

## THE THIRD WAY

*Liberal arts or a professional education? More and more students are choosing to combine elements of both. A leading proponent describes the emerging trend he calls "practice-oriented education"*

BY RICHARD M. FREELAND

.....

**L**iberal education and professional education have traditionally been considered opposites. According to received academic wisdom, students seeking broad exposure to the arts and sciences should not be burdened with acquiring workplace skills, and students preparing for careers in fields such as business and engineering should not be diverted by more than a token engagement with "irrelevant" liberal arts content.

But this view is changing—which is a good thing. Slowly but surely, higher education is evolving a new paradigm for undergraduate study that erodes the long-standing divide between liberal and professional education. Many liberal arts colleges now offer courses and majors in professional fields; professional disciplines, meanwhile, have become more serious about the arts and sciences. Moreover, universities are encouraging students to include both liberal arts and professional coursework in their programs of study, while internships and other kinds of off-campus experience have gained widespread acceptance in both liberal and professional disciplines. Gradually taking shape is a curricular "third way" that systematically integrates liberal education, professional education, and off-campus experience to produce college graduates who are both well educated and well prepared for the workplace.

Though this trend has not yet coalesced into a movement with a clear identity, evidence of it can be found in the statements of educational leaders and in the offerings of many colleges and universities. It is time to recognize this pattern, to urge its codification as a powerful alternative to traditional practices, and to give it a name. Because this new approach builds bridges between the realm of the intellect and the arenas of action and practice, let us call it "practice-oriented education."

**P**ractice-oriented education began taking shape amid the turbulence of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the twenty years following World War II, academia had enjoyed a golden age of expansion, prosperity, and support. But a combination of student protests, unforeseen financial problems, and the beginnings of the "baby bust" brought that era to an end. Government leaders as well as prospective students and their parents began asking hard questions about higher education's return on investment. The percentage of young people seeking college admission, which had risen steadily since 1945, began to level off, and some feared it might actually decline.

This "time of troubles," as it became known, prompted extensive self-examination within academia and critical commentary by outsiders. Official commissions, campus-based committees, and individual observers offered varying analyses of what had gone wrong and how it could be fixed. The most remarkable example was the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, which from 1968 to 1975 produced ninety reports touching on virtually every aspect of academia.

The most fundamental result of this soul-searching was a greater thoughtfulness about the democratization of higher

education. Before World War II the academy had been largely the preserve of elites. After 1945 it became steadily more open—first to veterans, then to the broad middle class, and finally to the truly disadvantaged. The institutional response to this dramatic change in student demographics was not what one might have expected. As its clientele became more "modern," higher education became more traditional. In the prosperity of the postwar years many campuses tried to recast themselves in the image of the Ivy League. New and expanding public universities modeled themselves on top-tier research institutions. Before the war, and during the veterans' era of the late 1940s, professional disciplines had been the fastest-growing ones at four-year institutions. From the mid-1950s through the 1960s, in contrast, the liberal arts boomed.

Study groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s recognized the irony: the expanding college-bound population represented a progressively wider range of backgrounds, needs, and interests, yet higher education was moving toward a single model based on top-ranked campuses. Many concluded that academia simply had to offer more choices. As the Carnegie Commission put it, "A main theme [of our work] is the desirability of a greater diversity of programs to match the greater diversity of students."

Colleges and universities responded in the 1970s with an era of experimentation. Course requirements were loosened. Interdisciplinary programs flourished. Multiculturalism took root, and the "canon" was expanded. Simultaneously, enrollments shifted away from the liberal arts and back toward professional majors, while institutions began to focus on strengthening their distinctive qualities rather than on becoming mini-Harvards.

One reaction to these developments was widespread complaint about an "erosion of standards" taking place. In its 1985 report "Integrity in the College Curriculum," the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the nation's most prominent association of liberal arts colleges, complained, "As for what [now] passes as a college curriculum, almost anything goes." Describing the experimentation as a sign of "confusion as to the mission of the American college and university," the AAC&U expressed particular alarm that "the very distinction between the 'liberal' and the 'vocational' that runs through two millennia of educational theory is no longer universal."

But another response to the trends of the 1970s and 1980s, which received much less attention, may be of greater long-term importance. Some educators recognized that higher education had been permanently democratized, and that many students—including some of the most talented—had a legitimate interest in preparing themselves for the workplace. The most constructive response to these realities, they concluded, was neither to abandon the liberal arts nor to defend them tooth-and-nail against any change but, rather, to build bridges between liberal and professional education, and to bring college closer to adult life by incorporating nonacademic experiences into undergraduate programs.

