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"To thine own self be true": Championing liberal arts education in the 21st century

Paula O' Loughlin and Pareena G. Lawrence¹

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night to the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Polonius in **Hamlet, Act I, scene 3**

To Thine Own Self be True: Championing liberal arts education in the 21st century

When we were invited to write this piece in honor of Sam, we considered several thematic options: "bicycling for the hard-headed"; "big ideas in small towns"; "Shakespeare and his as-of-yet-unrecognized contribution to college administrator speak—or the difficulty we both have as college administrators without an encyclopedic knowledge of Shakespeare, Pindar and Nabakhov"; or maybe a Star Wars-themed tribute focusing on how Sam brought us to what many faculty consider the Dark Side early on in our careers.

Quickly, however, we realized that our contribution to this fest had to be about the future of the liberal arts college. That is what Sam helped prepare us for.

Like many of us, Sam loved liberal arts colleges. But his was not a blind love. As Sam taught and led institutions like University of Minnesota Morris (UMM), he studied the liberal arts and particularly the role of small residential liberal arts colleges intensely. He considered the liberal arts as a body of ideas, as both public and private intellectual places, as institutions that have the potential to be both radically egalitarian and bastions of privilege. In short, he knew our phenotype, our genus and our subtypes. Still, he fervently believed in our promise for the individual and for society and the world as a whole even as he knew our foibles, weaknesses and idiosyncrasies.

Having now transitioned to administrative leadership roles at other liberal arts institutions, we realize we have become somewhat like Sam. It's similar to that moment you have with your children when you realize you have become your parents. While neither one of us will claim to know the liberal arts college (or Shakespeare for that matter) as well as Sam did, we share his unabashed and studied love for the small residential liberal arts college. Like Sam, in our day jobs we also spend a lot of time as leaders studying the liberal arts college and worrying about its future. We are always thinking about the strategic vision for our own institutions, but also ruminating about the bigger question of the liberal arts college in the present and uncertain future.

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In thinking about this presentation, we realized that Sam's well known, even legendary opening convocation remarks were quite relevant. Many of you never had a chance to hear these, and others may have forgotten, so here for you all to savor are a couple points he made every year:

Point 1 - You are going to be OK.

Point 2 - Reinvent yourself.

And since we are travelling back in our minds to that well known speech and Sam always dropped some Pindar therein as well, we would add a third point with some pithy wisdom from Pindar, "We know what we are but not what we may be. Learn what you are and be such." Although we don't think this is the exact sage advice from Pindar that Sam was known for, it is quite relevant to our case for the liberal arts college's role in the 21st century. So to add to points 1 and 2:

Point 3- Learn what you are and be such.

If the liberal arts college in the 21st century is to remain robust and relevant, it must intentionally return to the original meaning of the *artes liberales*, the arts and skills necessary to be a free citizen. We argue that the future of the liberal arts college in the 21st century will be fine as long as we are intentional and reflective about the mission of the liberal arts college, which also happens to be its comparative advantage; know our uniqueness within our sector; and as a sector engage with our challenges and reframe the debate at a national level.

So let's talk about our three points in reverse order. Point 3: *Learn who you are and be such*. Who are we as liberal arts colleges? Our self-exploration begins with the demographic trends that require re-understanding ourselves for the future.

Demographic trends

Nationally, the traditional pool of high school graduates who have gone on to small liberal arts colleges (read: graduates from predominantly white middle-class to upper-class families) is declining. This decline is particularly marked on the East Coast and in the Midwest. There are two implications for our small Midwestern liberal arts colleges. First, we have fewer prospective students to fill our entering classes. Second, the small liberal arts colleges of the East are now going much more aggressively after students in other parts of the country, including the Midwest. We are thus fighting over a smaller pool, and the first one wasn't that large to begin with.

No doubt you caught our careful qualification of the demographic trend, because while the traditional population of who has historically inhabited our institutions is declining, there is growth in other demographic groups, particularly Latinos. We are also witnessing relative growth in our first-generation, historically under-represented and under-resourced students in the upper Midwest. The problem here is our liberal arts colleges have not historically pursued these populations, nor have these students found us particularly welcoming. This is particularly true of private liberal arts colleges in smaller or mid-size towns.

But even in the realm of small public liberal arts colleges (for example, at a place we so fervently believe in, UMM), there has been an unspoken tension between the commitment to access and the commitment to a vision of being an Ivy League-type private liberal arts institution, such as one of the author's alma maters *Smith*, with the concomitant academic elitism.

