

Community College Is the Future of Liberal Education

It's time to support the humanities there.

By [Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr.](#)

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Fifteen years ago, a member of my family expressed some surprise when I began teaching at Austin Community College, in Texas, after completing a degree in political philosophy. “Community college? Isn’t that for electricians and nurses?” he asked, incredulously. “They read Plato there?”

This perception that community colleges are more oriented toward the trades than the liberal arts is still common, but it’s also outdated and false. The primary function of community colleges in our society has been steadily shifting away from technical and pre-professional education and toward liberal education for some time now. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the number of students who completed associate degrees in the liberal arts and humanities at community colleges has reliably [increased](#) by about 4.3 percent each year from 1987 to 2018. Degrees in vocational and professional fields actually declined during this period, while degrees requiring a significant number of courses in the humanities increased by 70 percent. As students are increasingly losing access to liberal-education courses and programs at private and state institutions, the opposite seems to be happening at community colleges.

The mission in practice of community colleges today is not what it was a generation ago. According to enrollment trends and degree completion, that mission, now and for the foreseeable future, has a lot to do with liberal education. In well-designed lower-division humanities and liberal-arts courses, community-college students talk about common human values and concerns, across their personal and principled differences. There, they begin to build a shared sense of being human together, as they recognize the complexity of our moral, political, and social lives.

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These experiences are made more powerful by the wide diversity of students who enroll at community colleges. While it’s troubling to [read](#) that the humanities are in peril at many colleges across the nation, it’s heartening to see the opposite happening at many community colleges. Community college may in fact be the future of liberal education — and vice versa.

Across the country, community-college faculty members are helping to shape that future. At Austin Community College, where I’ve taught government and humanities for about 15 years, faculty members founded the Great Questions program in 2017. Nearly 4,000 students completed a common introductory humanities curriculum in our [Great Questions Seminar](#), which emphasizes the discussion-

based study of literary works like Homer's *Odyssey* and religious texts like the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, and the Rig Veda. In this class, students wrestle with fundamental human questions and learn to have productive [conversations](#) about them with their peers. Faculty designed the curriculum as well as the six-week onboarding seminar for new members who'd like to teach the class, which 125 of them have completed in the last five years. Additionally, nearly 3,000 students completed faculty-redesigned general-education courses in the [Great Questions Journey](#), organized around questions like, "What is justice?" or "Is there a supreme being or beings?" This year, [The Great Questions Foundation](#), a nonprofit I founded and lead, will help faculty from a number of institutions work together to reimagine general education at community colleges in a [Faculty Fellowship](#) program.

Programs with similar goals and outcomes, like [Core Books](#) at four New York City community colleges, or [Cornerstone](#) projects at institutions like [Linn-Benton Community College](#), in rural Oregon, and [Onondaga Community College](#), in Syracuse, N.Y., began with funding from the [Teagle Foundation](#), which prioritizes faculty-led programs in the projects they support. Each year, these programs collectively offer thousands of community-college students an opportunity to wrestle with life's most important questions together and to benefit from the transformative experience of a liberal education.

While there is a great opportunity for private philanthropy to make a difference at community colleges, the Teagle Foundation is one of the few private grant makers funding liberal-education programs at these institutions, making this increasingly important funding area one that's often overlooked. In fact, supporting liberal-education programs at community colleges may have a greater impact in areas of focus for private philanthropy, such as civil discourse and cultural literacy, than funding for similar programs at wealthy private institutions attended by the very privileged few.

A notable exception is the generous \$10-million gift from the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation to Cuyahoga Community College in 2016, which established a [humanities center](#) supporting faculty scholarship, public events, and student engagement. The heart of the center is the Mandel Scholars Academy. According to Matthew Jordan, dean and chair of the humanities, the academy's purpose is to "cultivate leaders for northeast Ohio who have thought broadly and deeply about the human experience." The academy welcomes over a hundred Mandel Scholars each year, offering them tuition scholarships, leadership-development programs, and opportunities for international study and travel. Other philanthropic organizations should follow the lead of the Mandel Foundation and support humanities programs at community colleges, where liberal education may better serve the public good if bolstered by much-needed private support.

Elsewhere, there are other exciting developments. Anne Arundel Community College, in Maryland, is in the process of developing a Center for Liberal Arts Work on their own. This faculty-led program will help infuse the values of liberal education in discussion-based iterations of courses that meet general-education requirements, and which are marked as such, making it easy for students to find them when registering for courses. According to its directors, Candice Hill and Timothy May, the CLAW will promote, "seminar-style instruction, and common questions and texts as democratizing forces for students and the community." This effort grew out of a previous [collaboration](#) between AACC and [St. John's College](#), in Annapolis, Md., funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Over three consecutive summers, the faculty at St. John's College led two-week seminars for AACC faculty members where they learned how to integrate primary sources in existing community-college courses, and how to

teach using seminar-style instruction. Additionally, the program provided a pathway via a [scholarship](#) opportunity for AACC students who want to explore liberal education more deeply to matriculate at St. John's.

As impressive as these programs are, they are, unfortunately, still the exception rather than the rule at community colleges. At most community colleges, "a liberal-arts degree usually means a degree in 'general studies,'" Michael Jacobs, dean of humanities and social sciences at Monroe Community College, in Rochester, N.Y., pointed out to me. "And these can range from well-designed programs with a balanced curricular emphasis on the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences to a Wild West, choose-your-own-adventure with upwards of 30 open elective credits and no obligation to take anything close to a humanities course beyond ENG-101."

At most community colleges, the tendency is more toward the latter. In a [study](#) on general-education programs at community colleges, the education researchers Terry O'Banion and Cindy Miles found that a student's experience in general education rarely matches the strong and commendable claims the vast majority of institutions make about them. For example, while an institution may say that their general-education program "provides a foundation in the knowledge and skills needed to develop a life of personal fulfillment and contribution to society," many students would encounter that it's "a wild smorgasbord" of over 100 courses, from which they must select about a dozen to be recognized as "college educated." It's a rare college freshman who is clear about which courses to take and in what sequence, and many community colleges don't do enough to help their students figure it out. While more students than ever are completing their general-education requirements at community colleges, the value of that experience for many is debatable, and it provides a liberal education worthy of the name for far too few.

This is important, and not only for the [4.7 million](#) students who enroll at community colleges each year. Many students begin at community colleges and then transfer to state or private institutions. About half of all four-year-degree recipients, according to a study conducted by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, will [complete](#) at least some of their course work at community colleges. For transfer students studying subjects like computer science, business, or health care, community-college coursework is where they are most likely to encounter the Dialogues of Plato or the novels of Toni Morrison. There will be little time for that in the discipline-specific courses they'll need to take to fulfill their major requirements at their new institution.

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An investment in liberal education at community colleges is thus an investment in the health of liberal education writ large. And there is much work to be done. While it's heartening to see the many innovative and successful efforts to provide a liberal education to the ever-growing number of community-colleges students, a national collaborative effort is required to make those opportunities more ubiquitous and accessible across the community-college landscape. The problem to tackle is not just one of course selection and sequencing, but also of pedagogy. Coherently selected and sequenced

lecture-based courses that center textbook learning, multiple-choice assessments, and offer little opportunity for discussion are not likely to yield the personal and social benefits of liberal education. We need both a curricular and pedagogical revolution, which top-down mandates are unlikely to bring about.

One thing that is abundantly clear from the many successful liberal-education programs at community colleges today is the importance of leadership from faculty and academically oriented instructional deans. Community colleges are the future of liberal education, and we need faculty leaders and philanthropists to help institutions make that education meaningful for more of our students.

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