The initial impetus for bridging the liberal-professional divide was practical. Through the 1970s and 1980s struggling liberal arts colleges found they could maintain enrollments by offering career-related subjects. Some added professional courses to their curricula, and some partnered with other campuses to create "3/2" programs: three years of liberal arts and two years of professional study, leading to two degrees. Such offerings could be found not only in the middle of the academic pecking order, at places such as Eckerd, Hendrix, and Alverno, but also at elite institutions such as Smith, Wellesley, and Claremont McKenna. By the 1990s most liberal arts colleges had some students studying professional subjects, and many had a majority doing so. Heightened attention to combining liberal and professional studies could also be found at leading research universities such as Penn, Tulane, and Johns Hopkins.

This hybridization did not occur without friction. Some liberal arts faculty members resented teaching students whose central interests were professional. But others recognized that contemporary students were simply trying to arm themselves for a highly uncertain and competitive job market. These professors began to explore ways in which professionally oriented studies could be better linked with liberal arts learning. James Appleton, the president of the University of Redlands, expressed the new way of thinking in a letter to The College Board Review in 1990: "While it is important to be concerned about whether the 'pure' liberal arts college represents a disappearing segment of the educational market, a more important question may be this: How do we best organize and articulate the relationship between liberal education and professional education?" Appleton's views were reflected in the formation of an

association of institutions committed to integrating professional and liberal studies. By 2004 the Associated New American Colleges claimed twenty-one members, including Redlands, Drake, Ithaca, Rollins, Simmons, and Susquehanna.

Still more striking was a recent report of the Greater Expectations National Panel of the AAC&U, which proposed to "erase the artificial distinctions between studies deemed liberal ... and those called practical" and suggested that professional studies—such as business, education, health sciences, and engineering—should be approached as liberal education. It's hard to imagine a more dramatic change from the association's 1985 report lamenting the blurring of "liberal" and "vocational" studies.

Just as thoughtful champions of the liberal arts have called for greater integration of liberal and professional studies, reform-minded academics on the professional side have moved toward a greater appreciation of the liberal arts. In the mid-1980s a group based at the University of Michigan formed the Professional Preparation Network to pursue a more interconnected curriculum, an effort described in its 1988 report, "Strengthening the Ties That Bind: Integrating Undergraduate Liberal and Professional Study." Meanwhile, professional accrediting associations in engineering, business, education, and nursing have increasingly insisted that majors in those fields take a certain number of liberal arts courses, and sometimes even specific subjects.

Aiding these bridge-building efforts has been academics' heightened appreciation for interdisciplinary work—a trend that began right after World War II and accelerated during the experimentalism of the 1970s. Students have been very responsive to this trend. Enrollment patterns reveal a high level of interest in interdisciplinary programs and in double majors that for some can provide a way to combine traditional academic studies with work in a professional subject. The dean of the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences at the University of Southern California recently told *The New York Times* that after the curriculum was restructured to emphasize double majors and minors, the number of liberal arts students earning professional minors "increased phenomenally."

Off-campus learning, which constitutes the second pillar of practice-oriented education, has evolved in parallel with the liberal-professional rapprochement. Before the 1960s only a few experimental institutions, including Antioch and Bennington, embraced the idea that a liberal education could include practical experience.

Among professional disciplines, only health-care and teacher education stressed the importance of workplace learning. The most radical early attempt to integrate practical experience with undergraduate professional study was the cooperative-education movement in engineering, in which students alternated periods of full-time study and full-time paid employment. But prior to 1970 "co-op" was emphasized at a relatively small number of universities, including Cincinnati and my own school, Northeastern.

After the time of troubles illuminated students' restlessness with traditional curricular forms, academics began giving more attention to off-campus experience. In 1971 the Carnegie Commission recommended that all colleges "encourage prospective and continuing students to obtain service and work experience" as part of their undergraduate programs. Even the American Academy of Arts and Sciences jumped on the bandwagon in a 1971 report recommending that students "be permitted to intermingle study and work in ways that are now uncommon."

In this context off-campus study grew exponentially. From 1970 to 1986, with support from federal funding, the number of schools offering cooperative education grew from about two hundred to more than a thousand. Other approaches, most notably internships, grew even more rapidly. Several traditional New England colleges—including Colby, Tufts, Mount Holyoke, Wheaton, and Trinity—moved in this direction in the 1970s. By century's end, according to the American Council on Education, virtually every college and university in the country offered some type of off-campus program. Some recent surveys report that as many as three fourths of all students have at least one internship or similar off-campus experience during their college years.