Who are we? For the future, we as institutions need to be something more like Morris, and yet also more than Morris. Let's push this question of who we are a bit more (and play around with verb tenses, as well).

Modalities of learning

One of the strengths of small liberal arts colleges has historically been their imperviousness to change. While in some cases this has proven to make our institutions stronger, we are not convinced the same is true now. There are multiple dimensions to this, so we will give two examples. First, the faculty at most small liberal arts colleges are typically focused on our dominant modality of learning (How We Learned). Given the information revolution of the last 15 years, this modality of learning and being in the world doesn't match the dominant modality for our pool of prospective students. By and large, the learning regimes of today's students are digital, not analog. Second, our beloved liberal arts colleges were founded on the principles of exclusion; that is, they were bastions of privilege that appealed to a relatively narrow population, with which we continued to engage over the centuries. Yet, if our colleges are to continue to educate students in this millennium, we need to be inclusive in everything. That will change us.

Market saturation

We are not the only ones asking the question of who we are. There are more higher education enterprises today than at any point in the history of American higher education (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93442.pdf>, page 75; <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>). Post World War II to the end of the 20th century, a student aspiring to go to college could go to a two-year college (technical, community or other) or a four-year public or private institution. Those days are long gone. While we are hopeful that the boom of MOOCs has peaked, even their downturn will not radically change the altered higher education landscape.

This saturated market of 4,706 degree-granting institutions in 2011 (up from 3,231 in 1980) has several implications for small Midwestern liberal arts colleges. Now it is not us and our eastern cousins competing for the post-secondary-education-seeking population—it's us, our eastern cousins, and all the other forms of post-secondary educational institutions, from the University of Phoenix, to Governor's State University, to Southern New Hampshire University. All of these few thousand schools are trying to distinguish themselves over and above the competition.

One of the by-products of this effort to grab market share has been that many educational enterprises are trying to be all things to all people. The outcome for the traditional liberal

arts college has been brand dilution, as virtually every school is now touting small class sizes, mentoring by world class professors, living and learning communities, and undergraduate research with faculty, to name a few. Over the last 20 years institutions from large Research 1 to regional comprehensives to community colleges have labeled themselves as having the feel and quality of a small liberal arts college. Young people and their parents who did not attend liberal arts colleges do not know the difference between a simulated liberal arts college and a real liberal arts college. So our brand, what it truly means to be a liberal arts college, is being diluted.

A cascade of related problems

This cascades into negatively affecting our value proposition—the return students/parents get on their investment in a liberal arts education. In the words of David Anderson, president of St. Olaf College, a college’s value proposition is demonstrated by the “financial independence, professional accomplishment, and personal fulfillment” of its graduates. (<http://wp.stolaf.edu/president/public-remarks/cic-remarks-1-6-12/> para. 3). He continues, though, by saying it is incumbent upon colleges to “demonstrate that these outcomes were not the result of serendipity but rather of [their] intentional institutional efforts.” (<http://wp.stolaf.edu/president/public-remarks/cic-remarks-1-6-12/> para. 4).

The value proposition of attending a small liberal arts college is under pressure for several reasons, but one big reason is our skyrocketing costs. We are not going to discuss the reasons why our costs have increased over and above the cost of general inflation in the last three decades, but liberal arts colleges are not alone. (For more details read chapter 3, “Economics and Affordability” by Catharine Bond Hill, Jill Tiefenthaler, and Suzanne P. Welsh in *Remaking College: Innovation and the Liberal Arts*, edited by Rebecca Chopp, Susan Frost, and Daniel H. Weiss, John Hopkins Press, 2015.) However, small liberal arts colleges do seem to face more questions in terms of our value proposition and whether we are worth the expense.

The fore-mentioned is important and not untrue, but it is also limiting. The point we (not the collective we, but we the authors of this piece) want to make is that adherents of the liberal arts have not defined or set the parameters of the case that needs to be made. We have been trapped into defending our value propositions by saying, “Hey, we are worth it,” in terms of the value of certain majors and career readiness as opposed to framing the narrative as a return on education. When the semiannual *New York Times* story about the English major who can’t find a job beyond Starbucks appears, the letters to the editor by ardent supporters of a liberal arts education make impassioned cases about the tremendous and time-honored essential value of English, Philosophy, Rhetoric, etc.

Before we go any further, let’s be very clear we are not arguing against English as a major, but rather against the framing of the value proposition that has been set up for us by our critics. This is not our argument, because the fundamental reality of a liberal arts education is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Separating the major out from the entirety of the liberal arts education is like imagining Morris the college without the town of Morris.

