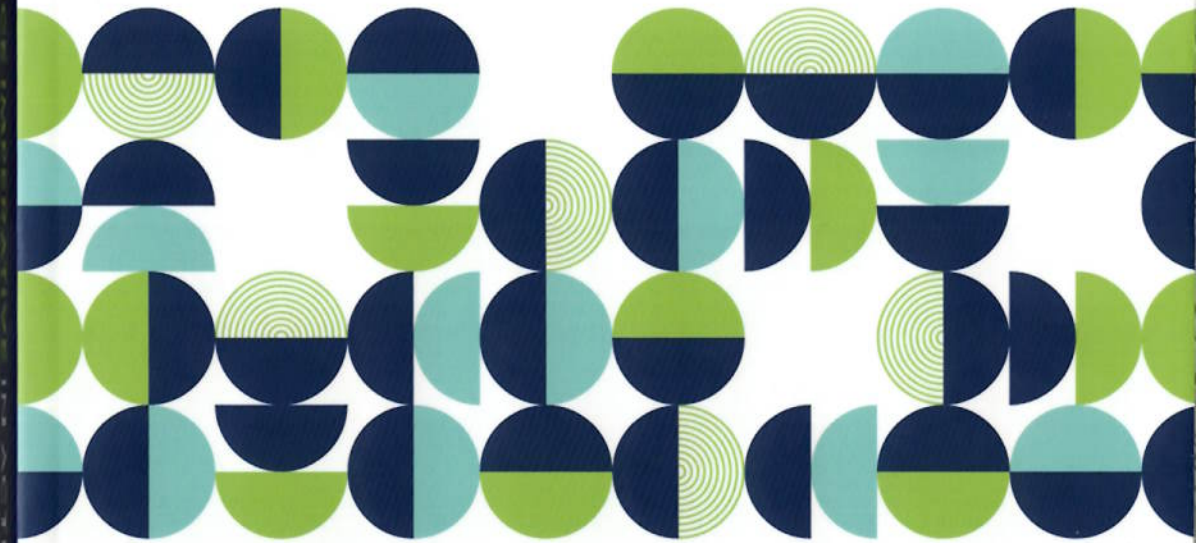


THE
EQUITY-EXCELLENCE
IMPERATIVE
IN ACTION



**Fostering Student Success
in Higher Education**

EDITED BY
STEVEN P. DANDANEAU

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with Melanie Carter, Michael Dennin, Lynn Okagaki, and Hillary Procknow



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Purdue Reimagines General Education

Melinda S. Zook

In 2017, Purdue University's College of Liberal Arts (CLA) launched a new initiative that has become a model general education program across the nation. Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts revolutionized the delivery of written and oral communication at a large STEM-centric Research 1 institution. By doing so, Cornerstone revitalized the central role of liberal arts learning within the university's degree programs. From the outset, Cornerstone's goals were twofold: First and foremost, we wanted to provide all our students with a robust, coherent, and meaningful general education. Second, we hoped that by introducing students to the liberal arts in their first year, they would enroll in more-advanced liberal arts coursework and save our programs in the CLA from extinction.

Fortunately, we accomplished both goals. We also solved other problems, some of which we had not been aware of initially. This, then, is a story of successful curriculum innovation. Cornerstone wasn't executed without risk—hundreds of the university's degree programs had to be changed to accommodate it—or without some pushback from units concerned about their programs. Change is never easy, and this was a big one. But we persevered, and we are currently teaching over half of the incoming class in our opening sequence, Transformative Text I and II. Many of those students take three more advanced liberal arts classes within the Cornerstone certificate—some minor or double-major in a liberal arts degree program. Our success, along with other innovative

programs with the CLA, has given life to the liberal arts¹—so much so that between 2021 and 2023, we hired seventy-seven new faculty members.²

The health of the CLA, of course, is vital. But Cornerstone's greatest impact has been on the students. The program's flexibility allowed it to meet the challenges posed by the crisis in mental health, the pandemic and its aftermath, and the new technologies that threaten how we teach and how students learn. We could not have foreseen these events in 2017 when the program was initiated. But we had the good fortune of highly adaptable faculty and steadfast leadership. This chapter describes our program and how it has continually adapted to the changing environment of teaching and learning within higher education, as well as why we think it's working.

