data indicates that the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) delivers an outstanding liberal education to its general student body and an excellent liberal arts education to students majoring in one of its disciplines.³ Even though CLA’s instruction is sound, our enrollment has been on a steady decline since 2004. In 2004, CLA had 1,282 freshmen and a total enrollment of 4,609. By 2010, CLA had 956 freshmen and a total enrollment of 3,988. In the fall of 2015, CLA had only 692 freshmen and a total enrollment of 3,108 students.

What is fueling this decline? Part of the drop can be attributed to the discontinuation of CLA’s Criminology degree, which at its peak enrolled over 800 majors. Another contributing factor is a change in Auburn University’s policies regarding undeclared freshmen. In the past, most undeclared freshmen were classified as Liberal Arts. Today, the university encourages freshmen to declare a major early and if they can’t decide, these students are categorized as “exploratory,” and assigned to the University College. There have also been revisions to the core curriculum that have cut by one half the students enrolling in English and History core humanities classes. Finally, many freshmen students arrive at AU with Liberal Arts credits from AP, dual enrollment and community colleges, reducing the exposure of these students to courses taught by our professors. Most of CLA departments use their core sections to recruit majors.

National trends, influencing mainly disciplines in the humanities, also contribute to the decline in CLA majors. In 1972, 17.2% of all college degrees awarded in the U.S. were in one of the humanities disciplines. By 1993, this percentage dropped to 8.5% and by 2014, just 6%.⁴ This decline in the percentage of humanities majors occurred as the basis of employment became more specialized, leading to the proliferation of professional programs that compete with traditional humanities majors and purport to better prepare students for early career success. In the past, students may have chosen to major in history because they loved history, and then, after graduation, landed positions in marketing, restaurant management, finance, or supply chain management. Today,

students can choose majors that are consistent with these job titles, learning specific skill sets associated with these professional occupations.

Interestingly, even as the *percentage* share of degrees awarded in the humanities declined, the *number* of degrees awarded in these disciplines actually increased slightly from the early 1990s to 2008. This seeming paradox reflected the growing base in the number of all students graduating from college in the U.S. over this timeframe.⁵ Unfortunately, since 2008, not only has the percentage of humanities majors been in decline, so has the number of humanities graduates.⁶ The steepening of this national trend coincides with the emphasis of government and businesses on more science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors to compete globally and to fill a growing number of tech-based employment opportunities. As the cohorts of students most influenced by this emphasis started matriculating through our universities, the number of STEM majors increased, while the number of humanities majors fell.

Although humanities degree programs nationwide and at Auburn have been the hardest hit by these national trends, other degrees in the fine arts and social and behavioral sciences are also starting to feel the pressure.⁷ The perception among many parents and students is that if Johnny, Camilla, Juan, or Octavia “wants a job” after graduation, they would be best served by one of the professional or STEM degree majors.⁸ This perception is incorrect, but the myth remains.⁹

The effects of these national trends are not equally distributed across all universities and colleges in the U.S. For example, in the SEC, Florida, Georgia, and Auburn have experienced declines in their Liberal Arts majors, but LSU, Kentucky, and Tennessee have not. In addition, while very small liberal arts and religious based institutions are under financial duress, traditionally prestigious small liberal arts institutions continue to attract a large number of students, many of whom have outstanding high school GPAs and ACT/SAT scores.

In sum, Auburn’s College of Liberal Arts has entered a new era, one in which we must compete with other liberal arts institutions and major universities for a finite number of liberal arts majors, especially students in the humanities. A decade ago, 1,200 freshmen enrolled each year in the CLA at AU without any effort on the part of the college. In 2016, only 500 first-year freshmen will be enrolled in Liberal Arts. Unless we can reverse this trend, which has cut our number of majors by more than half, it will be increasingly difficult to argue for maintaining the current number of tenure lines devoted to these programs.

