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Leadership and the Liberal Arts: Achieving the Promise of a Liberal Education

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Leadership and the Liberal Arts

**Achieving the Promise
of a Liberal Education**

Edited by

J. Thomas Wren, Ronald E. Riggio, and
Michael A. Genovese

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Introduction

J. THOMAS WREN, RONALD E. RIGGIO, AND
MICHAEL A. GENOVESE

Those who are committed to the value of a liberal education tend not to be half-hearted in their advocacy of this form of preparation to live a fulfilling and committed life. They believe that an individual educated in the liberal arts and sciences is one who is best prepared to meet life's challenges in thoughtful and creative ways. A liberally educated individual has engaged in the study of our physical, social, and moral universe from a wide variety of perspectives and come away with invaluable skills. Such an education creates an active and engaged intellect that understands not only the self, but also one that is open to the differentness of others. It is an education that hones an ability to deal with ambiguity and change. Perhaps more important, an individual steeped in the liberal arts develops the capability to think critically and, more important yet, a capacity to engage in ethical reasoning in the face of life's complex challenges.

It is of little wonder that those who are engaged in the provision of a liberal education are so passionate about their life's calling. They have seen generations of students transformed by this educational experience and take quiet pride in seeing their charges make their way in the world. Yet if the end result were only individual success, most liberal educators would feel that the magnificent education so attained would have been, at least in part, misspent. Implicit in this education that prepares one to fulfill her/his human capacities to the fullest extent is the concurrent expectation that these capabilities will also be devoted to serving something beyond the self. The rhetoric of liberal arts colleges and universities about creating citizens and leaders is not empty

bombast. A liberal education has always been about preparing individuals to better not only their own lives, but also the lives of others. We who are engaged in this noble calling take fullest satisfaction from having had a part, in our own small way, through the proxy of our graduates, in contributing to the betterment of our society.

Given our passion for liberal education, it should come as little surprise that we also engage in a continuing discourse concerning whether our methods and approaches continue to fulfill our high expectations for this form of education. This volume is intended to be a part of this discourse. While the modern liberal arts curriculum continues to be the best education available in preparing students to live lives of consequence, in its current manifestation it imperfectly realizes the purposes of a liberal education.

To be more specific, the increasing specialization of the disciplines has narrowed our world view from the characteristic wide compass of a liberal education. A great part of the educational experience takes place within the confines of disciplinary ways of defining problems and the disciplinary content and methodology in response to those problems. This poses one of the great dilemmas of modern liberal education. Few seriously advocate abandoning disciplinary study, because its strengths are patent. In the disciplines students gain the analytical rigor found only in disciplinary study and the opportunity to garner substantive depth along with methodological expertise. What is lost among these considerable intellectual benefits is the opportunity to synthesize knowledge across academic disciplines.

Admittedly, one of the goals of the general education curriculum traditionally has been to address this issue. But general education curricula do not adequately solve the problem of the integration of knowledge for two reasons. First, many general education curricula are mere "menu" sorts of approaches to the various components of our intellectual tradition. This serves the purpose of introducing students to various disciplines, but it does little in the way of calling upon the students to integrate their learning across disciplines. The second failing of general education is more generic. Almost by definition, general education courses are introductory courses in the respective disciplines. If the objective is to develop students who can address complex problems at the highest level of sophistication, they need to draw simultaneously on the richness of their entire academic preparation.

Having a structured and intentional opportunity to practice such intellectual integration will better prepare them to confront the messy

complexities of life's problems. The challenge for liberal arts educators, of course, is to create such a curricular opportunity that spans the disciplines without intruding on them overmuch, while providing students with a real opportunity to engage in efforts of synthesis.