Declining Humanities: Inventing Cornerstone

When journalists write about the humanities, they tend to follow a standard credo wherein “no one is permitted to write the word ‘humanities’ in a sentence that isn’t quickly followed by the word ‘decline’” (Bérubé & Ruth, 2015, p. 1). The humanities, assert Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon (2021), are always declining, and we humanists are always on the defense, in a state of “permanent crisis.” Yet even Reitter and Wellmon admit that something changed in the first quarter of the twenty-first century—that the crisis (or, really, crises) we face today is deeper and far more profound than those of the past. There are many reasons for this, but let's address the issue of decline first.

Regardless of how we measure health in the humanities, and the liberal arts more broadly, within US higher education, we see deterioration, especially since the Great Recession of 2007–9. The numbers do not lie. If we count the number of degrees awarded by discipline in the humanities or the number of credit hours offered in the liberal arts, we see a downward spiral. If we count the number of liberal arts colleges that shut their doors in recent years or the number of humanities departments that were scuttled or diminished nationwide, we see an upward spiral (Barshay, 2021; Snyder, 2023).

Although the steep decline in liberal arts majors was already apparent at Purdue by 2010, the national news media did not sound the alarm until 2018 and 2019 (Handler, 2017; Harris, 2018). Benjamin Schmidt's (2018a) “The Humanities Are in Crisis,” published in *The Atlantic*, reported numbers from the Department of Education: “Almost every humanities field

has seen a rapid drop in majors: History is down about 45 percent from its 2007 peak, while the number of English majors has fallen by nearly half since the late 1990s.” Schmidt (2018b) called this a “catastrophe,” warning that this shift was not “just a temporary response to the job market.” He was right. A spate of media pieces and books analyzed the causes (who is to blame?) and vigorously defended the value of a liberal education, which added to the sense of crisis (Hayot, 2018; Anders, 2017; Douthat, 2020; Montás, 2021; Drees, 2021; Neem, 2023).

While the number of students pursuing the liberal arts continued to plunge, the number of STEM majors surged to new heights in the post-recession era. Nationally, the number of degrees awarded in the STEM disciplines increased from 400,000 graduates in 2010 to 550,000 in 2016, representing a 43 percent growth (Wright, 2017). At the same time, colleges and universities created new degree programs in data analytics, computer coding, AI, health technology, biomedical engineering, and cybersecurity—all of which offer high job placement and above-average starting salaries, making it increasingly difficult for liberal arts degree programs to compete (Fong, 2019). It was amid this background of alarm and consternation in the years leading up to the pandemic that we at Purdue decided to act and create Cornerstone, a program designed to integrate liberal arts learning within STEM and business degree programs.

The causes of our declining numbers in the CLA were not mysterious, nor did they require extensive soul-searching. We understood what was happening: Students and their parents wanted a return on their investment of time and money. In short, they wanted job security. The fact that we understood the causes for the decline of our majors (nearly half between 2010 and 2015) did not make it any less mortifying. But we certainly knew where the students were—in the STEM disciplines—and we knew we needed to reach them. The creation of Cornerstone was still something of a gamble, a “risky bet on a different future” for our college (Zook, 2023). I was charged with directing Cornerstone in 2016, and Dean David Reingold and I handpicked eight tenure-track faculty from various liberal arts disciplines to create the gateway sequence to the fifteen-credit-hour Cornerstone certification. We planned to use the opening sequence, Transformative Texts, to provide incoming students with an immersive liberal arts experience. By learning from faculty who were both superb teachers and successful scholars, students would come to appreciate the value of humanistic inquiry and the power of core texts, from Plato to Toni Morrison. To complete the Cornerstone certificate, students only had to attend three more advanced liberal arts classes that

we had arranged in themes to attract STEM, business, health care, and prelaw students:

Science & Technology
Environment & Sustainability
Medicine & Health Care
Business & Management
Justice & Conflict Resolution

Arranging our course offerings into the five themes of Cornerstone was easy. The college already offered numerous courses on these topics, from History of the Space Age to Global Green Politics. The heavy lift was building and seeking approval for the new gateway sequence, Transformative Texts I and II, which would fulfill our students' written and oral communication requirements. Since 1956, these requirements have been offered by our English and Communication Departments, respectively, but these skill-based courses were primarily taught by graduate students and adjuncts. Regardless of how inspiring the student or instructor was in the classroom, they taught nothing else; students who admired them could not take another class with them. Further, the purpose of these courses was to impart skills. Our goal was to offer a far more edifying experience, one that would nourish our students intellectually through core texts. One that not only hones their communication and critical-thinking skills but also cultivates their humanity. We wanted to introduce them to our amazing faculty and all that we value: the power of words and ideas and the beauty of art, music, literature, theater, and film.