So how do we reverse these numbers? The Dean’s Office in CLA believes that part of the answer is to provide an authentic liberal arts experience for CLA majors. This multipronged approach adopts the best practices from smaller liberal arts institutions, develops a larger number of interdisciplinary degree and certificate offerings—similar to those at our successful flagship peers— and addresses the perceived career planning and specialized professional employment weaknesses of the traditional liberal arts model. Ours is an authentic liberal arts experience adapted for the 21st century. Coupled with a strong marketing strategy, we believe that this approach positions the college to expand the pool of students who would consider majoring in one of our liberal arts degree programs, especially in one of the humanities disciplines, and should enhance our yield rate. Expanding this pool and enhancing our yield rate are the keys to increasing the number of majors.

Authentic Liberal Arts

What is an “authentic liberal arts education?” The College of Liberal Arts defines it as a rigorous, student-centered set of studies in the fine arts, humanities, and social and behavioral sciences, delivered in an intimate learning environment, and focused on developing written and oral communication skills, spurring creative and critical thinking processes, and facilitating the capacity to resolve personal and community issues in a global society. Students earn degrees across an array of established disciplines and interdisciplinary programs, and these programs are reinforced with opportunities for students to apply their knowledge through study abroad, practicums, apprenticeships, and internship positions. In this engaged, dynamic learning environment, students become leaders who are productive and contributing members of society.

Understanding our target student population is paramount for the success of our efforts to create an authentic liberal arts experience adapted to the 21st century. Seemiller and Grace have developed the most convincing portrait of these students, who are labeled collectively as “Generation Z.”¹⁰ Born from 1995 through 2010, Generation Z grew up in a world transfixed by 9/11. They experienced the Great Recession, continued U.S. involvement in intractable wars, and an educational system dominated by “no child left behind.” They use one digital device with easy access to world issues and digital social networks. They do not shy away from learning alone and engaging in online research for assignments, as long as it serves a meaningful purpose.

They describe themselves as loyal, thoughtful, compassionate, open-minded, and responsible (as opposed to Millennials, who tend to be inwardly focused). The students of Generation Z see themselves as problem-solvers with a strong desire to make a difference in the world. Generation Z is concerned about economic inequality, and financial security, together with issues related to climate, health, human rights, and immigration. This generation “feels the Bern.” Within Gen Z, there are subgroups based on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation that can play an important role in defining social networks. These subgroups are important because recruiting these students to attend Auburn is important for reaching CLA’s and university’s goals for diversity and inclusion.

Members of Gen Z are not seeking a job, but following a passion. They see themselves as inventors, researchers, philanthropists and activists. Nearly half of Gen Z expects to become their own boss during their careers and do not see themselves working for large organizations and corporations, entities that they inherently distrust. With self-employment predicted to grow at a rate of 6 percent for the next five years, they are appropriately predisposed toward entrepreneurship and freelancing as a means to make a living.

Seventy-nine percent of Gen Z students think it is important that educational programs integrate practical experiences such as internships. Practical, experiential learning is preferred, as they are drawn to learning that will help them fill their toolbox with knowledge and skills for the workforce. Even though many in Gen Z expect to be self-employed, their thirst for experiential learning actually coincides with the desires of most employers, who seek employees with the skill sets that liberal arts majors possess combined with applied learning experiences.¹¹

Knowing what Generation Z thinks and cares about is useful as CLA recruits and develops learning communities and curricular and co-curricular programs.

Intimate Learning Environment: The cornerstone of an authentic liberal arts approach is providing first- and second-year CLA students with intimate learning environments. The classic example of an intimate learning environment is a small classroom that allows for frequent interactions among students and between the students and the faculty member. The expectation is for students to participate in class activities ranging from daily discussions of course reading materials, to essay question tests, to small group presentations, to conducting undergraduate research.

