

Educating Students for the World of the Future “Blue Sky” Conversation – May 30, 2007

Present: Leslie Collins, Al Crumbliss, Tom Ferraro, Peter Haff, Peter Lange (convener), Lynne O'Brien, Gautham Pandyan, Louise Roth, Judith Ruderman, Suzanne Shanahan, Paul Slattery

The second and equally stimulating “blue sky” conversation among students (graduate and undergraduate), faculty (Pratt, Arts & Sciences, and Nicholas) and administrators took off from both the draft case statement and the summary of last week’s meeting. Several ideas were reinforced and new emphases added. This summary of the discussion will supplement the case statement¹ and the document produced after the May 25th meeting.

The undergraduate focus of the conversation. Like the discussion on May 25, this one was undergraduate-centric. This may be a function of the persons assembled around the table and/or the more compelling need to address issues of undergraduate education in the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). The verdict is still out on this question. The students asked that a third conversation be held, with students only (graduate, professional, and undergraduate), and the hope is that this will happen next week.

What skills, attributes, and experiences do we need to facilitate for the world of the future? On May 25th, the attributes mentioned as being crucial for the future were leadership, entrepreneurialism, innovation, and openness. Other (sometimes related) qualities were added on May 30th: among them, creativity, versatility, risk-taking, judgment, perspective, reflection, introspection. Because we do not know exactly what the future holds, our students need to acquire the skills that might not even be apparent now—thus, we need to foster “learning how to learn.” In consideration of how to do this, we need to keep in mind what is actually core and what is a mere “bell and whistle.”

The word “balance” was brought into the conversation in different ways from its typical use when referring to Duke undergraduates: instead of a balance between curricular and co-curricular (as in “work hard, play hard”), the suggestion was made that our students need to slow down, to stop engaging in a frenzy of co-curricular activities, and instead to balance the mastery of a subject with the willingness to entertain the new; the analytic with the synthetic; their sense of personal importance with their place in the larger world(s); thinking with doing; respect with judgment; working by oneself with working in teams.

Learning how to work with and learn from diverse peoples—diversity defined in socio-economic, intellectual, national terms, among others—is a critical component of the educational experience. This is more than a question of mere “interaction”; rather, it is a matter of encountering ideas that cause us to rethink our own (a quality similar to that of “openness,” mentioned by the May 25th group), which can lead to a change of ideas or a reaffirmation of them. What aspects of Duke encourage such meaningful encounters and what are the obstacles that the University (or society) puts in their path? Can such encounters be imposed from the top down, for example through housing

¹ The case statement, draft #4, remains a useful corollary to this document as to the summary of the May 25th “blue sky” conversation and should be reviewed in tandem with them.

policies? How does one balance the need for comfort with the necessity for encountering different people and ideas? Can living and learning with others different from ourselves (in the classroom and out) be both stimulating/enlarging *and* safe?

Revisiting the meaning and content of “the liberal arts. The characteristics of a liberal arts education are important but they are not necessarily the same characteristics that defined the term in earlier ages. Team work, for example, was not hitherto considered to play an integral role, nor what we call “experiential” learning. What are the defining characteristics of a “liberal” education in the 21st century? What is the role for the past—and for books themselves—in this education? What is the role for direct experience (in its many forms)? What aspects of education are timeless and what dated? Where should our emphases lie?

Revisiting the meaning of “intellectualism.” Are many Duke undergraduates anti-intellectual? Is it possible that the meaning of the term “intellectual” has changed and they are intellectual in different ways? Some would call them “fiercely intelligent”—what does that mean? What “should” it mean? What role does “pre-professionalism” play in our thinking about these questions? How “pre-professional” can we say our undergraduates really are when Teach for America is their largest employer, and when a large percentage of these students changes career paths within five years of graduation?

What changes do we need for the curriculum/a? Rethinking the majors. Stepping back from, and reevaluating, the majors is a good idea at this juncture. Are there outdated elements and new elements we should be considering? How can we make the majors more “relevant” in the best sense? If we can define what our students need in order to be prepared for their futures as citizens and workers (and family members), how would we go about developing these qualities and abilities in the classroom? It is important for us to articulate these desired outcomes in such a way that each department can relate to the overall rubric and adapt itself accordingly.

What salient issues about teamwork inform pedagogy? How can the faculty incorporate collaboration in their syllabi and pedagogy? This includes finding a way to allow students to team with others in research projects instead of slotting them handily into the faculty member’s ongoing research interests. What is the balance between traditional and experiential education? In Pratt, for example, the professional accrediting body (ABET) dictates certain aspects of the engineering education that limit the amount of experiential experiences; yet Pratt students want to do, to build. How to resolve this dilemma?

Do structural elements impede change? Do we encourage a “local” perspective by the way we feature sports or Greek life, or even by the way that international graduate students often remain in their laboratory silos? (Do we over-compartmentalize graduate students from undergraduates?) Have we made the most of internationalization? Could interdisciplinarity be better fostered if departmental structures were more fluid? How can we take the focus away from the customary (and often self-serving) and turn our structures “inside out”?