Old Wine in New Bottles:
Liberal Education and the 4-Year Curriculum in Hong Kong

GE Seminar at Hong Kong Baptist University

Bobby Fong

18 September 2013

I want to speak to you this morning from three vantage points. I come to you, first, as a colleague, a member of the academy for 35 years as a professor, academic dean, and president. Second, I offer my remarks in the spirit of service as a Chinese-American to the people of my parents, who emigrated from Zhongshan in Guangdong province and stayed in Hong Kong before making their way to the United States. Third, I speak as one whose calling to teach is rooted in a Christian sense of vocation, and when we invoke the ideas of liberal learning, I believe we are talking not simply about the development of the intellect but also about the formation of character, what Hong Kong Baptist calls "Whole Person Education."

We live in interesting times. In the United States, there is trepidation that our students are falling behind the youth of other countries in reading, math, and science; that the proportion of the population with a college degree is declining; that employers are dissatisfied with the ability of college graduates to meet the demands of a modern workforce; and that college, which in America is increasingly paid for by individual families rather than the government, is unaffordable and inaccessible to the economically-disadvantaged. The response has been frantic calls for more access to practical degree programs leading to productive careers in less time at less cost, including three-year baccalaureates, online learning, and certificates based on competence rather than course credits.

At the same time, China has invested heavily in tertiary education in order to serve more students and to create more workers for a rapidly-developing knowledge-based economy. New campuses are being built. However, dissatisfaction has grown with regard to the products of the Chinese educational system. Graduates master specific bodies of knowledge relevant to their work, but they are oftentimes unable to adapt that knowledge to new situations or to be innovative in creating new solutions to problems. They don't know how to think critically. Chinese educators are looking increasingly to American models of education for alternative pathways. Hong Kong has transitioned from a three-year baccalaureate to a four-year program in order to make room for more general education. In particular, the Chinese are interested in liberal learning at a time when Americans are focusing increasingly on career preparation.

This past month, President Obama unveiled proposals to tie federal funding for college to a scorecard that awards increased graduation rates, evidence of alumni going on to well-paying jobs and advanced degrees, more access to the economically-disadvantaged, and innovative ways in which costs are dramatically cut. The goal is to have students spend less time in college and get certified for careers. The means include three-year baccalaureates and streamlining the curriculum via scalable online learning and disruptive technology.

In a column this winter entitled "Revolution Hits the Universities," Thomas Friedman declared his hope in the reimagining of higher education through the proliferation of massive open online courses (or MOOCs).[1] MOOCs and other emergent online technologies have the potential to make education accessible and affordable on an unprecedented scale. Writes Friedman, "I can see a day soon where you'll create your own college degree by taking the best online courses from the best professors from around the world . . . paying only the nominal fee

[1] Thomas L. Friedman, "Revolution Hits the Universities," *New York Times*, 26 January 2013.

for the certificates of completion. It will change teaching, learning and the pathway to employment." Higher learning need no longer be coincident with physical campuses, and an education can be comprised of the aggregation of credits ranging from online to classroom courses, certification for life and work experience, and completion based on competency exams.

The prospect is the ultimate democratization of higher education, where learning is freed from constrictions of locale and schedule, available at little or no cost, and organized about the individual's interests and needs. Well and good, but general education has dropped out of the mix.

It is ironic that at a time when my colleagues in Hong Kong are making room for liberal learning, American academics are fighting to maintain standards for general education. Carol Schneider, President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, has described current proposals for reforming higher education in the United States as "learning-free zones," where the focus on college completion and certification neglects issues of quality learning.

For this reason, I salute your efforts to make liberal learning an expectation for your students. I firmly believe that you are firmly on the right road to enhancing the educational experience of your graduates. In the remainder of my talk, let me describe why and how such an education is essential.

First, knowledge transmission and subject matter mastery are important components of education, but they are not the whole of education. Yet too often it is knowledge transmission that underlies what is sought by those who focus on career preparation, and it is subject mastery that is assessed in order to gain academic credit. In one sense, this is nothing new: a hoary image of the academy is that of the "sage on the stage" passing on what is known to another generation of learners, and exams are occasions for regurgitating what was said by the professor.

However, it was also dissatisfaction with this model of learning that led to recurrent reforms in higher education. What concerns me is the implicit re-ascendance of this model as the essence of higher learning. Higher education is too frequently equated with knowledge transmission and acquisition because such an attenuated vision of what constitutes learning seems so readily achievable.