Even with small class sizes, creating intimate learning environments can be difficult in a large university like AU. One method to ameliorate this problem is to place students into learning communities composed of about 18 students and organized around a topic of common interest. Leading each learning community is a faculty member accompanied by a peer instructor.

The creation of learning communities provides another advantage—the opportunity to block schedule. Thus, each student in a learning community could share 6 or more hours of coursework each semester in their freshman year and 3 or more hours of common coursework of their sophomore year. Some of these LCs will be “Living Learning Communities” with all members housed in the same dorm. Seeing familiar faces in some of their courses and in the dorms creates a greater sense of intimacy and involvement for the students.

Generation Z students experience digital social networks as an extension of their personal lives. They do not view online communities as distant, impersonal and/or cold. Thus, online courses, appropriately formulated, can provide these students with an intimate learning environment. Classes that use both face-to-face and online components may provide Generation Z students with the optimal learning environments.

Intimate learning environments can also be generated in larger section courses if these courses move away from the pure lecture model of instruction to embrace discussion sections, flipped classroom pedagogies, student self-directed learning exercises, clicker participation, and more written assignments and/or tests.

Our expectation is that most of the instruction within the college for freshmen and sophomore students will be provided in small enrollment courses, or flipped classrooms, or, only when necessary, large enrollment courses with discussion sections. As much as possible, CLA departments should provide “majors only” introductory sections for their freshmen majors. (1000- and 2000-level courses taken in other colleges at AU are not controlled by CLA and thus may not follow CLA’s intimate course philosophy.) CLA will still offer large section core courses for students from other colleges at AU. CLA students who choose not to join a learning community may also enroll in these large section courses. Finally, when students become juniors and seniors, they will be taking mostly upper division courses, within their major(s) and minor(s). These courses tend to have lower enrollments and the students taking these classes share the common bond of being in the same major or related discipline. This said, the expectations noted above apply to all CLA courses.

Interdisciplinary Majors: Strong liberal arts colleges also offer an array of interdisciplinary programs to appeal to a wide range of student interests. In addition to traditional disciplinary offerings, CLA currently maintains a very limited number of interdisciplinary offerings. These include one major in International Trade, and minors in Africana Studies, Women’s Studies, Asian Studies, Italian Studies, Global Cultures, Medieval and Renaissance/Early Modern Studies, Classics,

Latin American Studies, Linguistics, Philosophy and Religion, and Community and Civic Engagement. CLA plans to add interdisciplinary majors in International Studies, Social Sciences, Neuroscience, and Law.

The college will also add an undergraduate certificate program in Leadership for a Global Society.

The advantage of interdisciplinary programs is that their curricula are largely based on courses already approved and offered by existing departments. Many of these courses are undersubscribed when offered, so adding interdisciplinary students enables these courses to become more fully subscribed. The advantages for the departments are that the additional credit hours from these interdisciplinary majors will count toward their overall student credit hour production. Under the new budget model, this is one of the most important metrics for departments. The advantage for the college is that it provides students a wider array of degree choices to attract a larger number of majors. Under the new budget model, the number of majors is an important metric for the college as a whole, because the college receives 100% of the tuition generated within the college from its own majors, whereas it only receives 70% of the tuition generated by non-CLA students taking CLA courses.

Career Planning and Application: In the 21st century we need to do more than provide students an intimate learning space and offer an array of interdisciplinary options. An authentic liberal arts approach should also address the expectations of students, parents, and potential employers of our students. Research shows that employers seek job-applicants who have applied their academic training in a workplace setting, typically through internships or equivalent experiences. Similarly, employers seek applicants who have broad experiences that expand the applicants' perspectives. Students and parents expect their academic programs to help them plan and prepare for their professional future.

CLA has already begun to address these expectations through the development and implementation of a two-hour career planning and preparation course for our students. This course is designed to help Liberal Arts majors and pre-majors identify their strengths and talents as liberal arts students, to seek appropriate educational and extracurricular experiences, and to plan for a successful transition from college to career. CLA has also encouraged all departments to require or strongly encourage students to enroll in internships hours and/or study abroad courses.

