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Defining Academic Vision

Submitted by Roger Brooks on January 22, 2007 - 4:00am

"Administrators are supposed to have an academic vision. What's yours?"

That's the best question a faculty member has asked me since I've become associate dean. In conversations that have followed, I've begun to understand that my vision, built upon a sense of curiosity and the impulse to teach, implies both a certain type of faculty and a certain type of institution.

The academy rests on a foundation of newly formulated and previously acquired knowledge, and a sense of wonder in its presence. That sense -- call it curiosity -- propels faculty to collect data, analyze it, and hazard generalizations in articles and books. It engenders creativity in music and the arts and drives academics to sift through mounds of evidence in the hopes of assembling something grander, be it historical argument or literary analysis. Curiosity requires mass spectrometers and gas chromatographs; it urges fundamental and foundational understanding of the world around us.

Yet none of us works in an institution where such delight in the new alone suffices. Sooner or later, every one of us wants someone else to understand what we've come to know. Perhaps it is a colleague or peer, if we work in a research institute or within the graduate school of a major research university. But in my vision, the faculty want to help shape younger minds, those of undergraduates. And most of the time undergraduates don't have the background to really understand the faculty.

The mismatch of intellectual preparedness and complexity of information compels faculty to teach. This impulse will have a faculty member reduce chaos, ignore variables, abstract principles, and then oversimplify them -- all for the purpose of communicating to the relatively underprepared. The faculty I envision see such teaching as a craft and think about it continually. In their classrooms, students experience a variety of lectures, discussions, and small group work, all meant to stimulate curiosity and create a setting maximally conducive to learning.

So what's my academic vision? I see the classic encounter of liberal education: expert faculty put their own ideas into dynamic tension with those of their colleagues, and then eagerly begin to engage students. I see classrooms where discovery and the boundaries of a field are the principal subjects, albeit explained at appropriate levels of simplification. These attributes -- curiosity and the impulse to teach -- explain why faculty labor over evidence, chisel away at concepts yet undiscovered, and manage syllabi of divergent topics, approaches, and problems.

I have also come to realize that good administrators likewise must take a deep interest in everything and put people in a position where they want to share their expertise.

Day after day during the search season, a dean's calendar is filled with candidate meetings, during which the dean must talk with a vast array of potential faculty members, and then make wise decisions about competence, communications skills, and energy, to say nothing of their fit within a community of scholars and students. At the end of those long days, someone inevitably asks: How can you talk with people in such a wide variety of fields, especially since your degree is in some other equally narrow field? This question comes up outside of the search season too. Indeed what makes administrative life intellectually rich and rewarding is meeting with department chairs, program directors, individual faculty, other deans: all with different training, all specialists in their own areas.

An example: the leader of the Science and Math Advisory Group approaches the administration with a hefty repair bill for a gas chromatograph/mass spectrometer, a bill that puts his department over budget for repairs. The administrator's task is to get this professor to teach enough that her decision is well grounded. How do students use this particular piece of equipment? What research will have to wait until next July if it goes unrepaired?

In just the same way, a good dean will enter the free-form portion of a candidate interview and begin with deceptively simple curiosity: "Tell me about your work...?" Other questions, based on the answer received, keep arising: "Could your work on the economics of dental care help someone understand why health insurers don't want to pay for preventative measures?" And the answer (dental sealants pay off only over the long haul, too long for the insurers) provokes another question, and so on and on.

Although I like to think there is a skill to such an interview, really it is all about putting the candidate in a position to be a teacher. The dean tries to draw from the expert a tidbit that summarizes a subject, in admittedly too simplistic a form, so as to ask for more detail, and perhaps a more cogent summary. The questions tip off the candidate as to how far to translate expert jargon into generally accessible ideas, complex ideas into simplifications comprehensible by a non-expert.

