




1999

Transforming Experiences: The Benefits of Intellectual Risk

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Recommended Citation

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TRANSFORMING
EXPERIENCES

THE BENEFITS of
INTELLECTUAL RISK

*Fourth in a series
of occasional papers from
John Strassburger, President*

URSINUS COLLEGE



THE BEST LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES today practice a form of deception. With outstanding facilities and professors devoted to teaching, they appear safe and supportive. And they are. But they are also among the riskiest places in America — risky because they offer young people the prospect of change and even transformation. They hold out the promise, heady and intimidating, that undergraduates will be different people when they finish college, different in outlook, attitude, capability, and aspiration. Residential liberal arts colleges like Ursinus are using their professors, their curricula, and the close-knit communities of their own students to foster transformation. They are doing it by creating opportunities for independent action and intellectual risk taking that would have seemed surprising three decades ago. It is precisely this guided, intensive encouragement to venture into new territory that is spurring students to levels of achievement they might never have attained in the supposedly less protected environment of a large university.

What follows is a discussion of risk and reward in education — and life. It summarizes a conversation that took place recently among some faculty and students at Ursinus. The students were asked to articulate what had happened to them during their four years that changed how they thought about themselves. The faculty were examining how their approaches helped students venture

beyond receiving knowledge to become intellectual explorers. Together they presented a vivid picture of a process by which young people take possession of their own education.



THE NECESSITY OF RISK

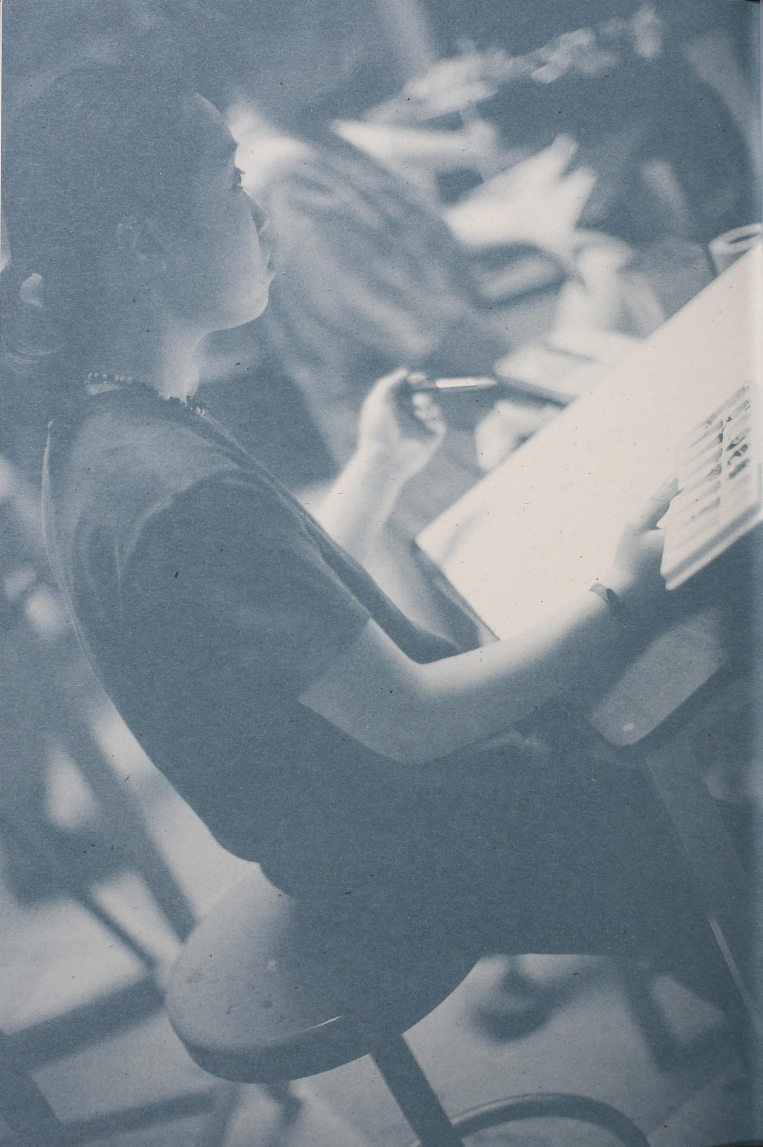
At a time when educational institutions across the county are struggling to equip students with basic writing and quantitative skills, critics might ask, at the outset, whether risk taking and independence are necessary and whether transformation is a realistic goal for education. Like many colleges, Ursinus has sought over the last several years to strengthen requirements in writing and thinking and in the quantitative disciplines. We can demonstrate that our students are writing more now than any previous group in at least two decades. But this alone is not sufficient.

