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## Practicing Community: The Future of Liberal Learning

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# AAC&U NEWS

INSIGHTS AND CAMPUS INNOVATIONS IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

AAC&U News, October 2019

## Perspectives

# Practicing Community: The Future of Liberal Learning

By: Heidi Bostic and Diane E. Boyd

In 2016, Furman University launched The Furman Advantage, a four-year pathway that prepares students for lives of purpose and accelerated career and community impact. Three years on, it is time to take stock.

Cue the publication of AAC&U's *Liberal Education* issue on "[Building a New Liberal Education](#)." Furman colleagues across academic affairs, information technology, and student life gathered to discuss the issue and answer its implicit calls to action.

We met three times over two weeks for about two hours each session. All told, fourteen colleagues participated, with two of us serving as facilitators: Heidi Bostic, visiting associate provost, and Diane E. Boyd, executive director of the Center for Faculty Development. We called our working group "The Future of Liberal Learning."

Inspired by [Lynn Pasquerella's](#) challenge to "revolutionize higher education"; [José Antonio Bowen's](#) question, "Are we being bold enough?"; and [Brian Rosenberg's](#) description of current changes to higher education as "more than tinkering but less than revolutionary," our conversations highlighted ideas that the articles imply but do not fully address. Mindful of sobering realities, seeking to *revolutionize*, and recalling AAC&U's commitment to higher education as preparation for work, life, and civic engagement, we identified three crucial outcomes.

### Outcome 1: Engage Jobs and Skills, Yes—And Also Work and Capabilities

The essays in this issue of *Liberal Education* emphasize skills, and understandably so: students, families, and employers want to know what liberally educated college graduates will bring to the workplace. But too often, the tripartite aims of work, life, and civic engagement are reduced to work, which in turn is narrowed to skills and jobs. It is no surprise that, as [Carmen Twillie Ambar](#) writes, "On many campuses, 'skills' is still treated as a dirty word."

*Liberal Education* includes examples of institutions countering this trend. For example, as [Gilda Sheppard and Anthony Zaragoza](#) write, "Like many institutions with liberal education curricula, we want to resist job skills as silos controlled by the rules of the market." Their college, Evergreen State College—Tacoma, offers "entrepreneurial opportunities" through cooperatives that transform students' life experiences from hurdles to gateways.

At Furman, we seek to enact [MaryAnn Baenninger's](#) call to distinguish between "merely adding career-specific majors" and helping students get "robust preparation to make the transition after college." Examples include programs offered by Furman's Cothran Center for Vocational Reflection and Shucker Leadership Institute; opportunities for community engagement through the Heller Service Corps and the Medical Legal Partnership, which seeks to improve health outcomes; and Furman Engaged, an annual day-long event that highlights students' diverse and immersive high-impact learning experiences.

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AAC&U; News is written and edited by Ben Dedman. If you have questions or comments about the newsletter's contents, please e-mail [dedman@aacu.org](mailto:dedman@aacu.org).

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While redefining the relationship between education and workforce preparation, we must also emphasize civic engagement, help students navigate the complexities of work and life post-college, and—as [Ronald A. Crutcher](#) emphasizes in his article—acknowledge “the responsibilities we have to share wisdom that promotes greater tolerance and understanding.”

At Furman we recognize that students may not always see how a major program of study will enable them to develop capabilities along multiple dimensions, particularly when that major does not map neatly on to a certain career track. Staff from Furman’s Malone Center for Career Engagement, building upon the National Association of Colleges and Employers career readiness competencies, will work with faculty to articulate cognitive, behavioral, and other capabilities fostered in each department at Furman and to infuse these capabilities into teaching and mentoring practices.



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### Outcome 2: Recover Deeper Meanings of Liberal Education: Virtues and Community

Though it is subject to various interpretations, “liberal education” means freedom. The essays in *Liberal Education* see this freedom as empowering students to chart their course after graduation, particularly in the workplace. Our conversations recovered deeper meanings.

Whereas liberal education today is often understood in the modern (since the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries) sense of freedom to maximize one’s individual benefits, an older tradition (that Aristotle would recognize) approaches freedom in terms of virtues and community. When AAC&U uses “civic responsibility” in its [definition](#) of liberal education, it invokes this older meaning. What are the intellectual and character virtues that students must develop in order to become responsible citizens, excel in their work, and lead a good life?

As Crutcher writes, one way to support students in this effort is to “use diversity as an educational benefit to change the campus culture.” And as Sheppard and Zaragoza point out, “We are responsible for creating our learning community together.” It is through such community on campus that students, staff, and faculty alike can become more effective citizens.

The recent report of [Furman’s Task Force on Slavery and Justice](#) provides a context for building community. This task force, which included students, examined Furman’s historical connections to slavery in order to help the university better understand and learn from its past. The report combines history, ethnography, theoretical approaches, and practical recommendations for continuing to foster diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging.

Inspired by the report, [strong support from the board of trustees](#), and broader university values and goals, Furman faculty, staff, and leaders in academic affairs and student life have begun an initiative of sustained engagement with Furman’s history through curricula and conversations. These efforts include exploring the creation of a new major in Africana studies and discussing texts like Beverly Daniel Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and Ibram X. Kendi’s *Stamped from the Beginning* over the next several months.

### Outcome 3: Articulate What is *Distinctive* about Our Institutions: Practices in Community

The essays in *Liberal Education* diagnose a general loss of distinctiveness in liberal learning and our collective shortcomings in promoting it. While several essays describe programs to deepen high-impact practices and students’ preparation for life after graduation, our conversations suggested that every institution needs to specify what makes its learning experience distinctive.

Furman’s signature integrative program is The Furman Advantage, exemplified by excellence in undergraduate research, sustainability, the Tocqueville Program (which builds intellectual community by studying political life from diverse angles), and the Vista House intentional community (a faith-based residence grounded in hospitality and the arts). Strengthening and highlighting the distinctive capabilities these programs develop in students will answer [Leon Botstein’s](#) call to renew “the practice of liberal arts education.”

Students want to know how our specific college or university will shape them and make a difference in their careers and broader spheres of influence. When students graduate, what practices will they have honed to guide their work, life, and civic engagement? How do we articulate these practices while also encouraging

students (and ourselves) to be ever-more intentional in developing values and virtues? Reflecting on these and additional questions will be crucial to identifying and crafting Furman's stories of distinctiveness.

Reflection is at the heart of The Furman Advantage. This year our Reflection Fellows cohort, responsible for fostering reflection in students, the campus community, and themselves, has doubled in size to include twenty-one faculty and staff across academic affairs and student life. The cohort itself is a structure for communication that bridges institutional divides; colleagues have already begun sharing stories of Furman's distinctiveness and crafting action plans. Additionally, faculty are continuing their conversations about what a liberal education means at the yearly faculty retreat and at meetings of an action group tasked with developing curricular innovations, research projects, and community engagement initiatives.

### Looking to the Future

We hope that our outcomes and calls to action might be useful to other schools interested in exploring *Liberal Education* to spur crucial conversations about the future of liberal learning. Colleagues who remain mindful of grand challenges and shape curricula that are problem-based and world-focused, as noted by Botstein and by [Lori Varlotta](#), will likely yield the most inspiring next steps. At Furman, such curricula include poverty studies (our most popular minor) and majors like public health and sustainability studies. Any liberal arts discipline can shape ideas and practices needed to address grand challenges. We will continue to host working groups to ensure that our community cocreates its future of liberal learning by recovering foundational principles and helping students address the challenges and opportunities that await them as adaptive, creative, and community-minded citizens.



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