A second area in which current liberal arts curricula fail our students is in the abandonment (or, perhaps better, orphaning) of the commitment to produce citizens and leaders. This issue, too, has two components that stem from ongoing debates among supporters of liberal education. In the first debate, many on one side argue that the mere process of gaining a liberal education sufficiently prepares and produces citizens and leaders. Others maintain that, given the explicit call for developing citizens and leaders almost universally proclaimed by institutions committed to the liberal arts, something more conscious and more overt is needed in responding to this call. The other debate among academics in the liberal arts that impacts how one implements the mission to create citizens and leaders is the extent to which "experiential" education, even broadly defined, has a place in the academic program. Again, one can find passionate proponents on both sides of this divide.

To return to the essential matter of how liberal arts institutions can navigate such debates while still fulfilling the promise of creating citizens and leaders, there is a need for some theme or approach that allows room for all sides of these arguments to operate productively. That is to say, there needs to be an element of the curriculum that provides students with the opportunity to confront notions of citizenship and leadership without dictating content, one that has provision for—but does not require in any individual course offering—the opportunity to link learning to lived experience.

This all-too-brief diagnosis of contemporary challenges to liberal education also suggests a possible solution: the introduction into the liberal arts curriculum of some overarching theme that encourages the integration of learning while at the same time offering a vehicle for students to confront more directly the implications for becoming citizens and leaders. That, in a nutshell, is the rationale for this volume.

The solution to these challenges is neither obvious nor inevitable. The goal of synthesis could be addressed by any number of inter- or multidisciplinary themes (environmental studies comes to mind), although few of the "usual suspects" have the needed breadth to encompass the entire liberal arts curriculum. Similarly, efforts to more fully address the liberal goal of the creation of citizens and leaders rather easily can be imagined (e.g., required internships), but most of these involve some element of coercion of students and faculty that will sit

uncomfortably with some. In recent years, however, there has arisen a new possibility that holds much promise to address successfully both the need for synthesis and the call for a more overt consideration of the implications of a liberal education for citizenship and leadership. It is the study of leadership itself—not as its own discipline, but as a field of study that encompasses the whole of the human condition, and hence embraces the entirety of the liberal arts curriculum. The concept of leadership also clearly addresses the desired liberal outcome of producing citizens and leaders.

What is meant by the “leadership” of leadership studies is of some importance. A precise definition can vary considerably, and indeed there is a strong argument to be made for students and faculty to make the definition of the construct a part of their continuing dialogue on the subject. Nonetheless, some introductory conception is useful, because it suggests the richness of the possibilities involved. At its most basic, one can think of leadership as “the process of facilitating the accomplishment of group, organizational, and societal objectives.” Such a definition reveals the scope of the subject. Leadership so defined is neither elitist nor narrowly confined. As a “process” it involves the interaction of all participants—in the public realm leaders and the people (“citizens”), in the private sphere group and organizational efforts to achieve goals. It is indeed a phenomenon that occurs whenever individuals come together to accomplish things, and as such is omnipresent in the human experience. When one thinks of its connection to the disciplines, it requires the intellectual rigor of the hard sciences, the understanding of individual and social processes provided by the social sciences, the insights into the human condition offered by the humanities, and the aesthetic sensibilities honed by the study of the fine arts. Since it demands interaction with others, it requires an understanding of difference and diversity, and it is inevitably accompanied by values and ethical challenges. As such, the study of leadership provides rich opportunities for both the integration of learning and contemplation of its applications.

All this brings us to the present volume. As Washington and Lee president Kenneth Ruscio indicates in his foreword, this collection of essays is a part of an initiative funded by the W. M. Keck Foundation for the specific purpose of exploring the nexus of leadership and the liberal arts. It is not intended as a *fait accompli*, but rather as an opportunity to initiate a broad discussion of the possibilities of this approach in reforming liberal education. We have brought together here college presidents and administrators, deans and heads of leadership studies

programs, and regular faculty members in the arts and sciences for the purpose of opening a dialogue concerning the possibilities of linking the study of leadership to the liberal arts. The results have exceeded our fondest expectations. In this volume we find a discussion of richness and depth that plumbs the complexities of such a marriage of leadership and the liberal arts, from the conceptual level to the pragmatic matter of thinking about how an initiative of this sort might be implemented.