We know that the world these students will enter requires new ways of thinking, especially the ability to assess and actively combine disparate kinds of information. Solutions to society's increasingly complex and interlocking problems are not easily imaginable, let alone achievable. It is emblematic of our time that many of America's most prominent figures, including the founders of Microsoft and Netscape, to take two examples, did not follow standard career paths to success. Instead, they committed themselves to

worlds that did not yet exist. We can call them visionaries, but it is more to the point that they felt there was little to lose and much to gain by venturing outside the accepted ways of thinking and working.

At the same time, a growing body of sociological and psychological studies tells us that risk taking is fundamental to adolescent development on every level — social, moral, intellectual. Risk taking is acting without certainty of the outcome or consequences, whether positive or negative. Such actions amount to nothing less than a testing of freedom, the pursuit of opportunities that present a self-transcending challenge. Engaging risk is a process rather than a way of behaving, and the question for a college is not how to make risk safe but how to make the engagement truly productive.

Willy-nilly the process of embracing the unforeseen and the new involves personal transformation. Taking risks does away with the status quo. How important is personal transformation? One of our students has provided the hint of a powerful answer. As a junior, she is working on an independent research project with a faculty member, a study of the atomic bomb and the former Soviet Union. She was distressed at finding little evidence from historians to support her thinking. She assumed that she must be off on an erroneous path. In fact, as she later discovered, few scholars had addressed the problem she had tackled. Her professor said, "The time has arrived for you to learn how to come to your own conclusions." As the student puts it, "I suddenly realized that this is why I am here and what I should be doing in everything I try." She added that her intellectual experience crystallized an important way of



looking at herself. It taught her that it is okay to follow her instincts, even to show doubts, as a way of relating to others, especially when friends are experiencing their own quandaries.



TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES

The anecdote suggests an important way Ursinus encourages students to think for themselves, which lies at the heart of intellectual risk taking: The college engages them in independent, faculty-mentored projects. With help from several prestigious foundations, including the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and the National Science Foundation, and from our alumni, we set out to create a comprehensive program of student research and independent learning opportunities. We intend them to be transforming experiences, and they range from curating art exhibitions at our Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art to working with historians from the National Park Service on problems that impinge on historic preservation. The research locations themselves are equally diverse, from Ursinus laboratories in Pfahler Science Hall, newly renovated with the help of a major challenge grant from the Kresge Foundation, to overseas locations around the world. Ursinus has become a center for undergraduate research, hosting symposia and colloquia and sending students to conferences and research presentations across

the country. Indeed, one reason for the Kresge grant was our intention not so much to create new faculty research space as to develop research space for students.

Many universities have established undergraduate research programs, which often have at their disposal resources few colleges can match. We have something different in mind. First, our idea is not limited to research *per se* but includes a variety of independent experiences with transforming potential: creation of works of art and performance, certain types of professional internships, off-campus and overseas activities, and in some cases public service and community action. We place these experiences at the center of education, not on the periphery. They are not restricted to honors students. Nearly eighty percent of Ursinus students engage in some form of independent learning, and we have set a goal of making such experiences part of every Ursinus student's education.