I submit that those of us gathered here today should be committed to a more expansive vision of what comprises higher learning. Imbedded in this more robust vision are reasons why a coherent approach to general education is needful. For fifteen years, I have been on the board of directors of the Association of American Colleges & Universities, which famously has enunciated four essential learning outcomes that should characterize college study.[2] Let me briefly rehearse the four. They include, first, study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts. Subject matter knowledge is important. But what we seek for our students is not only comprehension of a subject but also a sense of how different disciplines validate knowledge. One desired outcome of higher education is that students distinguish different ways of knowing. Creating knowledge in the sciences is different from creating meaning in literature; there are different methodologies for verifying insights in physics as opposed to psychology. Knowledge is not static, and to truly understand a subject is to understand the conditions under which our apprehension is modified by new discoveries and new interpretations. It is not sufficient only to master the current state of knowledge in the field.

Moreover, if college is preparation for career and life, knowing is not enough. A second essential learning outcome is that students need to be able to integrate and apply learning across areas of study to new settings and complex problems. Integral to this outcome is coherence in the

[2] Association of American Colleges & Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century* (AAC&U, 2007), 12.

curriculum: how may learning across courses, within and beyond the major, and in general education, link up into a comprehensive sense of the world? Accumulating courses and credits does not guarantee coherence. Packets of knowledge attained by fulfillment of discrete course requirements are not equivalent to a curriculum.

Such integration and application are made possible by a third essential learning outcome: the development of intellectual and practical skills, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, and capacities for teamwork and problem solving. These skills are developed in the course of mastering and demonstrating knowledge, but they also need to be cultivated directly as capacities in themselves, not simply as instruments for learning. For example, writing is not only a means of expressing what we know; the process of composition is arduous because it is a means of discovering what we think. Moreover, these skills often are fostered in situations beyond the classroom: the capacities for teamwork and problem solving, for example, may be most vividly realized in an internship or community service project. In the aggregate, these intellectual and practical skills are the keys to lifelong learning, and in a world where one-third of college graduates will work at jobs that don't yet exist, they ultimately prove essential to one's personal and professional re-creation.

The fourth essential learning outcome is the inculcation of personal and social responsibility. Higher education should have a civic dimension, and at its fullest the academy educates not simply the intellect but the whole person for participation in society and a global environment. It fosters community engagement, intercultural competence, ethical reasoning, and the capacity for lifelong learning. There is a social end to higher education: the rehearsal of students to live in community.

I submit that in the name of liberal education, we must seek to realize all four essential learning outcomes for our students, and that our general education programs are the means to doing so. In our desire to prepare them for careers, in the name of realizing greater access, and affordability, let us not diminish what we expect students to learn in college. Knowledge attainment is a necessary but not sufficient end of higher education.

Second, there is already considerable criticism, exemplified in America by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift*, that current college graduates demonstrate insufficient breadth and depth of learning and that they are ill-equipped to engage in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication.[3]

Academically Adrift identifies students as being deficient in some of the essential learning outcomes I just enumerated. Moreover, in a series of employer surveys undertaken by Hart Research Associates on behalf of AAC&U, employers were asked what learning outcomes should receive more emphasis in college.[4] Eight-two percent cited critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills; 81% the ability to analyze and solve complex problems; 80% cited the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing; and 78% the ability to apply knowledge and skills in real world settings. There is a convergence of thought among AAC&U, employers, and the authors of *Academically Adrift* as to what colleges graduates ought to know and be able to do.

There is also a clear sense that certain pedagogies best conduce to the realization of the essential learning outcomes. Drawing from work with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), George Kuh identified ten teaching and learning strategies that he

[3] Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (University of Chicago Press, 2011).*
[4] Hart Research Associates, *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* (10 April 2013), 8.

denominated high-impact educational practices.[5] They include 1) first-year seminars and experiences, 2) common intellectual experiences, 3) learning communities, 4) writing-intensive courses, 5) undergraduate research, 6) collaborative assignments and projects, 7) diversity and global learning, 8) service learning and community-based learning, 9) internships, and 10) capstone courses and projects. When done well, whether in the major, in general education, in special programs, or in the co-curriculum, they have been shown to have substantial educational benefits, and notably for traditionally underserved students.[6] In turn, the Hart employer survey found that 79% of respondents endorsed capstone projects that demonstrates both depth of knowledge and analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills; 78% found value in internships or community-based and service learning; and 74% wanted graduates to be able to conduct research collaboratively with peers.[7]

Over my three decades in the academy, I have seen the lecturer model complemented with a rich variety of pedagogies. Instructors intersperse exposition with discussion; more frequent papers and quizzes have succeeded the traditional midterm, research paper, and final; students do collaborative projects as well as individual presentations; classroom activities lead to independent research and internships. Pursuing these strategies have resulted in the realization of essential learning outcomes for graduates who are prepared to do well for themselves, their employers, and their communities.

