

Learning through Instruction Subcommittee Final Report

Submitted by:

Maeve Howett, Clinical Associate Professor, Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing
Kim Loudermilk, Senior Lecturer and Director, Program in American Studies,
Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts

Introduction

The Learning through Instruction subcommittee has developed three concrete recommendations for infusing the liberal arts throughout the University and turning Emory University into a true liberal-arts research university. Our process for developing these recommendations was multi-layered. We began with two full-group meetings in the fall semester. At the first meeting, we discussed a number of structural barriers that prevent Emory from reaching its full potential as a true liberal arts research university. In order to eliminate these barriers, the University should consider:

- Allowing faculty to teach across units
- Allowing students to enroll in courses across units
- Coordinating academic calendars
- Offering flexible types of courses
 - Variable credit
 - Variable time: mini-semesters, workshops, etc.
- Creating a system for allocating teaching credits across units based on contact hours, student enrollment, etc.
- Establishing a faculty evaluation/reward structure for teaching and mentoring.

Because we believe addressing these barriers are beyond the scope of the Learning through Instruction subcommittee, we ask the appropriate administrators to consider these issues.

In our fall semester meetings, we developed four ideas we felt deserved further attention. Those ideas were:

1. Create activities to support the life of the mind for all University community members.
2. Encourage cross-unit and cross-school teaching and learning.
3. Develop a capstone experience that would cross school lines and that would include faculty members, graduate and professional students, and undergraduate students.
4. Consider a great books program that could be expanded to reach across the University.

After assessing committee interest in these ideas, we decided to combine the ideas and form two working groups, one focused on the life of the mind and another focused on capstone seminars and other teaching and learning issues. Each working group met to develop recommendations in these areas, and we came up with three concrete ideas, each of which will be discussed in detail below. We end this report with a discussion of the resources we believe will be required to implement these initiatives.

Life of the Mind: Intellectual Tailgating

The Life of the Mind working group realized that renewing the liberal arts is not just about adding more non-traditional learning and teaching opportunities to undergraduate curricula. It is also about supporting the experience of the life of the mind across Emory communities and schools. In this spirit, the Life of the Mind group proposes transforming existing intellectual, artistic, and community-engagement activities around the theme of “Intellectual Tailgating.” As group member Maureen Sweatman related to us, Dean Forman made an important observation when he arrived at Emory: We may not have home football games to rally around, but the University has other reasons to tailgate. Already, Emory has rich intellectual relationships with the Dalai Lama, Salman Rushdie, Alice Walker, and the late Seamus Heaney, among others. Their visits are intellectually focused, yet they could also provide opportunities for us to take a break from the intense, goal-directed work of teaching, learning and research, so that we could share food and drink, and simply be at and part of something connected to the broader Emory community. Pre-event gatherings would be occasions not only for relaxing and getting ready to watch, listen, and participate in a larger intellectual experience, but we could also prolong the tailgating afterwards, allowing us to share, appreciate and consider what we had just experienced. Anthropologists have long observed that, regardless of cultural tradition, community rituals that transform us have three stages that complete a kind of round-trip journey: separation (from the complexity and grind of everyday life), an experience at the threshold of the extraordinary, and a fully inclusive aggregation that prepares us to return to our everyday goals and obligations. Intellectual tail-gating would provide just such a community experience. These kinds of events already happen on a small scale in particular venues, but we hope to expand and combine them to include students, faculty and staff from across the university, to create events that would build the kind of community that other schools get from big-time sports.

Specific Proposals

As a pilot effort, it would be most effective to arrange an intellectual tailgating event during a visit by a high-profile Emory-affiliated figure. A pre-event “tailgating” opportunity that is informal and inviting for students, faculty, staff, and wider community members would allow everyone to gather and anticipate the upcoming event. We would also recommend having a post-event tailgating occasion, also informal, that would allow audience members and participants to share and reflect on their experiences in a common space, under common, inviting conditions.

It might have greater impact—as we seek to focus on building a sense of community, identity, place, and opportunity—to use visual arts and music in highlighting key symbols or icons of the occasion. This might involve art that frames awareness of the mind-body connection or moral courage during the Dalai Lama’s visit, or maps, journeys, and the complexity of identity during Salman Rushdie’s visit. Artistic themes related to other major lectures or symposia could focus on discovery, health, sustainability, or society. Several group members have suggested that beginning with one or two well-thought-out intellectual tailgating events would have the best chance of involving a large, diverse group, while also leaving a more transformative, lasting impression.

Although the metaphor of tailgating is inspired by big-time college football, the communal ritual aspect can be scaled down, from the big to small, from connected to local, and from general to unique. Thus, group members have recommended the possibility of connecting all divisions of the university through experiencing a common book or performance. This idea is something that lots of other schools do, and certainly those programs were part of the inspiration for this idea, but our real inspiration came from closer to home. You may remember a few years ago when Paul Farmer was the commencement

speaker, students were given a copy of a book about Farmer and his work. The buzz surrounding commencement that year was palpable—everyone was talking about Farmer and his work. We hope to recreate that buzz by providing a common intellectual experience for the community through a common reading or attendance at a common performance and hosting conversations to discuss the experience.