Students themselves identify independent learning experiences as ones that give everything else they do heightened meaning. It is important to listen to what they say. For many of the very best, coming through the American education system has meant meeting teachers' expectations exactly and totally. Yet the liberating experience of education comes when they frame their own expectations, and that moment has meaning only if students also face the possibility that they have set a mistaken expectation or one they cannot meet. These challenges cannot be abstract; they must come in the form of developing a strategy and working to implement it over time.

Above all, the experiences must be substantive. Our students are not placed in laboratories only to be given someone else's agenda to follow. From the outset, they define the problems and the purpose of the work, develop the information, and present and defend their conclusions. As the history professor said, they face the implications of thinking for themselves. It can feel risky, as if failure is just around the corner. In fact, failure is impossible. The dividends of growth and self-confidence are guaranteed. As one student remarked about her research, "When I found myself presenting my results to faculty, I felt I was on their level. This wasn't someone else's work I was describing but my own."

I have suggested the broader benefits of such experiences, but our students also demonstrate more concrete ones. Recently, our Modern Languages faculty received a grant from the Mellon Foundation to implement approaches to computer-assisted, interactive learning. One of our computer science majors, working on an independent project to design a campus intranet, was enlisted to help solve some programming problems. He united the two projects, and now Ursinus students have immediate access to language learning tools and exercises and can work electronically with professors and other students to supplement the work they do in the classroom. This same student is working with professors in several languages to realize the full potential of the Mellon grant. His schoolwork has segued into the responsibilities and satisfactions of adult life.



AGENTS OF UNCERTAINTY

Behind every Ursinus opportunity for intellectual risk and reward stands a teacher. The greatest advantage a liberal arts college such as Ursinus has in educating students for independence is a faculty committed first and foremost to teaching. Without this mentorship, intellectual growth is haphazard. No curriculum yet devised can educate by itself. Most of what faculty do at Ursinus, in and out of the classroom, is to structure opportunities that challenge. Ursinus has steadily reduced lecture classes and increased the number of seminars, including a multidisciplinary honors colloquium.

At the same time, faculty are leading an effort to bring critical perspectives to bear in disciplines from economics to biology. They act as agents of uncertainty, organizing courses so that students regularly examine not only the basic assumptions of their discipline, but its moral and social implications. We have designed our distribution requirements to ensure critical thinking, with interdisciplinary Liberal Studies seminars in the first year and required areas such as Science and Society. The introduction of critical doubt and uncertainty into the forward march of learning prevents students from walking in lockstep. They must choose their steps and become active learners. More often than not, students welcome that uncertainty. Recently, two of our chemistry majors, in the midst of preparing for an exam, found themselves putting aside the moun-

tain of information they needed to master until they could resolve to their satisfaction whether the theory of quantum mechanics were actually true. As one remarked, "After two hours, we decided we could take it on faith, at least for now."

Faculty who invest themselves in their teaching know the students they teach, and this enables them to intuit how to spur particular students into exploring fresh territories of thought and action. Because Ursinus has developed a strong faculty advising system, there are almost always at least two faculty members who are thoroughly familiar with a student's work at any given time. Usually there are more than two, as faculty in a community such as ours commonly talk to each other about their students' progress. For example, one senior, who is exceptionally strong in both mathematics and French, wanted to do honors research in both areas but did not see how it could be done in a meaningful way. The two faculty members who would have directed her work got together and suggested she translate the biography of the seminal French mathematician Evariste Galois, which does not exist in an English version. She is doing something original and entirely her own, and the results may well be publishable.

For faculty to promote such intellectual risk taking among students, they must take risks themselves. Not only must they try new ways of teaching and become partners with students in exploring uncharted terrain, they must also be scholars, putting their own work in front of their peers. If they had not had the confidence that risk taking — breaking away from received ideas — had paid off for

them, they could not be so confident in working with students. And if they had not been willing to put their work in front of colleagues for criticism, they could not be so adept at gently shepherding students to new ideas as well. The new teaching requires an extraordinary faculty — scholarly and dedicated to undergraduate students. Yet it is faculty members themselves at Ursinus and other leading colleges who have taken the lead in redefining standards and creating expectations for themselves that are higher than ever before.