To facilitate students enrolling in internships, CLA's Student Government Association is advocating that the college and alumni association cultivate lists of alumni that are willing to provide summer housing for CLA students on internships in cities away from their homes. This should help to reduce the overall costs of an internship for our students and break down a significant impediment for students enrolling in internship hours. Next summer we will be piloting this program in Washington, D.C.

Diversity and Inclusion: Two major goals for Auburn University and the College of Liberal Arts are to enhance the diversity of the university and cultivate an inclusive learning environment. Our authentic liberal arts approach embraces these priorities by embedding both into the recruitment of students and curricular programming. This means working with central administration and development staff to create additional academic and financial support programs for first generation, Black Belt and urban core students as well as awarding talent based scholarships for students in the visual and performing arts. In addition to continuing to support CLA's already existing interdisciplinary minors, the college plans to create new interdisciplinary programs

(discussed earlier) that either attract diverse students or focus on topics where diversity and/or inclusion are major themes. Finally, we will also infuse diversity and inclusion into the topic areas of CLA's learning communities.

Implementing Authentic Liberal Arts

The full implementation of the Authentic Liberal Arts approach will take up to three years. It entails creating a large number of learning communities, training faculty to facilitate an intimate class environment, and developing new interdisciplinary degree and certificate programs.

Listed below are the steps we need to take to implement the Learning Communities component of this proposal.

- Over the next three years, establish additional CLA learning communities (LC), enough to accommodate every CLA major who wishes to participate in the Authentic Liberal Arts experience. The university limits each LC to 19 students. The themes of each LC will be dependent on an interaction between student interests and faculty interests. Some of these LCs should address issues that are important to AU's goals for diversity and inclusion.
- Recruit and help the First Year Program train faculty members and peer instructors for LCs. We will allow faculty members to count instructing a one-hour learning community as an overload, or in lieu of a portion of their service responsibilities, dependent on department by-laws and chair's permission.
- CLA LCs will be coordinated through the First Year Program with some of our LCs housed together in dorms during the first year. All LCs will enjoy the benefits of block scheduling in their first two semesters at Auburn. We will work with the Provost Office to facilitate CLA LCs in the sophomore year.
- As a part of CLA's LCs, students will be required to attend three university or CLA lectures, performances, and art exhibits each semester.

Listed below are the steps we need to take to implement an intimate course environment.

- Conduct training sessions for faculty members teaching core courses to CLA students covering flipped classroom techniques, critical thinking pedagogies, and methods for using peer-grading procedures for essay question tests and other written assignments.
- Adjust class/section sizes to maximize intimate classroom environment. Composition, Communication, and Foreign Language courses are currently capped at 25 students. Reduce the cap for CLA literature courses from 30 students and CLA Philosophy courses from 35 students to 25 students. One LC does not fill these seats, thus other CLA students who chose not to join a LC will be allowed to fill the remaining seats.
- Other core CLA courses in Anthropology, Art History (Looking at Art), Economics, History, Music, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology can range from 25 to 330 students. We anticipate working with these departments to 1) limit the size of sections for CLA students to 2 or 4 LCs, taught in EASL or EASL Lite classrooms (EASL classrooms on campus have a

capacity of 45 to 72 students), or 2) provide recitation sections for a larger enrollment core courses for which we will cluster 4 to 5 CLA LCs into each course.¹

- Estimate additional courses needed to achieve intimate course environment and costs for flipped classroom/critical thinking instructional training. CLA needs to also assess the availability of classrooms to accommodate the smaller sections. Convert classrooms to EASL and EASL lite classrooms.

Listed below are the steps CLA needs to take to create additional interdisciplinary offerings.