But back to our earlier point about value proposition: In the process of making the argument about the value of the English major, the devotees of the liberal arts inevitably end up talking about how the study of English is an essential and immutable component to the liberal arts education. In making this argument, however, we unintentionally present an ahistorical perspective on the liberal arts and the challenges it represents. We make our case for the value of the degree on the premise that the liberal arts have been the same since the beginning of time, and that this moment of challenge is unlike any other time in the history of our colleges. And that's just not true. The history of the liberal arts is a history of change and innovation. We don't need to go back to the Middle Ages to see this dynamism at work. A simple example up through the 1970s is illustrative.

As noted earlier, we (faculty and students and our institutions) were built on exclusion rather than inclusion, but we adapted and changed. Yet under attack, advocates of the liberal arts (that includes us) have fallen into a defensive posture that the liberal arts are defined by an essential core curriculum and a certain set of core majors and they are what we currently offer at our colleges and that is what we must passionately protect.

In sum, the liberal arts college of the 21st century faces a host of formidable challenges. Yet there's absolutely no question in our minds that the liberal arts as a body provides the best education for individuals and societies in the moment and in the foreseeable future. While the challenges appear to be formidable, we would argue that they are surmountable if we can return our focus to the original meaning of the liberal arts—IF we learn what we really are, and reinvent ourselves accordingly.

Reinvention

We need to understand that the future of the liberal arts is in the original meaning of *artes liberales*—skills embedded in subject matter that in classical antiquity were considered essential for a free person to actively participate in the public political sphere. Our argument is that through a liberal arts education, and developing and strengthening the skills of critical thinking, communication, analytic reasoning, creative expression etc., we develop the arts and skills necessary to live a full life as free citizens. We develop the ability to find answers to the complex questions of the future we don't yet know. Students experience this as individuals, and in the process come to understand themselves as part of something bigger than themselves, a community however they define it.

So, we must use the content of our fields to intentionally focus on how we teach and develop the skills and arts required to be a free citizen. Underlying and connecting each of our distinctive fields, like art and chemistry and English, are the skills of analysis, problem solving, persuasion, communication, a deeper understanding of the human condition, creative expression and intercultural competence. We are not saying that content doesn't matter, but content without those underlying skills offers neither the individual nor society much value.

A focus on knowledge, transferable skills delivered via disciplinary knowledge, and the disposition developed through personal transformation and self reflection—these comprise our comparative advantage.

Engage with us in a shared thought experiment for a moment, and imagine if we were to reinvent ourselves as liberal arts institutions—what might it look like? Perhaps not that different, on the surface, than who we are today. We would still have individual students putting together their programs of study... but maybe we would allow them a little bit more space to design their own program of study. Why and how would this serve the goals of developing the arts and skills of the free citizen? Here again, we turn to Pindar: “Curiosity is insubordination in its purest form.” Giving students the right to take ownership of their education and put together their own programs of study promotes the curious and critical mind that asks the questions our society and world needs answered. It also allows our students to develop efficacy, agency and ownership, rather than follow a well structured program they do not relate to or cannot develop a passion for.

In this imaginary world, the study of fields and courses will be just as the professoriate’s intellectual gamut is becoming—inter-, cross-, multi-, meta-disciplinary. The greatest intellectual excitement currently is happening at the boundaries and the intersections of our fields. We must practice collaboration around intractable problems because, last time we checked, solutions to complex world problems are not within the purview of one field such as Political Science or Economics; the solution most likely lies at an intersection of these two fields together with History and some other field of study.

We would develop a liberal arts college learning environment and process that matches the way students are learning—classrooms everywhere, with a problem-based and research-based modality of learning. Concerning the way students live today and the information regime we live in now, the curricular and co-curricular might blend together, so a student’s involvement in a social protest, study of music, and internship at a high-tech company are thoughtfully brought into her study of the field of psychology. Why? Because each learning experience helped inform her to become a better world citizen.

The liberal arts college of the future would be inclusive in everything, not just diverse, and through that inclusion model the *artes liberales*. Collaboration and resilience would be taught as well as leadership. In opening convocations, one might say, “Look to your right and left and ask yourselves, ‘how are you going to help each other thrive?’”

If we remain true to our historic selves as ivory towers, we will fail our students and our mission. Each of our colleges and universities should be talking incessantly about the Syrian crisis, police shootings and racial tensions, and the polar ice caps. We shouldn’t be limiting ourselves to discussions alone, but should show future citizens of a shared world their chance to make change happen. (As a side note, while college administrators worry about student protests on their campuses, we like Sam believe they can prove to be the best learning and teaching moments for the entire college community. We must embolden our students to take risks—together with faculty, staff and administrators—in order to work towards constructive change.)