High-impact practices that foster deep learning characteristically emphasize recurrent interactions among students and between instructors and students. They typically require frequent assignments and prompt feedback. They focus on teaching the arts of inquiry, analysis,

[5] George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (AAC&U, 2008).
[6] *An Introduction to LEAP: Liberal Education & America's Promise, Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College* (AAC&U, n.d.), 5.
[7] Hart 10.

and problem-solving. To the extent that educational reforms don't pursue the panoply of essential learning outcomes and high-impact practices I've described, they are not answers for the criticism that too many traditional college graduates already are ill-prepared. The legitimacy of educational curricula ultimately must be tied to the same criterion by which traditional colleges and universities should be adjudged: what is the quality of the learning that takes place?

We surely will see future models of blended education that include MOOCs and other online innovations combined with face-to-face interaction. Recently I asked a chemistry professor at Ursinus whether he could foresee using a MOOC presentation in one of his courses. Yes, he could, but he also thought that virtual could not substitute for a real-life chemistry lab. I asked why a virtual lab could not guide students to the appropriate learning. He replied, "Because there are many reasons why a lab experiment can fail, including an insufficiently cleaned beaker with residue that contaminates the results." There is a real-world serendipity at play that leads to learning. In that vein, for the moment it is difficult for me to imagine the efficacy of a purely online education for preparing teachers and nurses, dancers and engineers. Even for liberal arts majors, there are high-impact learning experiences that require face-to-face interactions and out-of-class experiences. In an Eduventures reply to the Thomas Friedman column which I referenced at the beginning of my talk, Melanie Andrich notes, "MOOCs will evolve undoubtedly beyond what we can anticipate. But we are creating potential harmful confusion by conflating MOOCs, which function most elegantly as just-in-time learning modules and lifelong learning supplements, with an articulated course pathway and progression scaffolded by co-curricular learning resources."[8] Higher learning still needs thoughtfully-structured curricula buttressed by resources beyond the classroom.

[8] Melanie Andrich, "MOOCs and the Platypus Problem," *EV Perspectives*, (39: January 2013).

What we structure, however, must be more than intellectual education. Liberal learning in America originated in the colonial colleges which were established to educate clergy and civil magistrates. Until the twentieth century, most liberal arts colleges had religious affiliations, and it was not unusual that all seniors were required to take a course in moral philosophy taught by the president. I believe that there is still a need, as you develop a program of general education, for faculty to consider the ends of what they are trying to achieve in their students. At Ursinus College, we put it this way:

> Judgment is essential for every aspect of a well-lived life. We believe that it is possible to learn to make better judgments and choices. We may not be able to anticipate what technical skills our graduates will need ten years from now. We do know that they will need to think well and hard about questions for which there are no pat answers and to benefit from the knowledge and experience of others as they do so.
>
> To exercise and act on judgment, we must be able to understand and assess competing ideas. We must be able to revise long-held views and oppose conventional wisdom when given good reasons to do so. We must be able to live with uncertainty and ambiguity and to resist easy answers. Consequently, we need courage to re-examine cherished beliefs, a commitment to work with others with whom we disagree, persistence and discipline to work through difficult problems, and intellectual curiosity so that judgment is a satisfying pursuit.[9]

Our curriculum is designed to create opportunities for all students to reflect on the values and perspectives whereby they make judgments and to provide occasions whereby they practice judgment. This extends to the residential life of the campus and to off-campus internships and experiences.

It is notable that in the Hart employer survey, 93% of respondents agreed that the capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems was more important than the undergraduate major; and 96% put a premium on ethical judgment and integrity.[10]

[9] *Transformative Education: A Strategic Plan for Ursinus College* (June 2012), 3.
[10] Hart, 4, 7.

Our students need to be equipped for living in a world where moral decisions must be made. And in living, and in choosing, character counts. It is the rudder that determines whether knowledge, skills, vocational expertise, and networks of influence will be used for good or ill. How one earns a living should be an extension of values that illumine one's life, and there should be continuity between personal values and societal engagement. Our graduates should be people who honor and follow through on their word, who play by the rules but also know and respect the processes, political and social, by which they can change rules they deem unfair. They should have the integrity to say "No" to practices that mislead and injure others, to have the moral compassion and empathy to address the misfortunes of others as if they were their own.

