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ADVICE

A Modern Great Books Solution to the Humanities' Enrollment Woes



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By Leonard Cassuto | NOVEMBER 10, 2019

Among the legion of problems facing doctoral education in the humanities is the tendency to talk about those problems in isolation.

We debate the future of the Ph.D. and the faculty job market as if those issues were completely separate from undergraduate

education.

In fact, they are closely connected: A root cause of the dearth of tenure-track jobs in the liberal arts is the steady decline in the number of undergraduates majoring in those fields. It's hard to justify hiring new professors in departments without enough students to teach.

The question of how to bring more undergraduates back to the liberal arts doesn't get enough attention from graduate-school reformers. But I've seen one possible answer in a thriving new liberal-arts program at Purdue University.

The background. The story of Purdue's Cornerstone program begins with that same sort of enrollment drop. When David A. Reingold took over as dean of the university's College of Liberal Arts in 2015, he faced "historic enrollment declines" of about 40 percent within just five years — a loss of more than 25,000 annual credit hours. Things looked "pretty grim," he said.

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As the numbers of students in each course shrank, so did the numbers of majors. "A survey of medieval history that once enrolled 300 might now get 70 students," said Melinda Zook, a professor of history at the university. "A course in Russian history that once got a few dozen now drew single digits."

Those declines naturally threatened the future of research in those disciplines at Purdue. The provost warned the dean that the liberal arts had become the proverbial frog in the frying pan: "The heat," Reingold said, "was on."

And it was getting warmer very quickly since the liberal-arts college at Purdue contains mostly humanities and humanistic social-science departments. Economics and computer science — which might have pulled up the overall course-enrollment numbers — are housed in other colleges. And because Purdue is a STEM-centered, public university, students' interest in the sciences can lead them to specialize very quickly and graduate without having taken any humanities courses.

Reingold saw a road to recovery running through the general-education curriculum — the core courses taken by all Purdue undergraduates. He appointed a faculty panel "to revisit" the role of the liberal arts within the gen-ed curriculum.

The group came up with the idea of "a core within a core." Instead of revamping the entire gen-ed program (likely a prolonged and bureaucratic undertaking), the core within a core would be a new five-course certificate program known as Cornerstone. The goal: "to give coherence and direction to students' experience" with the humanities while satisfying core requirements at the same time.

In 2016, Reingold asked Zook to direct the fledgling program. Her "great achievement," he said, lay in the design of a yearlong, two-course sequence of Great Books courses for first-year students. Known as "Transformative Texts," the

courses are built around a list of "foundational texts we recommend," said Zook. This first-year sequence has become the centerpiece of Cornerstone and its most distinctive feature.

As a historian, Zook is well aware that Great Books courses have been criticized for enshrining a static canon of dead white men. "That argument came up initially," she said, but it receded "once people saw the list."

Developed by various faculty committees, the reading list is highly diverse, not limited to the "usual suspects," and built around "books that people were really going to teach," Zook said. So among its 214 authors, the roster includes Sophocles and Plato, Shakespeare and Milton — but also Adrienne Rich and Sherman Alexie, bell hooks and Bob Dylan.

For each section of "Transformative Texts," the instructors has "tremendous latitude" in choosing the readings — of which at least half must come from the approved list and the rest from the faculty member's preferences. "An anthropologist teaching a course in decolonization," for example, Zook said, might "go off-list for poems, short stories, even TED talks."

These first-year courses offer exposure to the liberal arts. "We can't solve all the world's problems in six credit hours," she said, "but we can give them the experience of reading Robert Frost, or attending a production of 1984."

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Taught in small sections, the classes are also designed to provide mentoring. That's a particular need at big public universities where it's easy for students to get lost. The new sequence aims to give first-year students "a real classroom experience with a real faculty member," said Zook. That person can become "a reference point, someone who can guide them, write letters for them, and help them going forward."

That kind of mentoring is possible because the "Transformative Texts" courses are taught by full-time faculty members. "The enrollment crisis gave us an opportunity" to recruit professors who were already facing low enrollments in their departmental offerings and were demoralized, she said. They were willing to try teaching a general-ed course — even one that Zook describes as "very teaching-intensive," with lots of student contact and grading.

They were so willing they even consented to undergo training. Most Purdue faculty members had never taught a Great Books course per se, and their experience with writing- and discussion-intensive teaching was also inconsistent. They each received a stipend — partly funded by the Teagle Foundation on a 50-50 cost-sharing basis — to attend group meetings to prepare them to teach the new courses.

Teagle has made two grants to Purdue, both in 2017. The first was a \$25,000 planning grant, following by a \$170,000 grant to implement Cornerstone. "We jumped at the chance to help," said Teagle President Andrew Delbanco in an email, because "we believe that Cornerstone can be a model for making general education more coherent and exciting for students who tend to regard it now as a box-checking exercise."

The "Transformative Texts" sequence satisfies Purdue's core requirements in composition and speech. Students may then complete the Cornerstone certificate with a 200-level course and two more at the 300- or 400-level.

The upper-level courses — which also satisfy other gen-ed requirements — are organized into five categories that are deliberately "STEM-friendly," Zook said, such as "Science & Technology" "Healthcare and Medicine," and "Environment and Sustainability." Others are broader in scope: "Management & Organization" and "Conflict Resolution & Justice."