Much of the thinking behind off-campus programs harks back to John Dewey, who argued nearly a century ago that all learning is deepened through experience. Wellesley, for example, explains its program—which offers internships, study abroad, and voluntary community service—as an opportunity for students to "explore the relationship between learning that occurs away from campus and their liberal arts education." In fact off-campus programs serve many

purposes. Internships give liberal arts majors a taste of workplace experience and allow students in professional fields to test their skills and interests. "Service learning" programs develop habits of civic engagement by linking college courses to actual work in community service.

**P**ractice-oriented education has yet to produce a standard curricular model, but its essential principles are clear: All undergraduates should have access to coursework that bridges the divide between liberal and professional education or even systematically integrates the two. Similarly, all students should have opportunities to deepen their understanding of classroom subjects through off-campus experience. Campus policies and culture should actively encourage both aims, through formal requirements or electives and through faculty advising and attitudes.

Patterns of study within a practice-oriented curriculum will vary depending on a student's interests. Liberal arts majors should have the option of taking courses, minors, and double majors in the professional disciplines, as appropriate to their plans. At Lehigh, for example, students in the College of Arts and Sciences are urged to take advantage of the College of Business and Economics and the College of Engineering and Applied Science.

Students in professional majors, meanwhile, should take liberal arts courses taught by regular faculty members and designed cooperatively by the professional and liberal arts departments. These students should also have access to a rich array of minors and double majors that allow them either to explore their professional interests more deeply—as when a student of business takes a minor in economics—or to pursue an avocational interest, as when a nursing student studies music or art. Caltech exemplifies this approach, stressing that students in professional majors should be provided with "well rounded, integrated programs that will not only give them sound training in their professional fields [but] also develop character, intellectual breadth, and physical well-being." To make room for this kind of program, professional faculties should rid their curricula of excessive technical content that can be learned on the job by well-educated graduates.

Such combinations of liberal and professional coursework represent the simplest approach to practice-oriented education. A step beyond are approaches in which the boundary between liberal arts and professional programs is dissolved altogether, and educators from both sides collaborate on interdisciplinary curricula. Babson College, for instance, has developed an integrated curriculum for business majors in which the skills and abilities needed by practitioners are developed by a combination of liberal arts and professional courses. Such collaboration can also result in exciting general-education courses taught by teams of liberal arts and professional faculty members. The "World Courses" at the University of Maryland are illustrative: for example, a course focused on the damming of the Nile River has been taught by members of the departments of civil engineering, microbiology, and government and politics.

Off-campus experience and classroom work can also be integrated in various ways. Students should have not only access to internships, co-ops, or other off-campus experiences but also opportunities to reflect systematically on these experiences in relation to their classroom studies. At Northeastern, faculty members in each department have designed an "integrated learning model" that carefully links students' coursework to a succession of workplace assignments, and provides "reflection seminars" to help students returning from off-campus placements clarify what they have learned.

The ultimate goal of off-campus work is to help students learn how to learn from experience. This sounds easier than it is. For most well-educated adults the worlds of intellectual learning and practical experience remain locked in separate mental chambers—one associated with school, the other with work. Practice-oriented education aims to connect the two in a way that gives new meaning to the idea of lifelong learning.

**T**hough the building blocks for a practice-oriented curriculum are readily available on many campuses, much work remains to be done before the fragmented efforts described in this essay come together as an accepted "third way" of educating undergraduates. That will not happen until both academic skeptics and thoughtful education consumers become believers. To that end let us see how practice-oriented programs compare with traditional curricular models in meeting the most enduring goals of undergraduate education.

Historically, undergraduate study has served four broad purposes: promoting intellectual capacity; developing professional competencies; fostering breadth of understanding, traditionally of cultural history but more recently of the academic disciplines; and nurturing values to guide adult behavior.

These goals are conceptually distinct but hard to separate in practice. For example, champions of the liberal arts argue that their disciplines not only promote intellectual development but, precisely by doing so, offer a sounder preparation for work than applied subjects. This claim, though consistently advanced, rests on stereotypes: a flattering one of the liberal arts as a font of fundamental knowledge, and a demeaning one of professional study as purely practical instruction. The truth is that both liberal arts and professional subjects can be presented either superficially or with conceptual depth and rigor. Anyone who thinks the typical liberal arts curriculum consists entirely of thoughtful, challenging courses hasn't looked at a college catalogue recently. And anyone who believes that all professional curricula lack demanding conceptual material is way behind the times. In truth, neither liberal nor professional education alone is the best way to sharpen undergraduates' intellectual powers.