This 21st century liberal arts college will also need a special kind of leader—defined in that expansive and democratic sense, not simply as a holder of a particular position of power. In August of 2003, at the opening convocation for faculty and staff at UMM, Sam shared the following:

One of the earliest books about Vladimir Nabokov was Page Stegner's study entitled "Escape into Aesthetics." It was a good book, but its core thesis was wrong. That thesis was that Nabokov sought in pure art an escape from the tragedies of his own life and obscene idiocies of politics. Actually, I believe Nabokov's works, especially his novels, employ a heightened aesthetic sense as a springboard for transmuting tragedy into bliss and seeing beneath social folly a pattern, like the pattern of art, in all life.

There was last year, and there will be this year, plenty of time for grim messages of fiscal gloom, administrative restructurings, athletics controversies, student and faculty recruitment challenges, and the like. I thought that today I would ignore all those pressing daily exigencies of our shared professional lives and take as my text the Monty Pythonesque motto, "and now, for something completely different." I want to say a bit about two visual images. You can judge if I am escaping into aesthetics, or trying to use these pictures to say something even more important than Budget Recommendations I, II, III, etc. "Look here upon this picture, and on this," says Hamlet in his rather oedipal bedroom scene with Ophelia.

The first picture is of Roan Mt., in the mountains of Western North Carolina. The 14-mile hike over Roan and a series of 3 or 4 other Southern Appalachian "balds" is one of my favorite sections of the Appalachian Trail, but actually this could be a similar picture from the Western mountains, or the Alps or the Andes. What I find perennially fascinating about walking in mountains is the interplay between the tiny alpine wild flowers at one's feet, and the huge overarching peaks beyond. Both can be beautiful, on a few lucky occasions to the point where you realize that "breathtaking" isn't always a metaphor. But the trick is to attend to both. To stand in equal awe of the huge, commanding rocky peaks and the tiny, perfect, fragile flowers.

This has always been my favorite analogy for the life of an academic administrator. I always try to remind myself that if I am doing my job decently, I simultaneously attend to the little details along the path and to the overarching peaks towards which we climb. If you only notice the wild Potentilla as you climb Swiftcurrent Peak in Glacier Park, or these Grey's Lilies on Roan Mt., you miss the point of being in the mountains. If you only pay attention to the daily detail of budgets and student appeals and internecine feuds, you miss the point of the journey, which is a peak much, much larger. Education, especially good liberal education, can help people make themselves better: more open, more curious, more rational, more understanding, more modest, more caring, more questioning. That's the best

hope for the world: that's the mountain we climb. At the same time, if we ignore the fragile beauty of the wildflowers at our feet, we stumble, but more importantly we miss the steady delight of the tramping. If we only think about getting to the top, it's no fun to get there, and we miss all kinds of glory along the way. Chancellors and Deans and Directors have to be managers as well as visionaries and visionaries as well as managers. Without the vision, the management is trivial; without the management, the vision is fruitless. I suggest this duality applies to all of us in this business: teachers, staff, students as well as administrators. We can only do our best as educators if we always look back and forth from the mountaintops to the wildflowers of our jobs and of our lives.

We think these words of Sam's hit the qualities needed of future leaders in the *artes liberales*.

Being OK

Sam gave this speech in early fall of 2003, but what we did not realize at that time was how meaningful those words would become in our lives as academic leaders. We can indeed only do our best as educators and as leaders of small liberal arts colleges in the 21st century if we can "look back and forth from the mountaintops to the wildflowers of our jobs and of our lives." As institutions, we will be ok if we reinvent ourselves by learning what we are and being true to it. We will be ok as leaders as long as we recognize that big things and the little things both matter, and the art lies in successfully balancing the two.

We are both living proof that Sam helped build the next generation of administrators—those who would lead future liberal arts colleges. He also recognized that those leaders needed to come from diverse backgrounds and different life experiences. When Sam was encouraging us to be bold, to speak up, to find our voice, he saw in us what we were yet to see in ourselves—a capacity to see the mountaintops and the wildflowers and the tenacity to fight for both.

Thank you Sam Schuman for believing in us, for inspiring us daily to strive to be the kind of leader you described. Thank you for helping us learn how to fight for the emancipatory potential of our sector of higher education. Thank you for always reminding us to stand for what is right, with an impish grin and mischief in our eyes. We hope you know how important your mentorship was, and is still, for us daily. We hope we are making you proud, and we are honored to have been your students. Fare thee well.