- Recognize and reinforce the clear strengths in existing CLA interdisciplinary areas, developing additional majors and certificate programs in areas like Africana Studies, Women's Studies, Asian Studies, Italian Studies, Global Cultures, Medieval and Renaissance/Early Modern Studies, Classics, Latin American Studies, Linguistics, Philosophy and Religion, and Community and Civic Engagement.
- Generate new interdisciplinary BA degree programs in Law, Social Sciences, and International Studies, and develop a certificate program in Leadership for a Global Society.
- Work with faculty to develop additional interdisciplinary BA options based on CLA strengths.

Finally, CLA would need to implement public relations and recruitment strategies to convince parents and students in Alabama and the Southeast who are focused on the liberal arts that CLA at AU is a viable and highly desirable alternative to other institutions.

- Conduct a marketing study of this area and estimate the costs of these efforts.

Outcomes

Below is a listing of some major outcomes that CLA anticipates if the college implements our proposed Authentic Liberal Arts approach.

- Expand the pool of students applying to CLA and/or achieve a higher yield rate
- Increased retention of first and second year students
- Improved four and six-year graduation rates
- Increase recognition of integrative learning
- Increased average student ratings of faculty for teaching effectiveness
- Increased student involvement in educational enrichment activities
- Increase in number of internships, apprenticeships, and/or practicums

¹ SASW will increase the size of several non-CLA core courses from 100 to 125, while decreasing the size of CLA core courses to fit in a large EASL classroom. Music needs to add four smaller sections (2 LCs) and offer one less large section. Art and Art History will develop ARTS 1510: Looking at Art for an EASL classroom. Psychology's core offerings will be delivered in a large EASL classroom (~72 students), three sections per semester. Political Science needs to increase its number of core offerings by four sections an academic year. Theatre will need increase its core offerings by three sections an academic year. Economics currently offers a number of its core courses in smaller enrollment sections that can be reconfigured to accept only CLA LC students.

- Increased number of CLA students interviewing at job fairs and the career employment and placement center
- Improved employment outcomes for graduates

Adopting this authentic liberal arts approach needs to be more than marketing campaign. Adopting this approach, or a revised version of it, will require buy-in and a commitment by CLA's departments and faculty members to the principles developed in this white paper. The dean's office looks forward to a healthy discussion with faculty members and students regarding the guiding principles and commitment to being an authentic liberal arts college.

Endnotes

¹ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* [1948], trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 37. The classical sources include Cicero, *De Oratore*, I.72–73, III.127, and *De re publica*, I.30; Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Ltd, 2015), ch. 2.

² Rebecca Chopp, "Remaking, Renewing, Reimagining," in Rebecca Chopp, Susan Frost, Daniel H. Weiss, eds, *Remaking College*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), ch. 1.

³ Degree programs in the College of Liberal Arts are assessed annually. Information from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) can also highlight the performance of students in the College of Liberal Arts.

⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, "Humanities Indicators," March 2016, retrieved on July 27, 2016, Chart II-1aa.

⁵ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Chart II-2c.

⁶ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Chart II-1b, Chart II-2c.

⁷ This fall, about 500 freshmen students will choose CLA at Auburn, a plurality of them clustered into one of the majors offered by Communication and Journalism, Psychology, or Political Science. About the same number of freshmen as in the past will fill seats in Communication Disorders, Economics, and Social Work. However, English, History, and Foreign Languages and Literatures will only enroll one-half to two-fifths of the majors that enrolled just five years ago.

⁸ Quentin Fottrell, "(More) Bad News for Liberal Arts Majors," *Market Watch*, May 21, 2014, retrieved on July 26, 2016.

⁹ Wilson Peden, "The Myth of the Unemployed Humanities Major," *LEAP: Association of American Colleges and Universities*, November 11, 2015, retrieved on July 26, 2016,

¹⁰ Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College*, (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2015).

¹¹ Hart Research Associates, "Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success," *LEAP: Association of American Colleges and Universities*, January 20, 2015, retrieved July 26, 2016.