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The Process of Definition

Defining liberal education in my LIB 100 (Introduction to Liberal Studies) courses is a process I engage with each section, every semester. No two definitions ever end up the same. We start defining the first week. Students are often unclear about or resistant to the word liberal (some think it entails a political plot or a financial scheme of GVSU), so I sometimes have to give a hint that the liberal we will be exploring comes from a Latin root meaning “to free.”

I first ask each student to write down a personal definition of liberal education. Next the students share their individual definitions in small groups, and then each group tries to combine the individuals’ definitions into one for their group. They write their small group definitions on the board. Finally, as a class we try to merge common elements from all the small groups’ definitions into a rough draft of a workable class definition everyone can support. The class definitions begin in broad yet often vague strokes: “A wide variety of subjects,” “A well-rounded approach” or “General Education classes” are typical responses. I try to guide their process with three questions: *What* is liberal education? *How* does one engage it? And *Why*? For what reasons? This helps them create some structure in their definition. We continue to revise the class definition throughout the first half of the semester.

First drafts of class definitions are typically long, often needing three or four cumbersome sentences, or one really long run-on, to satisfy the majority of the students. In the third week of classes, after reading several essays, including William Cronon’s “Only Connect,” Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” and Mark Van Doren’s “The Liberal Arts,” we revise the class definitions. These second drafts become more streamlined and contain more of the complex nuances liberal education involves. The current (second draft) definitions of my sections this semester are:

LIB100D: Liberal Education is a continuous and lifelong process that involves an evolution in your way of thinking. It is an opportunity to experience a wide variety of subjects and opinions in order to live a better life by giving back to your communities.

LIB100E: Liberal Education gives more choices and covers a broad range of ideas. It encourages learning in order to enrich our understanding of different cultures so we can give back to society.

LIB100 I: Liberal Education is a lifelong process of teaching and learning, using a broad range of disciplines that involves questioning, reflecting and being open-minded. It provides the skills and tools to explore, understand and connect with our communities.

LIB100H: Liberal Education is a continuing development of self which through critical thinking, reflection and questioning creates a balanced and well-rounded person who positively contributes to humanity.

As we continue to read more essays and engage each other in class discussions, students develop their articulation with the language of liberal education and draw upon the ideas of the authors we read to support or argue their specific word choices or problems with others' word choices. This process of definition is stimulating and lively in every class, since each class brings new combinations of energy, ideas, backgrounds and personalities to the task.

Usually a class will be able to revise a third and final time to get a viable definition just before the midterm. They also understand by the end of the class that 1) having more questions than answers about themselves and their liberal education is a good thing, 2) they have just begun a lifelong understanding of and engagement in liberal education and 3) there are faculty members across the university with whom they can continue their conversation about the value inherent in liberal education and their pursuit of it.