It is useful to preview the argument in the following pages to see how this volume can serve as a platform for further progress toward an appropriate reform of today's liberal arts education. The volume begins with several chapters designed to serve as an orientation to the theme. J. Thomas Wren, a historian and faculty member in the field of leadership studies, begins the discussion by placing the topic within the context of the traditions of liberal education, suggesting a definition of leadership, and demonstrating how that construct fits nicely into the aims of a liberal arts curriculum. Thomas E. Cronin, formerly president of Whitman College and now professor at Colorado College, adds to this by depicting the liberal arts as "the liberating arts" that free us from dogmatism and open up our minds to exploration, an understanding of self and of others. Liberal education requires us to reexamine and strengthen our values and act accordingly. This commitment to action brings us to the concept of leadership. Liberal learning demands civic engagement, and "constitutional democracy, social justice, a sustainable environment, political freedom and healthy communities don't just happen. They require countless acts of imagination, courage, and leadership." He proceeds to outline how the various studies undertaken in the course of a liberal arts education help us to develop the capabilities to become leaders. This call for the integration of leadership and the liberal arts is paired with a cautionary note by Richard Ekman, former president of the Council of Independent Colleges, that critically assesses the claim that the liberal arts are the training ground for leaders. Part I of this volume not only introduces the concept of leadership in the liberal arts but also invites debate over the nature of that linkage. The chapters in part II allow the reader to delve more deeply into the conceptual linkages between the study of leadership and the liberal arts.

In the initial contribution of part II, Gama Perruci, dean of the McDonough Center at Marietta College, makes a powerful argument that the perceived contradiction between leadership studies and the liberal arts is a false dichotomy. To the contrary, they are inextricably linked, and the nexus is strongest at the heart of the traditional liberal

arts education, the general education curriculum. Perruci suggests that globalization has transformed the world, creating “a dramatic shift in the way we relate among our own citizens and across cultures”—becoming more “flat,” if you will—bringing new value to the study of the liberal arts—and leadership. The link between the liberal arts and leadership is “the process by which a student translates knowledge into meaningful action.” This, in turn, leads to a focus on general education curricula. Perruci calls for “a ‘humanistic’ approach to leadership development” that includes “...the search for meaning in human experience, ... a focus on knowledge as the basis for action, and ... action grounded in a moral ethos.” General education fulfills these requirements, while also developing the competencies necessary for the twenty-first-century leader: “critical thinking, oral communication, writing skills, cross-cultural understanding, and problem solving.” He concludes that “A general education curriculum grounded in the liberal arts should serve as the foundation for helping our emerging leaders handle ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and clarity of thought.” All in all, Perruci’s presentation serves as a persuasive argument that the study of leadership and the core of liberal arts learning are not so far apart after all.

Equally impressive is the contribution of Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, president of Sweet Briar College, who demonstrates the links to leadership found in the disciplines of the liberal arts. To make her point, she concentrates on those disciplines not usually equated with leadership. Although the study of leadership issues is not unfamiliar terrain in the social sciences, “Little curricular attention is paid [when analyzing leadership] ... to the study of the arts ... the humanities or the sciences.” Muhlenfeld explores in some detail how the study of music provides “a number of insights directly transferable to leadership.” Similarly the contemplation and analysis of poetry teaches not only facility with language, but it also offers a window into the soul. Literature can do this and also provide metaphors for leadership and demonstrate “the importance of story” in the leadership relation. Likewise the study of science does more than provide such key leadership skills as “accuracy ... and ... the ability to observe carefully,” it also gives one training in “moving regularly and comfortably from the theoretical realm to the practical and back.” Muhlenfeld concludes by stepping back and viewing the liberal arts as a whole, and their impact on leadership. “[S]erious study of the arts, humanities, and sciences as well as the social sciences ... insures the development of a deep understanding of the connectivity between disciplines, the integration of knowledge This facility should be regarded as a core skill in

leadership development. Leaders must be able to move nimbly from one world to another—drawing on everything and everyone that can help them reach their goal.” Thus, “the link between the liberal arts and leadership is not only strong, but considerably richer and more complex than we usually realize.”