In reflecting on the narrowing and attenuation of what counts for higher learning, I've also discussed the elements of what counts as a more robust model of liberal education, rooted in essential learning outcomes and high-impact practices. It is within this larger frame that our deliberations on general education must be embedded. At a time when credentialing for careers threatens to make afterthoughts of general education, we must do general education today in a more thoughtful and comprehensive way than ever. Let me proceed now to describe six characteristics of a strong general education program that embodies best practices. I will refer to examples from institutions with which I'm best acquainted, but they are illustrative rather than unique.

First, I believe that general education at a university must be rooted in a coherent curricular vision rather than a checklist of credits. Faculty must do the hard work of discerning what they believe that all students at their institution should be able to know and do. Such knowledge and competencies should determine the structure of requirements, not advocacy for departmental turf. An agreed-upon set of common requirements should span majors,

programs, and even individual colleges within a university. At Butler University, the general education program was the same for all 4,100 undergraduates, whether they were in the College of Business, Communication, Education, Health Sciences, Performing Arts, or Liberal Arts and Sciences. Implicit in such a general education program is that the faculty has formulated a common vision of an educated person. Faculty members are not only representatives of disciplinary expertise; they are educators. They teach not only their subjects; they teach students. And the curriculum, particularly in general education, is the collective autobiography of the faculty, an expression of what the institution declares important for their graduates to have mastered.

Second, there also ought to be continuities between general education in the first two years of undergraduate work and the latter two years. Too often in American institutions, general education is viewed as something to be "gotten out of the way" in the first two years before a student proceeds to deep learning in the major. By contrast, I urge you, for example, to consider linking first-year seminars and experiences with senior year capstone courses and projects in the major. Let explorations of topics and issues in first-year general education courses be reprised as part of a senior year course in each department or in a general education capstone requirement. Such bookending enables students to return to objects of reflection in the first-year and think about how their understandings and perspectives have matured.

Third, look for opportunities to take general education beyond the classroom. Ursinus College has a two-semester common syllabus course required of all first-years entitled the Common Intellectual Experience, or CIE. Taught by faculty from all academic disciplines, it rehearses three perennial questions: What does it mean to be human? How should we live our lives? What is the universe and how do we fit into it? Students and faculty grapple with texts

that have addressed these questions and use the readings as lenses to bring their own lives into focus. This common intellectual experience spawns several kinds of learning communities at the College. The most basic is the solidarity among members of the first-year class, who in discussions in and out of class have common reference points that serve them throughout their time at Ursinus. The texts and lessons of CIE become a cultural shorthand for how they might understand and conduct their lives. This common cultural base is reinforced by the fact that 95% of our students live on campus, and all first-years are housed together. In 2012, the College established a CIE Fellows program, where upperclass students work with residential assistants to promote interchange and activities in the first-year houses. Issues of civil disagreement and community, of personal freedom and social responsibility, are linked with the vicissitudes of learning how to live together. There is continuity between academic study and student life, between individual learning and the rehearsal of community.

Student learning communities are paralleled by the CIE faculty learning community. Each first-time instructor is partnered with two veteran instructors to form a triad for support. In addition, the CIE staff meets weekly to examine the text being studied. The constant reconsideration of texts and guiding questions has kept the course vital. Because of the faculty-wide commitment to the Common Intellectual Experience, Ursinus professors are accustomed to crossing disciplinary boundaries and supporting students as they link learning across courses into a comprehensive sense of the world. This has had two benefits: first, faculty are oriented to student achievement, and potentially onerous discussions of curricular revision, outcome assessment, and supervision of experiential education are at least entertained with cautious openness to the degree that they are justified as enhancing student achievement. Second, as a small college, Ursinus is adjusting to advances in knowledge by becoming more interdisciplinary and supple in its approach to majors and programs. In no small way, the familiarity and trust

engendered by working with colleagues across departments has enabled faculty members to cooperate with one another on curriculum reform and successful grants that call for integration, such as science and public policy or promoting student diversity in STEM disciplines.