So what is my academic vision as an administrator? The task is to use budgets, hiring, and curricular leadership to promote faculty research and enhance student learning. And the skills we're building should be no strangers to academic deans. Before moving into administration, over long careers in graduate school (and for those of us lucky enough, in the classroom), curiosity and the impulse to teach defined our work -- as it does that of the faculty we serve.

Of course, I'm only an associate dean. I work within a much larger structure, under a president and senior administrative team that combines with the faculty's academic vision to build an institutional culture. Still, I'd argue that liberal arts colleges that embrace a culture of curiosity and teaching have a quite distinctive profile, in terms of curriculum, structure, and values.

Institutions with a culture of curiosity and teaching use the *curriculum* to help drive students to areas of study otherwise unthought of, and allow faculty to construct courses that test ideas in new contexts and combinations. General education programs range widely, helping students sample broadly enough to educate their academic palates, while major requirements sink deeply into subject matter, guiding young scholars toward the nuances of disciplinary cuisine.

Such a curriculum demands that the administration be nimble and open to change, supportive of both classical and emergent fields. The president must lead discussions defining institutional goals and the dean of faculty must propound a theory of which academic issues and programs trump dollar costs. And since no institution can spend all the money required to do everything, even the CFO will need to teach: how shall we reallocate resources effectively to bring on new programs while closing down those that no longer meet institutional goals?

Liberal arts colleges that pursue a vision of curiosity and teaching will also have certain predictable *structures*. Foremost among these is the wave of interdisciplinarity that began on campuses in the late 1970s. Interdisciplinary programs and centers arise when faculty and student curiosity about a topic exceeds disciplinary possibilities: for example, environmental studies is born when a group of faculty realizes that biology and botany cannot answer all of their critical questions, and wants to consult regularly with colleagues from chemistry, public policy, and sociology, as well as literature and others.

The shifting nature of the disciplines raises questions that must be engaged: At the limits of interdisciplinarity, what guides the granting of positions, the allocation of budgets, the support of the community? An institution that has fostered curiosity in labs, studios, and classrooms will have answers to such questions, because curiosity and teaching propel faculty to build bridges between subjects, leading to multidisciplinary appointments and calls for newly intersecting programs and emerging fields. By contrast, an institution that has not attended to such matters will be caught up short when its faculty meet across the divide between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity.

Finally, an institutional commitment to curiosity and teaching will result in an embrace of the *values* of liberal education, from critical thinking and self-development to understanding matters of difference and diversity.

The hallmark of small, residential liberal arts institutions is close student-faculty engagement in and out of the classroom, lab, and studio. Such apprenticeships of the mind aim to develop students' abilities toward critical thinking. Students attempt to create principles abstracted from a set of facts and circumstances, and then to apply those principles in situations never before encountered. Successful students gain a facile (and curious) mind that is both critical and adaptable. Such intellectual formation must happen everywhere on campus and shape the student as a whole. And as students demonstrate what they have learned -- in written essays, oral presentations, in logical or mathematical proofs, scientific lab reports, and artistic presentations -- they go beyond mere mastery of facts to critical argument (and, indeed, to teaching one another).

The object of curiosity in this type of institution is the entire world around us, from the cosmos at one extreme to quantum states at the other. But a particular focus on humanity and our place within the universe of meaning emerges from the social nature of a residential college. That is to say, curiosity about "The Other" (here understood as a focus of inquiry, not an epithet) becomes a critical part of the academic curriculum. Institutional values of diversity and equity of necessity shift from the periphery toward the center; administrative support for such curricular and community attention emerges during complex conversations about resources and structures, all the while cognizant that a diverse faculty and curriculum can better serve a community curious to be taught about culture and difference.

In the end, of course, academic planning must begin with an institution's mission and core values. And when that mission centers on liberal education, an entire community of students, faculty, and administrators must find common ground in the face of critical issues, from resource allocation to interdisciplinarity and diversity. I remain convinced of my original reply: the best academic vision builds on intellectual curiosity and the impulse to teach.

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