Richard Morrill, former president of the University of Richmond, views the nexus between leadership and the liberal arts through the other end of the telescope; that is, rather than looking to how the liberal arts can bring insights to leadership, Morrill makes the argument “the study of leadership brings important resources to both the theory and practice of liberal education through its focus on the phenomenon of values.” He argues that leadership studies has done a better job of exploring “what values are, how they function, and the way they can be studied, or, in some cases, taught.” Morrill posits that “An inquiry into values and valuing has the potential simultaneously to enrich self understanding and the practice of both leadership studies and of liberal education.” He concludes that “In focusing on values as human powers, as patterns of human agency, leadership education has the potential to contribute to the creation of a robust contemporary model of integrative and transforming liberal education that exemplifies its heritage. It points the way toward linking disciplines to one another, connecting knowing and doing and integrating intellectual and personal development.”

This brief for the connections between the liberal arts and leadership receives an intriguing codicil when Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago takes a different turn and looks to its outcome: “humanistic leadership.” For Elshtain, leadership transcends analysis. “. . . [W]e should always acknowledge,” she says, “that there is something mysterious about leadership, something not reducible to surveys and models.” Her fascination is with the puzzle of “what happens—what is kindled—when a particular person or persons in a particular context ignites something in others.” She calls upon us to contemplate this phenomenon. Regardless of whether we can ever fully understand analytically that black box that is leadership, a liberal education is fundamental to the actual practice of such leadership. Elshtain says, “I hope and I pray that we are educating a significant portion of our young people into such humanistic education for, without that, there cannot be humanistic leadership.” And what is this “humanistic leadership”? Elshtain uses the examples of Václav Havel and Jane Addams to proclaim the sort of leadership to which we should aspire: “It is a way of ‘seeming’ and a way of ‘being’ in the world that notices possibilities

where others do not. It is a way of acting that creates space for others to react in positive and constructive ways. It involves courage, free responsibility.... It encourages rather than discourages; emboldens rather than weakens; calls people to citizenship rather than victimization” Such a vision of the sorts of leaders we may one day produce seems reason enough to pursue our present course of the contemplation of leadership within the liberal arts curriculum.

The chapters just summarized provide those who are intrigued by the possibilities of linking leadership to the liberal arts sufficient material with which to engage in a lively discussion of the conceptual underpinnings of such a union. In the final part of the volume, the focus turns to how such a linking might be implemented: what might it look like?

The initial chapter in part III is authored by Sandra Peart, dean of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, and her frequent collaborator, David Levy of George Mason University. They provide a cogent demonstration of how leadership studies can merge with a discipline of the liberal arts—in this case the work of two economic historians—to yield insights beneficial to both subjects. From a seemingly simple initial inquiry into the nature of the “Great Man Theory” of leadership, great insights emerge. The simple—“thin”—answer is that this conception was the product of Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century. But Peart and Levy are not satisfied with this answer, and instead opt for a “thick” intellectual history of the term. They find it was “developed in the context of intense debate over slavery, property rights for women, and Irish self-government,” and culminated in a remarkable debate between Carlyle and John Stuart Mill (among many other notables). The larger theme was a part of what they called “the most significant modern debate in moral philosophy and social science of the nineteenth century,” involving conceptions of human nature, elite hegemony, ethical dilemmas, and the resulting implications for the “ability to lead and the capacity for self government.” The richness of this analysis opens a portal into the possibilities of linking the construct of leadership to the insights provided by the traditional liberal arts. Although the pertinent leadership theory is certainly enriched by the disciplinary analysis, so too does the concept of leadership provide a way of structuring of the myriad insights drawn from multiple sources ranging from intellectual history to the poetry of Walt Whitman.