In addition, we have discussed the possibility of offering much smaller “tailgating-like” events, connecting smaller numbers of faculty, graduate students, and staff to undergraduates. For instance, it would enrich the Emory and Oxford Scholars programs to incorporate “intellectual tailgating” into outings to performances and exhibits. Finally, we would recommend considering how smaller rituals—either at places connected to what it means for being part of Emory or in a virtual, connected space on Twitter or Instagram—could creatively reinforce our community members’ connections to one another in experiencing the life of the mind at Emory and beyond. The goal here is not to force anyone to be a part of these intellectual events, but rather to provide everyone—students, faculty and staff alike—the opportunity to experience the richness of a liberal arts experience—the joy of discovery and the life of the mind.

Synthesis Seminars

The subcommittee also suggests creating a seminar experience that would bring together faculty, graduate and professional students and undergraduates around a theme that could be addressed from a number of liberal arts perspectives. One impetus behind this idea is the strong feeling that many of us have that the liberal arts experience can be a disconnected and fragmented one. We take a number of classes in different disciplines, but we never fully comprehend the ways in which these disciplines overlap, connect or can be brought together to address particular ideas, questions or problems. We don’t have the luxury, or even the opportunity, to do the integrative work necessary to make sense of our liberal arts education.

These seminars would provide that opportunity. Focused on specific themes, these seminars would ask participants to look back over their educational experiences and make connections across disciplines. Participants would be asked to think about what a liberal arts education means, and how their own experience demonstrates that education. We imagine that these seminars would be facilitated by two or more faculty (from different schools and/or departments), but might also include involvement from other faculty from across the university as both teachers and/or participants. Several committee members mentioned the Gustafson seminars as a model, but noted that these synthesis seminars would involve undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty, who would work together to create the seminar experience.

We think it possible that synthesis seminars could be organized around themes that would dovetail with the intellectual tailgating idea described above. We suggest that each seminar contain a public scholarship and/or service learning component so that participants can connect the seminar material with the world at large. Given our time frame, our committee did not work out details for these seminars, so we propose piloting these seminars in the 2015-16 academic year and using next year as a time to plan and solicit course ideas. Planning would include discussion of evaluation and the creation of an assessment instrument. We would hope that the pilot process could run through an already established organization, perhaps the CFDE or the restructured ILA.

Cross-School Teaching

The synthesis seminar offers one opportunity for cross-school teaching. We would like to see other opportunities for this experience as well; therefore, we propose faculty exchanges wherein faculty are released from their home department for a specified period of time (from one semester to two years) to do research and teaching in another department, either in the same school or a different one.

Since graduate students may have more flexibility than faculty members, we also suggest that graduate students from a particular school be given the opportunity to teach in another school. For example, RSPH students could potentially teach classes in global health or psychology.

Finally, we believe that both graduate and undergraduate students should have the opportunity to take classes in a school not their own. For example, advanced undergraduates might take courses in one of the professional schools, and professional school students might take courses in the College or Graduate School.

Necessary Resources

The committee believes the following resources are necessary in order to bring these ideas to fruition:

- Key to the success of any of these endeavors: Create a central office with a budget to facilitate cross-school collaboration. Use the funds to compensate home departments when faculty are doing teaching or other intellectual work in other units. The administrator directing this process would need a superordinate rather than a parochial view, keeping in mind the goals of the University while also serving the needs of the departments.
- Create “CoLA Time,” a time when classes are not scheduled that would allow for the kinds of activities described above, perhaps 1 – 2 hours per week or every other week. Although we understand that the Commission on the Liberal Arts will have finished its work before these ideas can be implemented, we suggest changing the name to the Community of the Liberal Arts and keeping the CoLA acronym. (Note—this seems to us like a great fundraising opportunity. Perhaps Coke would like to sponsor CoLA time?)
- Significant attention to the following issues (as mentioned in our opening paragraph):
 - Tuition dollars: How will this be addressed for cross school teaching? As is, it provides a significant disincentive to encouraging students to take classes in other schools or to faculty teaching or even cross-listing courses in other schools.
 - Faculty salaries: Which school pays the salary of a faculty member who is teaching outside their home department? This is particularly problematic when some faculty on hard money and others are on soft funds.

- Resources: Issues of space, especially lab space, and other resources are already difficult. How could these be addressed if we are thinking about cross-school initiatives? Is there a way to more easily share resources?

Conclusion

The vision of a liberal arts research university evokes a commitment to learning both within and beyond the classroom. Undergraduates' interactions with graduate students, diverse faculty, staff, and off-campus community stakeholders necessarily and profoundly complement the foundational learning activities—including attending lectures and laboratory sessions, participating in classroom discussions, reading, and completing assignments and examinations—that are centered around traditional academic courses. These proposals—intellectual tailgating, an integrative seminar, and cross-school teaching—aim to support Emory realizing the possibilities of the liberal arts research university.