We also placed a premium on mentorship. We wanted our students to feel that they were seen and heard despite the sheer size of Purdue.³ We wanted them to know that at least one faculty member knew them, cared about them, and was available if they needed to talk to someone. This emphasis on faculty mentorship became crucial as the mental health crisis worsened across the nation. At Purdue, this epidemic was evident before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, I began to instruct Cornerstone faculty on how to respond to various crises, from simply reaching out to visibly distressed students in their classes, to handling medical emergencies, to taking the appropriate steps with students who discussed some form of trauma or suicide ideation. Faculty cannot be therapists, but they can direct students to campus resources and report students who need help immediately.

Since 2019, Cornerstone faculty have seen the full array of mental health concerns among our undergraduates, including attention deficit

disorder, panic attacks, suicidal ideation, and emotional and physical exhaustion from stress and social anxiety. Whether these issues resulted from the 2020 shutdown or the addictive nature of social media and other digital distractions, our graduate students and part-time faculty should not be asked to handle them (Editorial Board, *WSJ*, 2023; Twenge, 2017). Cornerstone employs full-time tenure-track or teaching faculty.⁴ First-year students need a full-time faculty member and mentor from the outset of their college careers—someone who understands college life, knows how the university operates, and is familiar with the resources offered. They need an adult with classroom experience. Although we could not have foreseen the depth of the mental health crisis, from its conception, Cornerstone sought to provide all our undergraduates with mentors and models: adults who are teachers and scholars, capable of inspiring young people and helping them navigate university life.

Expanding and Collaborating

In our pilot year, 2017–18, we only offered ten sections to approximately one hundred students; however, we scaled up rapidly in the years immediately thereafter. In addition to the positive feedback we received from students that year, we received several pieces of good fortune. The farsighted dean of Purdue's Polytechnic Institute wanted his students to gain a more well-rounded education and asked his departments to require their students to complete the Cornerstone certificate.⁵ The Teagle Foundation offered us a three-year grant of \$175,000 in 2017 to help us scale up the program.⁶ That body's contacts with the media, particularly *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, also helped us build our reputation and solidify the program within the university and beyond (Flaherty, 2019; McMurtie, 2019; Cassuto, 2019). By 2019–20, we were already offering Transformative Texts to nearly two thousand incoming students each semester, most of whom were first-year engineers and polytechnic students. It also helped that so many tenure-track faculty voluntarily joined the program (*The Equity-Excellence Imperative*, 2022).⁷

Then came the pandemic. The shutdown in March 2020, just days before spring break, was a shock for both students and faculty. Faculty had less than two weeks to determine the best delivery methods for the last third of their courses, upload material, reorient their syllabi, and experiment with new technologies. We may have forgotten, but holding class virtually via Zoom or MS Teams was new in 2020, and everyone had to

adjust rapidly. The question facing Cornerstone faculty was how to maintain the dynamism of a class built around active learning in a remote environment. How would staff continue to connect with and mentor students?

Even if the first days of the shutdown were chaotic, Cornerstone instructors learned how to deliver the same content through synchronous meetings, breakout rooms, and posting on our learning management system, Blackboard. They continued to mentor students on Zoom and FaceTime, and even through handwritten letters of encouragement. We also continued to share teaching and learning ideas via email and virtual meetings. Cornerstone became a hub, a space where our faculty from all the various liberal arts disciplines could talk about teaching, technology, and reaching our students. Over time, faculty became increasingly inventive. One teacher termed his thrice-weekly lessons “Wilbur Radio,” after his cat, whose antics were famous among the students. Soon, even parents were fans of “Wilbur Radio.” Another professor filmed her lecture on John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” at a horticultural park. Students responded by creating and sharing their videos and photos of their favorite corners of nature that reminded them of what Keats sought to express (Mayes & Zook, 2020). The kind of creativity the faculty learned and shared during that fateful spring semester and throughout the summer of 2020 significantly strengthened Cornerstone. We were the place where teaching was honored and innovations were piloted.