Professional educators, meanwhile, often argue that applied studies offer students the best career preparation because a mastery of specific skills helps them gain traction in the workplace. There is an undeniable basis for this claim. In a field involving formal licensure—engineering, say, or pharmacy—such knowledge is indispensable; in a field such as business, it helps graduates get a foot in the door. Most students plan to go straight from college into the workplace, and for them at least some explicitly professional coursework is valuable. But professional educators do their students a great disservice when they fail to take liberal learning seriously. Most professional knowledge rests on theoretical and empirical work in the basic disciplines, and grasping the link between theory and practice is indispensable. In any case, undergraduates preparing for the workplace deserve to know more about the world than the skill set associated with their craft.

But what of students headed for graduate school in fields like law and medicine? As many famous cases attest, a traditional liberal arts curriculum can serve such students well. Nonetheless, their understanding of their undergraduate majors would most likely be enriched by seeing how theories and concepts play out in the real world. Moreover, there is something deeply irrational about expecting a student to choose a career without having any actual experience of his or her anticipated professional environment. It is hard to see why prospective graduate students—even those headed for scholarly careers—would not benefit from some professional coursework or off-campus experience.

For two of our historical purposes, then—developing intellectual capacities and preparing for careers—the advantages of integrating liberal education, professional studies, and off-campus experience are clear. To consider the third purpose—fostering breadth of understanding—we need to recognize that contemporary approaches to general education bear little resemblance to classic liberal education. Today, "general education" often means little more than loosely structured distribution requirements intended to expose students to different "ways of knowing," as represented by the various academic disciplines. Often these requirements are also supposed to enable students to grasp in some practical way the impact of technology, or the significance of the environment, or the pervasiveness of ethnic diversity. Since all these goals involve helping students understand the physical and social world they will experience as adults, they are more likely to be advanced by a practice-oriented combination of academic and applied coursework than by a completely theoretical approach.

The fourth historical goal of undergraduate education is to develop students' character—in particular, their moral and social values. Champions of the liberal arts have long asserted the superiority of the traditional disciplines in this realm. But moral and ethical constructs deserve serious attention primarily to the extent that they affect behavior. It is only when we consider such ideas in the context of actual choices and decisions—the standard fare of applied subjects—or, better, try to enact them outside the classroom that we begin to truly understand how to apply moral knowledge to our lives. This is the essential insight of contemporary service-learning programs, in which students who want to serve society develop their capacities by actually doing so.

In the end, claims for the moral superiority of liberal education reflect a bias against—even a disdain for—the workaday earning experiences of most adults, as if academic learning had a monopoly on value and meaning and

other forms of work were solely about material gain. This perspective is an unfortunate relic from the tradition of classical—and class-based—education in Britain, from which the contemporary liberal arts are descended. For most of us, however, the workplace is more than a place to make a living. Often work is what gives our lives value beyond our families and ourselves, and enables us to make a broader contribution to society.

Instead of deriding students' interest in their careers, we should help them see how the work they do can promote personal growth, intellectual adventure, social purpose, and moral development. We should show them how the values of intellectual honesty, personal integrity, and tolerance can strengthen the institutions in which they will work. And we should help them build bridges between the intellectual concerns they encounter in philosophy, literature, and history courses and the decisions they will have to make as business leaders, lawyers, and government officials. Properly conceived, practice-oriented education can provide at least as powerful a moral education as any purely academic study of ethics.

**P**ractice-oriented education is no panacea. In advocating a course of study that systematically integrates liberal education, professional education, and off-campus experience, I do not mean to diminish traditional approaches to either liberal or professional studies. Many students have flourished within such curricula, and many will do so in the future. Some undergraduates will have no interest in building off-campus experience into their college years. Moreover, implementing a practice-oriented curriculum is not easy. It requires faculties to collaborate across lines of professional separation that have been in place for generations. It requires colleges and universities to provide more than token support for off-campus programs. And it requires a level of attention to undergraduate learning that many university professors will find difficult to muster.

Nonetheless, many faculty members, students, and campuses have found their way toward some preliminary version of practice-oriented education over the past thirty years. These efforts deserve the serious consideration of educators, parents, and students alike. For many undergraduates, practice-oriented education will enhance learning and produce significant developmental gains. It is time for the nation's educators to embrace this latent movement and to recognize an important educational idea that can transform and enrich the college experience.

The URL for this page is <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200410/freeland>.

Print this Page

Close Window

---

**SUBSCRIBE TO THE ATLANTIC TODAY!**

Take advantage of our great rate to subscribe to a year of The Atlantic Monthly. Go to the following Web address to sign up today:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/subscribe12>

---

All material copyright The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.