Close contact between students and faculty is vital to a program of challenge and transformation because professors themselves are the best role models. Ursinus faculty regularly share their own work in progress with students and solicit comments. Last year, half a dozen faculty published papers with students in scholarly journals. They willingly linked their professional reputations with student performance, just as they are eager to have students question their conclusions. In the arts and in creative writing especially, which is taught on a workshop model, all the participants, including faculty, submit work to group criticism.

Our first-year Liberal Studies seminars embody this questioning spirit. Faculty members are asked to teach outside their disciplines and think deeply about questions that they may be encountering for the first time. The seminars have succeeded because, as much as faculty value competence in the classroom, they value something else even more: the ideal of the liberally educated person. This is the ideal they seek to demonstrate.





CONFRONTING CULTURES

Of course, faculty care about student outcomes at every institution. Yet a distinguishing feature of Ursinus is our consistent emphasis on student achievement and independence across many kinds of opportunities, not just those centered in the classroom. An obvious example is overseas and off-campus study. Such programs abound at universities, and their intent is, at the least, to broaden students' horizons. Ursinus seeks to make such encounters part of a structured continuum. Not only do we have a foreign language requirement, we have organized our own overseas programs, in locations such as Japan and Senegal, rather than only placing students in preexisting programs. We have also made overseas experience available on different scales, ranging from field trips of several weeks in the rainforests of Central America to year-long programs in many locations. Faculty actively recruit students for these opportunities because students often do not know what they might be missing. One student who spent a remarkable year in Spain studying the Catalan language was urged to do so by a faculty member who was not even her professor but knew of her interests.

According to our surveys, nearly every student who fully confronts another culture finds the experience transforming. Over the last four years at Ursinus, participation in such short- and long-term programs has risen almost fivefold.

The same intention to engage the world beyond the campus motivates our increasing use of Philadelphia as a resource. The city used to seem much farther away from the campus than it does now because so many of our students are venturing out on projects and internships, whether to banks, commercial laboratories, or media companies. Our entire first-year class has taken on the Herculean project of cleaning up a stream that flows through some of the most environmentally compromised neighborhoods of the city. As with student research and overseas programs, Ursinus has made a conscious effort to mainstream such opportunities. The result is that greater discipline and focus are brought back by students when they return to the classroom.