Fourth, higher education can no longer be an "ivory tower" removed from the "real world." If we aspire to prepare students to be contributing citizens and leaders in a global society, there needs to be an interpenetration of town and gown, of classroom and applied learning. Students should be familiar with and to the employers, NGO's, and civic organizations in the area. Our local communities should be laboratories for research, collaborative assignments, service learning, and internships. At Butler, the College of Business required two faculty- and employer-supervised internships as a condition for graduation. At Ursinus, each student is required to do an Independent Learning Experience or ILE, whether an internship, research experience, study abroad, or student teaching. Many students do more than one ILE, whether multiple internships or semesters in a lab. Others seek to combine internships, research, or student teaching with study abroad.

Fifth, as high-impact practices extend teaching and learning beyond the classroom, the importance of internship coordinators, international study advisors, civic engagement directors, and employers come to the fore. Faculty find themselves partnering with student affairs professionals, community organizers, and workplace supervisors in structuring experiences and assessments for students. Such efforts call for more coherence and coordination rather than less. Ironically, what expedites such coordination and recordkeeping is emergent technology. Students build e-portfolios of their experiences in college. Advisors can access databases and communicate with each other on line. Such technology supports the creation of a more

comprehensive narrative of student achievement, where the grade transcript is only a part of the record of accomplishment.

And sixth, robust, coordinated learning in and beyond the classroom will also enable institutions to set graduation requirements not only by courses taken but also by designating activities and competencies. Learning doesn't have to be measured by seat time. At Wagner College, the faculty is currently working to make a portion of the graduation requirements competency-based, developing, for example, rubrics to assess civic engagement experiences. At Ursinus, as previously mentioned, the Independent Learning Experience requires an internship, research experience, study abroad, or student teaching, activities that are separate from formal course requirements. At the same time, these activities and assessments are part of a larger vision of what constitutes essential student learning, not simply alternative pathways to give credit for the experience in lieu of taking courses.

Let me reiterate the six characteristics of a general education program devoted to the essential learning outcomes and high-impact educational practices. It should

1) Be founded on a coherent curricular vision of what students should know and do;
2) Create continuity between general education and advanced work;
3) Extend education beyond the classroom to on-campus learning communities and off-campus experiences;
4) Involve administrators, staff, and employers in the coordination and assessment of learning;
5) Use technology to support advising and to create student e-portfolios that offer fuller accounts of student achievement;

6) Construct graduation requirements that include assessment and credit for competencies and activities as well as courses.

My examples have been local, and necessarily so. For my final point, I want to make a brief for place-based learning. I recently received a thoughtful email from an Ursinus alumnus who has permitted employees to work on line from home. He observes that of late many prefer to come into the office. He concludes, "Technology has given us a plethora of opportunity for home based work but most of us want socialization that we find in the workplace. For most employees the traditional workplace in our knowledge based economy is preferred like a place based campus by students."

A recent *New York Times* op-ed cited studies that community college students enrolled in online courses were more likely to withdraw or fail, and less likely to earn degrees or transfer to four-year colleges, than those in traditional classes.[11] Perhaps students taking online courses had more life challenges that precluded their enrolling in traditional classes, but I wonder about the role that community support from teachers and peers plays in persistence in courses and in degree completion.

We are embodied human beings. We cannot be human in general: we express our humanity in particular culturally-mediated ways. Language is a quintessential human capacity, but no one speaks "Language," we speak English, or Chinese, or Swahili. So too, I think, with community. Healthy communities may have characteristics in common, but the building of community is a local venture.

Although we traditionally grade each student individually, increasingly we know that learning is a communal activity. In the academy, we teach in community because no one of us in

[11] "The Trouble With Online College," *The New York Times,* 18 February 2013.

pedagogical style, temperament, or time of life, can be successful in teaching every student. My expectation is that the students I fail, my colleagues can uplift, and the students they may be unable to reach, I may touch. In turn, we increasingly ask our students to do group work because the nature of modern professions and research depends on individuals of diverse perspectives and expertise contributing their skills to a common project. We know that students can teach one another, and they teach us.

Students need to be known by name and face. They need to rehearse the stories of their lives in community. Students go to college at a period of their lives in which they change at a greater rate than any comparable period except infancy. College can be a second home, an *alma mater* where they find or develop their best selves. For the ultimate transformation we seek is what occurs in the lives of our students. May a Hong Kong Baptist University education engender in its students not only habits of mind but also, in de Tocqueville's famous phrase, habits of the heart which will enable them not only to make a living but also to make lives that are personally fulfilling precisely because they are implicated in the well-being of others. May you equip your students in knowledge, in skill, in character, and in hope to work to make a brighter future, to make a world more just, more tolerant, more compassionate, more inclusive than the world in which they were born. May you in these tumultuous times hold on to this vision and earnestly work to make it real.