

LIBERAL ARTS NEW CORNERSTONE PROGRAM BRINGS HUMANITIES CURRICULUM TO STEM MAJORS



In August 2018, the College of Liberal Arts hosted a welcome event for the incoming freshmen. The college's new Cornerstone Liberal Arts program is open to all Purdue students regardless of major. (Purdue University / Rebecca Wilcox)

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Purdue's College of Liberal Arts has designed a 15-hour Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Program to produce more well-rounded graduates and bolster enrollment.

Steve Jobs once said, "It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing."

While this is undoubtedly true, there is a larger, uncomfortable truth to be had among the poetry. In the rush to create a tech-savvy and production-oriented workforce, many institutions of higher education have placed less emphasis in recent years on a broad, well-rounded, high-quality education.

Communication, critical thinking and writing skills, once the bedrock the of the freshman-year general education curriculum, have been largely replaced by STEM-oriented courses. And with fewer students pursuing humanities majors as well, employers are now seeing the upshot of these two trends: a workforce that is technically competent, but lacking in a developed worldview and critical thinking and communication skills.

Purdue's College of Liberal Arts has designed a remedy in the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Program, a 15-credit hour certificate program open to all Purdue undergraduates. Its intent is twofold: to produce more well-rounded graduates and to bolster enrollment in the liberal arts and humanities.

Driving factors

Along with curriculum changes at universities, another driving factor in liberal arts enrollment decline has been the students themselves. Much has been written in the media in recent years on the correlation between the Great Recession – a time when new graduates in even highly sought-after fields struggled to find jobs – and the majors that today's students are choosing.



These reports are backed up by research such as the annual [Freshman Survey](#), which the American Council on Education has been conducting since 1966. While pre-2008, students noted that their primary motivation to attend college was to study something they were interested in, in the years since 2008, student respondents have noted that the No. 1 reason to attend college is to secure a better job. That change in motivation has led to more students pursuing majors in business and healthcare and fewer pursuing the humanities.

Melinda Zook, a history professor, observed this decline at Purdue in a very visual way. “In the past, you would see a hundred faces when you walked in to class, and then you were seeing 50,” she says. “The History of England class used to get about 25-35 students; suddenly there were 10.”

Collaborative and integrative

With nods from Purdue President Mitch Daniels and David Reingold, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Zook designed the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program, which she now directs.

Purdue is known for its collaborative and integrative educational atmosphere, and with Cornerstone, the liberal arts are no different, Zook says. She and a cohort of faculty were tasked with creating an introductory liberal arts program that not only satisfies general education requirements but also creates a pathway that encourages students to seek out advanced liberal arts courses, regardless of their major. Zook conducted qualitative research during development, visiting every college on campus and speaking with department heads and faculty to determine what needs weren't being met and what deficiencies should be addressed.

Zook says, “The question I always asked was ‘How can we, in the liberal arts, help you to better educate your students?’” The answers to that question resulted in the development of a two-semester freshman sequence called Transformative Texts I and II. In these classes, foundational texts from all genres and all over the world are taught by experienced, full-time professors from across the spectrum of liberal arts.

In addition to reinforcing written and oral communication skills, students actively engage in discourse, critical thinking and writing every week in class, and they visit galleries and theatres, hold competitions and film festivals and find other ways to explore their creativity. Professors are given the latitude to create and facilitate a course they truly enjoy teaching, Zook says.

Students then have the option of completing the Cornerstone Certificate in Liberal Arts by enrolling in three additional advanced liberal arts classes which are arranged into five thematic areas. These areas — Science and Technology; Environment and Sustainability; Health Care and Medicine; Management and Organization; and Conflict Resolution and Justice — align with colleges across campus and have been specifically designed to attract students in STEM areas who might otherwise drop off the liberal arts radar after their core curriculum classes have been completed.

These additional nine hours also help hone students' core skills in critical and creative thinking and writing while still remaining applicable to their major, Zook says. “These themes allow students — say engineering students — to see engineering from a humanistic or social studies perspective. They want to build things, they want to animate things, but who does that affect? How does that affect a community? How does that affect human beings? You want to get them into these liberal arts courses to see that,” she explains.

Having the option to explore a wide range of ideas beyond the scope of a dedicated major — and with the mentorship of experienced faculty — is a prerequisite for creating a well-rounded global citizen. In high school, students have the opportunity to be many different things, says Zook: “You could be in band, and you could be in sports or theatre, and then you get to Purdue and now you say ‘I'm a computer scientist.’ It should be the opposite way. You should be expanding them.”

Credits and certificates aside, arguably the most important takeaway from the initial success of the program may well be the most intangible one. One of Zook's Transformative Texts students easily sums up the benefit in one sentence. “This student said, ‘The reason I love this class is because here I am human again,’” Zook says.

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