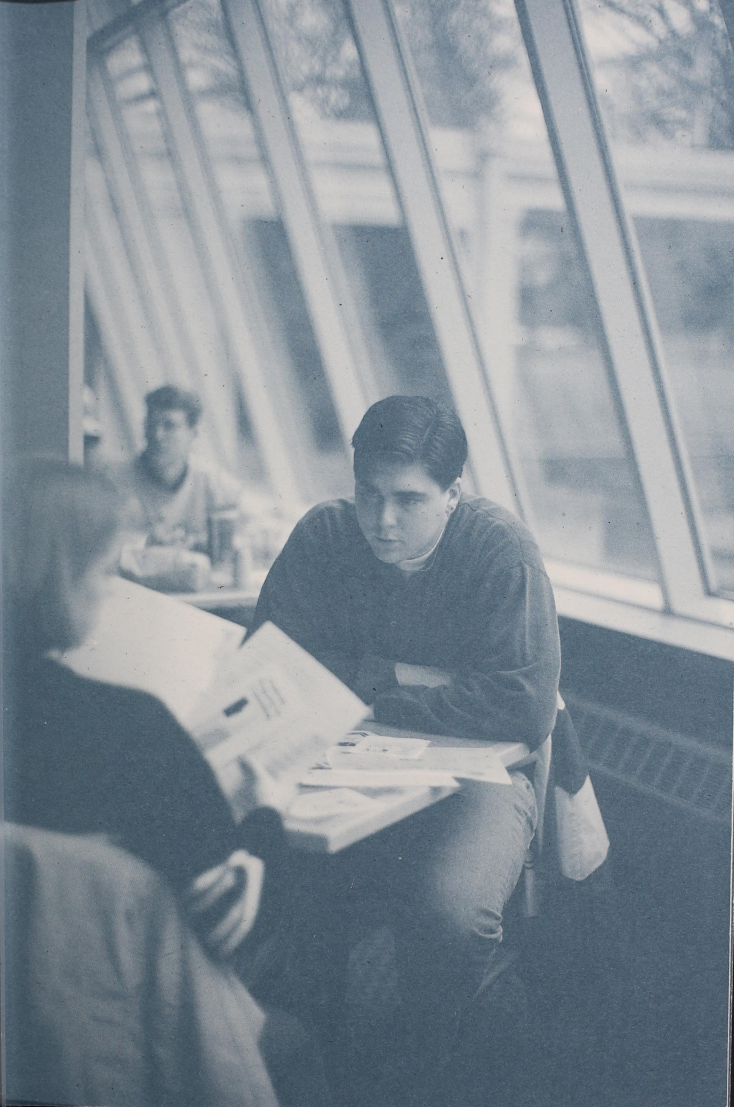
Real-world, off-campus programs erase the distinction between academic and personal growth. Indeed, liberal arts colleges have the unique ability to foster independence in students' lives as well as in their studies by encouraging them to take on mature responsibilities. The greatest asset in this effort, the one we are just beginning to exploit, is our residential campus. We are discovering that we are a community, and communities have enormous teaching power. With calculated effort, we can do more than we imagined to spur achievement. Given the right conditions, students take over and teach and learn from each other with phenomenal effectiveness.

Examples of this abound on our campus. Just a few years ago, a small group of students came to the president's office asking for assistance in starting a campus dance club; as a prelude, in their minds, to the development of a formal offering in dance. Our office

agreed to help because the students had taken the initiative to act. They had already figured out how to organize rehearsals and coaching. They came to us to support performances. To take another example, a group of students wanted a more productive way to spend Spring Break than lying on the beach, so they organized the Alternative Spring Break. They spent their vacation with the Appalachian Service Project, repairing and building houses for people who desperately needed housing but could not afford it. The Alternative Spring Break is now one of the opportunities for living and learning we offer all students.

These students did it themselves, just as other students did when they founded the campus literary society and the Java Trench Coffee House; established the student multicultural center, Unity House; converted a residence hall into a house dedicated to social service; and created the African American students organization SUN, none of which existed on our campus just a few years ago and all of which are now mainstays of student life. They knew that if they took the risk of creating something new, investing their time and energy, they would get support. In recent years, our residence halls and especially our resident assistant (RA) program, have become centers of similar initiative and responsibility.

In university dormitories, RAs are often graduate students, in effect surrogate parents with at least a modicum of built-in authority. At Ursinus, RAs may start as early as sophomore year, and they have to earn authority and respect from their peers. In the process, these students discover the roots of leadership. They have to have



the courage to take on a new identity in front of people who know them only as friends. As one said, "The program gave me the opportunity to transform myself, to strengthen qualities that will help me succeed in whatever I do. The more I experienced these opportunities, the more I wanted them."



HARVESTING DIVERSITY

It is on our residential campus that Ursinus directly encourages students to experience the most important opportunity of all for personal transformation — encounters with difference. This is why the perception of liberal arts colleges as protective and isolated is so misleading. Diversity has little to do with numbers. It is far easier to avoid substantial contact with people different from you in the anonymity of a city than in the intimacy of a village. Given the makeup of the world around us, liberal arts colleges like Ursinus have a responsibility and a rare opportunity, as one of our professors put it, to "harvest diversity."