Students in the program are encouraged to choose three upper-level courses from within the same category because, Zook said, "we want them to gain another competency." The "Environment and Sustainability" category is a popular choice — and a natural one for environmental engineers, for example.

The results, so far. Cornerstone premiered in fall of 2017 as a pilot program with 100 students. Just a year later, in 2018-19, its first full year, Purdue offered 33 sections of "Transformative Texts" a semester and filled all of them — enrolling in each term almost 1,000 students (30 in each section), most of them from outside the College of Liberal Arts. This year, in 2019-20, the program will double in size to nearly 2,000 students each semester.

There have been bumps, to be sure. Some faculty members I spoke with complained that 30 students were too many for a writing- and public-speaking-intensive course. They said presentations by 30 students take up so much class time that there aren't enough hours left to analyze the books closely. Such criticisms deserve attention.

Some full-time faculty members also worry that Cornerstone discounts research and reduces the liberal arts to a set of service courses. (Zook pointed out service courses in the liberal arts are nothing new. The new part is that they're not being taught by graduate students.)

Relevant to that concern are the demographics of the instructors teaching Cornerstone courses: They are not just tenured and tenure-track professors but also clinical faculty members who teach heavier course loads with more modest research expectations.

Why did Cornerstone catch on so fast with undergraduates?

Zook cited "tremendous support" from all levels of the administration, part of what the dean called "a phenomenal team effort." But all the teamwork in the world wouldn't matter if students didn't like the courses. Remarkably, Cornerstone has uncovered a hidden demand for the liberal arts at Purdue.

When they enroll in the "Transformative Texts" courses, many students "don't even know what the liberal arts are," Zook said. But afterward, "they ask me at the end of the term, 'So what else do you teach?'" And some talk about minoring or majoring in, say, political science.

Christopher Yeomans, the head of the philosophy department, sees Cornerstone as a recruitment tool. "I look for any opportunity to get my faculty in front of uncommitted students," he said. "I think we'll do really well recruiting majors from these courses." Yeomans teaches in the program himself.

Even if they don't major or minor in the liberal arts, said Zook, Cornerstone students will "know something of Dante's *Inferno* or Frederick Douglass's speeches." In that way, the courses provide "a gateway into a different world of knowledge and experience."

They open a gateway for the professors, too. Teaching these classes "gives the kind of freedom that you don't usually get at a big public university like Purdue," said Zook. "People see the list and tell me, 'I've always wanted to teach that.'" When they do, they create and share unusual classroom energy. "We get to sit in a circle with 18- or 19-year-olds and turn them on," said Zook.

Moreover, Cornerstone has forged an interdisciplinary community of teachers at Purdue.

When you get to a research university, said Yeomans, "people splinter" into shards of specialization. "I'm a fan of getting college faculty together to talk about teaching." Such collaboration has cracked open departmental silos and created an esprit de corps. "People who have been here 20 years come up to me and say that this is the first time that they feel a sense of contributing to university goals," said Reingold.

The Cornerstone program shows that raising undergraduate enrollment begins with engaging courses taught by engaged faculty. "Given the state of the liberal arts," said Zook, "it's time we got back into the classroom."

The health of our graduate programs depends on the health of undergraduate education — and thanks in part to Cornerstone, graduate training at Purdue has turned its own corner. The program's success, said Reingold, has created a healthier balance between teaching and research at the graduate level.

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"We're not bringing in [graduate] students explicitly for teaching courses," he said. Reduced demand for graduate-student teaching has allowed Purdue to admit fewer graduate students in liberal-arts fields, so there's more money available to support those who are admitted. Their stipends have gone up by

more than a third. The idea here is to raise enrollments in liberal-arts courses and, in the long run, raise the number of majors, too. That would stop the bleeding, first of all, and create a future for tenure-track hiring in the liberal arts.

Zook has also started a Cornerstone postdoctoral program to prepare young scholars to teach "Transformative Texts" and enhance their teaching credentials as they face the diminished academic job market. The program is small now, but Zook wants to expand it. She plans outreach to Ph.D.s from underrepresented groups, perhaps through a partnership with one or more historically black colleges.

Team Cornerstone has big plans going forward. Its teaching faculty now number 55 and counting. All newly hired Purdue faculty members in the College of Liberal Arts will do half of their teaching in the first-year "Transformative Texts" sequence, said Reingold.

For the dean, Cornerstone fulfills a responsibility. At too many big public universities, Reingold said, "faculty are walking away from their roles as guides and stewards of undergraduate education. We can't abdicate that responsibility."

The Cornerstone example demonstrates that the liberal arts can prosper even at a STEM-centered campus like Purdue. "We're trying to show," said Reingold, that a liberal-arts education can be "central to the mission" even of a large, comprehensive research university.

Purdue views the program as a model — one they want other educators to see. We hope, said Reingold, that "they will learn from us and we from them." The Teagle Foundation has the same idea: "We hope to see the Cornerstone idea spread to other institutions," said Delbanco, "and we will do whatever we can to help make that happen."

Growing and spreading Cornerstone will continue "its interesting adventure," said Zook. "I'm very hopeful about the future." And when was the last time you heard a humanities professor say that?

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. His latest book is *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It*, published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. His Twitter handle is @LCassuto.

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