In the fall of 2020, then-President Mitch Daniels reopened Purdue. The university’s willingness to provide on-campus learning earned it a reputation for resilience. In 2021, Purdue admitted the largest incoming class in its history (Daniels, 2020; Troup, 2021). For Cornerstone, this meant rapid growth was necessary to teach this new class of beginners. We hired seventeen visiting faculty members for that year (2021–22), and over the last three years, we converted those lines into permanent positions, providing Cornerstone with its own small cohort of seventeen teaching faculty. Nonetheless, most of the instruction in the program is provided by tenure-track faculty (currently, seventy-four professors) from Purdue’s ten liberal arts departments.⁸

In those early years of the program, we learned another valuable lesson: that Cornerstone’s access to so many students could be a force in revitalizing the arts on campus. This aligned with our goal of immersing students in a true liberal arts experience. We wanted to bring core texts to life for the students, showing how old books could still speak to us today. We started modestly in 2018 when Purdue’s Performing Arts Cen-

ter presented a dramatic production of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to campus—the perfect show for a program that reaches out to STEM students. Students in Cornerstone read the book and saw the theatrical production. We held a Frankenstein movie night and a short fiction contest. All of this was done in collaboration with four other units on campus.⁹ The success of Frankenstein that fall taught us that having one or more common readings among our many sections of Transformative Texts was highly valuable. It strengthened the unity of faculty and the community of students, and working with other units on campus helped highlight and solidify our profile across the university.

Since 2018, we have collaborated with numerous departments, schools, and centers. Cornerstone and Purdue’s Department of Theatre work together every semester, offering our students inexpensive tickets, while we provide them with an enthusiastic audience. Bringing our students to a live performance has often meant taking them out of their comfort zone, but we have seen them light up as they watch their peers tackle *Twelfth Night* or *Nora*, a modernized version of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Students who were silent all semester suddenly come alive, moved by the humor, poignancy, and power of the words they read on a page as they came alive in performance.

What ignites an individual student’s awe and fires their imagination is never obvious. Knowing this, Cornerstone faculty have partnered with Purdue Galleries to take our students to art exhibitions, and with Film and Video Studies to watch movies like *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). The various units Cornerstone has worked with have also benefited. Selling tickets to Cornerstone students during the pandemic helped to save the theater department from having to dramatically reduce the scope and scale of its future offerings.¹⁰ Cornerstone faculty have given preperformance lectures and produced educational videos on great texts for our performing arts unit (Purdue Convocations). In 2021, Cornerstone’s collaboration with Purdue Libraries led to the creation of the Cornerstone Reading Room: a quiet space where students can read and faculty can host book talks and receptions.

Innovative Teaching and the Students

From the outset, Transformative Texts was designed to be entirely composed of active learning, usually in the form of discussion, debate, and small-group work. For faculty members more accustomed to a lecture format,

this style of teaching took some adjustment. Additionally, these courses are general education and are not driven by any one discipline. We designed the Transformative Texts sequence to be interdisciplinary or, more accurately, “predisciplinary.” When teaching this sequence, faculty often recall their broader undergraduate background rather than their more focused graduate training. Faculty can draw on their discipline, to be sure, but they must remember that they are not teaching their discipline. They are teaching communication and critical thinking through inspiring texts.

So, we learned together through workshops and retreats and sharing resources reading lists, assignments, and syllabi. What had become increasingly clear before the pandemic, but more so after it, was how much the students were changing. Generation Z is not content to sit and listen (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). They rarely take notes; memorization is alien to them. After all, they have a vast array of sources of information at their fingertips, and we are not the only talking heads they can see and hear delineate the meaning of *The Waste Land* or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. These students need to be actively involved in the learning process.

Gen Z learns by doing, through workshopping, peer review, debates, presentations, playacting, poetry reading, and group projects. This kind of active learning gives them agency over their education. Cornerstone faculty have learned a great deal from problem-based learning (PBL) pedagogy (Epler & Jacobs, 2022; Alt & Raichel, 2022). Typically, PBL provides students—either as individuals or, more often, in teams—with a real-world problem to solve. It allows students to design solutions, often using technology, to a problem posed by their readings. Their tasks are scaffolded, and there is usually a public-facing component in which they “show and tell” their learning. We often center the problem around adapting a classic text for a modern audience or creating a solution to a societal need based on a classic text.

For example, an assignment might be based on Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, where students are asked to create a utopia that responds to problems such as housing, employment, health care, crime and punishment, immigration, and war.¹¹ Students would have to understand More’s solutions as well as the context of these issues today. Another assignment might be to pitch a new video game based on Dante’s *Inferno*. Students would need to be keenly familiar with Dante’s epic and also research the company to which they are pitching their game and understand their audience, the market, and their competition.