Michael Genovese, director of the Institute for Leadership Studies at Loyola Marymount University, takes a somewhat different perspective. He argues that one of the basic goals of the university is to create and nurture citizens and leaders for a democratic state. This is particularly

difficult in today's clime of market ideology, careerism on the part of students, militant individualism, and rampant apathy. Notwithstanding, the university must invest students with all those intellectual capabilities long associated with liberal education: the capability to think critically, the power of "observation, reflection, imagination and judgment" and "the ability to gather and interpret evidence, marshal facts and employ the most rigorous methods in the pursuit of knowledge." But even this is not enough. All this must be accomplished within a framework that consciously and "explicitly seeks to educate citizens to become leaders of a democratic republic within a global community." This must be made clear in mission statements, it should infuse the curriculum, and it should be put into practice in classrooms characterized by participatory and engaged learning.

The contribution by John Roush, president of Centre College, argues that it is useful to address the concept of leadership overtly in the liberal arts curriculum. He describes a course on leadership that he alternately teaches to freshmen and seniors that he hopes will serve as "a model for how and why the study of leadership can be appropriately and effectively blended into one's liberal education." According to Roush, "the process of becoming a leader—the journey, if you will—fits nicely into the notion of being liberally educated; that [students] understand and even welcome the idea that a person is always a student, forever learning about and unceasingly acquiring new skills needed for good and effective leadership; that to be a leader puts one in the position of forever 'becoming'; that the expectations are to acquaint, to develop, to encourage a life-long desire to know more about leadership."

James Maroosis of Fordham University takes a somewhat contrarian stance. He argues that the liberal arts' focus on the life of the mind has strayed from the original purpose of the liberal arts, which was to impart practical wisdom that can be used by the leader in addressing the challenges of the world. Somewhat ironically, Maroosis maintains, in today's academic world, the study of "management"—broadly defined—best adheres to the ancient traditions of the liberal arts. In his own words, his chapter assumes "along with the other contributions to this volume that an education in the liberal arts is critical for meeting the leadership challenges of today's world. It diverges from the mainstream in two respects: first, it portrays education in the liberal arts less as an academic venture and more akin to the development of the ability to respond to opportunities in a creative and moral manner; second, it asserts that, contrary to preconceptions and stereotypes, [the study of] management, as a discipline of thinking is [the approach that is] central

to realizing the ancient promise of the liberal arts[:] the practice of leadership, which is practical wisdom aimed at” achieving successful action in the world.

This section on the implementation of a course of study that links leadership to the liberal arts appropriately ends with the all-important matter of how one assesses the product of this experiment. Ronald Riggio, director of the Kravis Leadership Institute at Claremont McKenna College, undertakes this challenge. He acknowledges that the assessment of any liberal arts educational endeavor is fraught with challenge because the desired outcomes are so intangible. Adding the leadership component complicates things. First, one must determine what substantive content relating to leadership is expected to be attained and then assessed. Next comes the question of whether there should be a practical component to the leadership aspect of the curriculum, and if so, how it will be assessed. Riggio proposes a four-part model of assessment that includes “*reaction criteria, learning criteria, behavioral criteria, and results criteria,*” and suggests ways to implement such a model.

The contributions to this volume from some of the most astute participants and commentators in the field of the liberal arts are both substantive and provocative. What is more important, however, is the way in which these contributors allow the intended recipients of this collection—those who are deeply devoted to liberal education and committed to maintaining its vitality—to engage in a conversation about how the liberal arts can be revitalized for the twenty-first century. The purpose of this volume is to serve as a catalyst for something larger. How this volume will be used in the future is the critical issue. If it is read and then left to reside peacefully on the dusty bookshelves of faculty and administrators, it will represent an opportunity missed. If, however, these essays spur a new dialogue among faculty and administrators concerning the challenges to contemporary liberal education and their possible solutions, then this volume will have served its purpose.