Ten years ago, we began a conscious effort to attract to Ursinus very able minority students. Today, our total minority enrollment, including foreign students, stands close to twenty percent. Numbers do not tell the whole story. Ursinus is forging closer ties with central Philadelphia high schools and has invested

resources in such successful initiatives as the Bridge Program, which offers African American students pre-enrollment opportunities and brings them together with Ursinus faculty. The college has successfully diversified its faculty and staff as well.

To spur maturing encounters among all students, Ursinus harvests diversity at many other levels. We have developed theme housing for upper-level students who share certain interests. First-year students, however, are generally together as a group. In all instances athletes and nonathletes, different ethnic groups and religious denominations mix. When we ask students about these arrangements after the fact, we often find that the prospect of encountering people totally different from themselves is one of the things they seek at college. As they tell us, it frees them to discover who they are. As one student put it, "I am not afraid of a different opinion or of holding one myself, and I no longer have a pigeon-holed view of myself."

As Ursinus has become more diverse, students are their own harvesters of the benefits. When students formed the new Gospel Choir, they not only organized rehearsals and obtained bookings, they also made sure the composition of the choir itself was diverse. An environment that fosters risk taking produces just such unexpected dividends. Students in our theater programs know all about the dividends. Risk taking, diversity, and initiative are behind the renaissance of theater on campus. There is a flowering of student productions, but with a difference: They are bolder, more innovative, propelled by student acting that more frequently pushes the

envelope, with characterizations that are cerebral and complex. This form of risk taking is contagious and a pleasure to watch.

In the end, the diversity we want to cultivate is diversity within each person, the broadening of an inner sense of possibility. This understanding of one's own complexity provides the greatest source of confidence as young people make their way in the world. Students need to see self-diversity honored wherever they look, and the scale of Ursinus helps make this possible. Just as students can combine several academic interests in their program, so Ursinus athletes, for example, are expected to be many-faceted as well. Ursinus teams are very competitive and successful at their level, but they are not a world unto themselves. They are integral to and integrated into the life of the college. One of our football captains, who is also an RA, has a crowded schedule. The coach and the residence life director do not vie for his time but often get on the phone together to help him balance his commitments. A favorite example is that of a member of the wrestling team, who is one of our best competitors and an accomplished writer. When he wants advice about academic challenges, he often talks to his coach. When he wants advice about challenges on the mat, he often talks to his creative writing professor. He understands that what he needs most of all is perspective.

Does having mentors who honor both sides of his nature make him a better writer or a better wrestler? He thinks it does because he gets the same message from both coach and professor. "They are really saying: 'Don't hold back, invest yourself com-

pletely, take a chance.' It is the difference between wrestling to win and wrestling not to lose. To win, you must try moves that may not work and may open opportunities for your opponent to score. But you get up and try again, knowing the opportunity to win — or to write the perfect story — is always there as long as you keep creating it."



Note: We would like to express our deep appreciation to the following Ursinus students and faculty who contributed to this report: Kevin Bailey '99, Fran Cunniffe '99, Jamie DiBlassio '00, Mike Edwards '00, Andrew Gerchak '00, Carrie Haslbeck '99, Pam Hufner '99, Christine Kenny '99, Gregory Klein '99, Cathy Murray '00, Tom Regan '99, John Sears '99, John Shilling '99, Mary Zanotti '99, and Jen Zwilling '99; Douglas Cameron, associate professor of Spanish; Catherine Chambliss, professor of psychology; Robert Dawley, associate professor of biology; Colette Hall, professor of French; Margot Kelley, associate professor of English; Judith Levy, professor of chemistry and Dean of the College; Anthony Lobo, assistant professor of biology; Annette Lucas, professor of French and Associate Dean of the College; Paul Stern, professor of politics; and Jon Volkmer, associate professor of English.

ABOUT THE SERIES



THIS IS THE FOURTH in a series of occasional papers about the challenges confronting students and what Ursinus is doing to help them enter adult life.

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