Problem-based, or *project*-based, learning allows students to engage with core texts in meaningful and creative ways and take control of their

learning. It also fosters collaboration. In the real world, engineers, technicians, and scientists work in teams. Placing students in teams helps them learn how to communicate, establish common ground, divide tasks, and handle conflict—all transferable skills they will need for the rest of their lives. Above all, PBL gives students an outlet for their creativity and ownership throughout the entire process of their work. Students who learn the value of expressing their unique perspective through their work are far less likely to rely on large language models to do their thinking for them.¹²

In the first years of the program, we also started program-wide contests that solicited student work: short stories, essays, videos, artwork, and poetry. We did this initially with *Frankenstein* and, following the shutdown in the spring of 2020, with the contest “My Quarantine Story.” Since then, we have held contests every semester around a theme; for example, “Reading Voyages,” “Magic,” and “Adaptations.” The submissions—poetry, short stories, digital artwork, and so on—have been so thoughtful and imaginative that we began publishing a journal of student work, *Cornerstone Review*. More than just a souvenir for students and parents, the *Review* gives our program a permanent record of what we have accomplished with first-year students from across the campus.

Cornerstone is only six years old and still building a track record, but every indication suggests the program is working. We passed every assessment of the written and oral communication requirements set by the university, and the CLA is now teaching more credit hours.¹³ In 2020, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Teagle Foundation launched a replication program, Cornerstone: Learning for Living, which offers grants to universities and colleges that create Cornerstone-like programs (Teagle Foundation, 2020). More recently, in collaboration with our new Mitch Daniels School of Business, we began a new program designed for entering business degree students, Cornerstone for Business.¹⁴

Above all, however, we know Cornerstone is working because students tell us so in emails, blogs, evaluations, and social media posts. The comments are often along these lines: “I made friends,” “I learned to love reading again,” and “I loved walking into this class every week.” Some are more poignant:

Being enrolled in SCLA 101 and 102 [Transformative Texts I and II] has had a tremendous impact on my life. Through building a stronger habit of reading, understanding, and discussing a variety of texts, I have grown in several ways. Intellectually and mentally, I have found myself interested in and interacting with ideas and perspectives I previously would

not have thought myself capable of. I feel like a continuously improving individual . . . forever beautifully changed.

SCLA 101 [Transformative Texts I] saved me . . . I have transformed from a withdrawn teenager to a confident leader. I am now doing all kinds of cool stuff. SCLA 101 not only helped me overcome a significant obstacle [fear of public speaking] but also gave me the tools to thrive and succeed. I am grateful for this experience, and I am eager to use what I have learned to make a positive impact on the world.¹⁵

The challenges of the postpandemic digital age are steep. We face demographic changes, cost pressures, an assault on the value of the humanities from talking heads, and threats to learning and teaching from artificial intelligence. But we in the liberal arts cannot expect to be saved by anyone or anything other than ourselves. Let us begin by saving our students. Gen Z may learn in different ways, but they are not fundamentally that different from the boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, or the millennials. Human nature—the need for compassion, understanding, inspiration, and guidance—has not changed. Only the world has changed, and the way young people learn has changed with it.

If we are going to reach young adults in our institutions of higher education, we need to onboard them through programs like Cornerstone to their new college life at the outset of their college career; we need to mentor them with full-time faculty who understand our institutions and are invested in them; we need to nourish young minds through the best writing the world can offer; and we need to immerse them in the arts and teach them through active learning, wherein they have agency over their education. If we can reach these young adults and foster their understanding of themselves and the world through a true liberal arts experience, we might end up reviving liberal arts learning.

Key Takeaways

- Entering college students need to be onboarded through small, coherent, and purposeful general education courses taught by full-time faculty members.
- A gateway sequence such as Transformative Texts I and II not only integrates the liberal arts in all degree programs, but it also nourishes

young minds via the best writing the world offers and immerses students in the arts.

- Students need faculty mentors, scholar-teachers who understand the stresses of college life and the resources available at the institution.
- Students learn best when they have agency over the course material. There is no reason the humanities cannot be taught via active and problem-based learning.

Notes

1. Approximately 800 students per year choose to complete the Cornerstone certificate, with 150 to 200 graduating each spring. In 2017, Purdue's CLA launched "Degree in 3," allowing undergraduates to choose more than 20 liberal arts degree programs that they could complete in a cost-effective 3 years. In 2018, "Degree+" was introduced, which offers students a streamlined way to complete a liberal arts degree in addition to their primary degree program.

2. In 2021–22, the college hired 42 faculty members: 29 were tenure-track and 13 were clinical. In 2022–23, the CLA hired 35 new faculty; 26 were tenure-track and 9 were clinical.

3. In 2016, the undergraduate population at Purdue was 30,043 and growing. It is currently 39,170. The percentage increase from 2016 to 2023 is 30.4 percent.

4. In addition to tenure-track faculty, we began employing full-time "teaching" or "clinical" faculty in 2018. We initially hired three highly experienced and award-winning faculty members who had previously taught at a local liberal arts college that closed in 2017. At Purdue, teaching faculty enjoy the same benefits as the tenure-track faculty, but their promotion is based on teaching excellence, service, and the pedagogy of teaching and learning rather than scholarship.

5. Gary R. Bertoline, currently a Distinguished Professor of Engineering Technology and Computer and Information Technology, was dean of the Purdue Polytechnic Institute from 2011 to 2021.

6. The total amount of funding from the Teagle Foundation between 2017 and 2019 was \$2,500.

7. In the first two years, stipends were paid to the faculty by the Dean's Office; starting in 2018, they were paid through our Teagle grant. In 2019, Dean Reingold decided that all new faculty hires, both teaching and tenure-track, would teach halftime in Cornerstone. This allowed us to scale up the program rapidly. This innovation was noted in the Boyer 2030 Commission report (2022, p. 54).

8. Currently, there are 104 faculty participating in Cornerstone.

9. Purdue Convocations, Krannert School of Management, Film and Video Studies, and the Center for Brain-Inspired Computing.

10. The pandemic hit live theater particularly hard. Starting in the fall of 2020 and through the following year, all theatrical productions were livestreamed. The chair of the theater department told me that the sale of tickets to Cornerstone students for *Mother Courage and Her Children* in the spring of 2021 was the life preserver that the department needed to plan next year's season.

11. In one recent variation on this assignment, the instructor had the students read More's *Utopia*, Voltaire's *Candide* (the El Dorado sequence is utopian), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. Working in teams, students had to create advertisement videos for their utopias. Many of these videos are still available on YouTube. My personal favorite is "An Invitation to the Utopia of Yetemari Geneti" (<https://youtu.be/WGryaaa4RO4>), but also see "Welcome to Elysium Eternis" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIHlxXBMQf8>); and "Recruitment for The Bandla Space Station," which students named in honor of Purdue's 26th astronaut, Sirisha Bandla (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_LpxXy-6Vs).

12. Since the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, Cornerstone has been proactive, offering guidelines and workshops to faculty on handling this new technology. Large language models are changing how we teach and how students learn. General education programs must confront and adapt to this new frontier.

13. In 2017, when Cornerstone was launched, the CLA taught 96,000 credit hours; in 2022, it taught 103,002. The number of majors and minors in our college has also risen.

14. Cornerstone for Business offers all entering business students a tailored sequence of Transformative Texts with readings in political economy taught by political science and philosophy faculty. Readings include works by Adam Smith, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and John Maynard Keynes, among others.

15. Email with permission from Jeff Priso (December 4, 2021); email with permission from a student wishing to remain anonymous (September 22, 2023).

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General Education for World Readiness and the Whole Student at the University of Texas at Austin

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The story of general education reform at the University of Texas at Austin is no longer a new one. It began over twenty years ago, long before the Boyer 2030 Commission began *its* work. Yet it is fitting for a volume centered on the Boyer 2030 report to tell this story because it is, in many ways, a story bookended by the two Boyer Commission reports. It is therefore also a story about the changes in undergraduate education over the past twenty-five years.

In 2002, Larry R. Faulkner, then-president of the University of Texas at Austin (UT), convened the Commission of 125 (hereafter referred to as the Commission), a group of citizens charged with expressing a vision for how the university could best serve Texas and society over the next twenty-five years. To the surprise of university leaders, one of the two strategic initiatives called for in the Commission's report was to "develop a new undergraduate core curriculum to better prepare students for lives of accomplishment" (Commission of 125, 2004, 14). The Commission used language that aligns with the Boyer 2030 report's (2022) provocation to prioritize "world readiness for all": "The modern world presents challenges that our graduates must be prepared to meet. In particular, they must learn to achieve in a world made smaller by technology and even more complex by the importance of different cultures and peoples" (p. 15). The Commission regretted that "the current curriculum resembles little more than a vast à la carte menu" and called for a "well-conceived plan