

LIBERAL EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE

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IF THE EFFICIENCY OF A UNIVERSITY BE DEFINED IN TERMS OF WHAT HAPPENS TO MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY AND STUDENT BODY, THIS UNIVERSITY MUST EARN A UNIQUE ROLE WITHIN THE PROVINCIAL SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION. IN ORDER TO ATTRACT SCHOLARS AND STUDENTS OF QUALITY AND QUANTITY, THE UNIVERSITY MUST HAVE A CHARACTER OF ITS OWN, AND COMPLEMENT THE OTHER INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THIS PROVINCE. ITS PHILOSOPHY, OBJECTIVES AND PROGRAMS MUST BE FORMULATED IN PRACTICAL TERMS IN RELATION TO ITS SIZE, SETTING AND HISTORY.

Should there be a University of Lethbridge? Submitted to the Waterton Conference of the University of Lethbridge, August 1967 by Owen G. Holmes

Liberal education was the focus of the University of Lethbridge 2012 Fiat Lux address. This discussion is not new to the University; it's been taking place for 45 years. Indeed, since its formation, liberal education has been touted as a defining feature of a U of L education. However, the curricular implementation of liberal education has taken numerous forms. The purpose of the recent Fiat Lux address was broader than how to modify the current General Liberal Education Requirement (GLER) – it proposed the involvement of the entire University academic community in defining what a U of L education means, what our students gain in their time at our institution, and how the academy can deliver an education that best prepares students for the current and future needs of society.

At first, the magnitude of these questions appears immense. However, looking across the University there are examples of what a U of L liberal education could, and perhaps should, look like. But, there is no common understanding of why such an approach is valuable and what the larger picture of such efforts leads to. Giving clarity to what we mean to accomplish when we say we give our students a liberal education will provide additional purpose and direction to our work as academics; it will also mean identifying what new actions or approaches will be needed to deliver on our promise to our students.

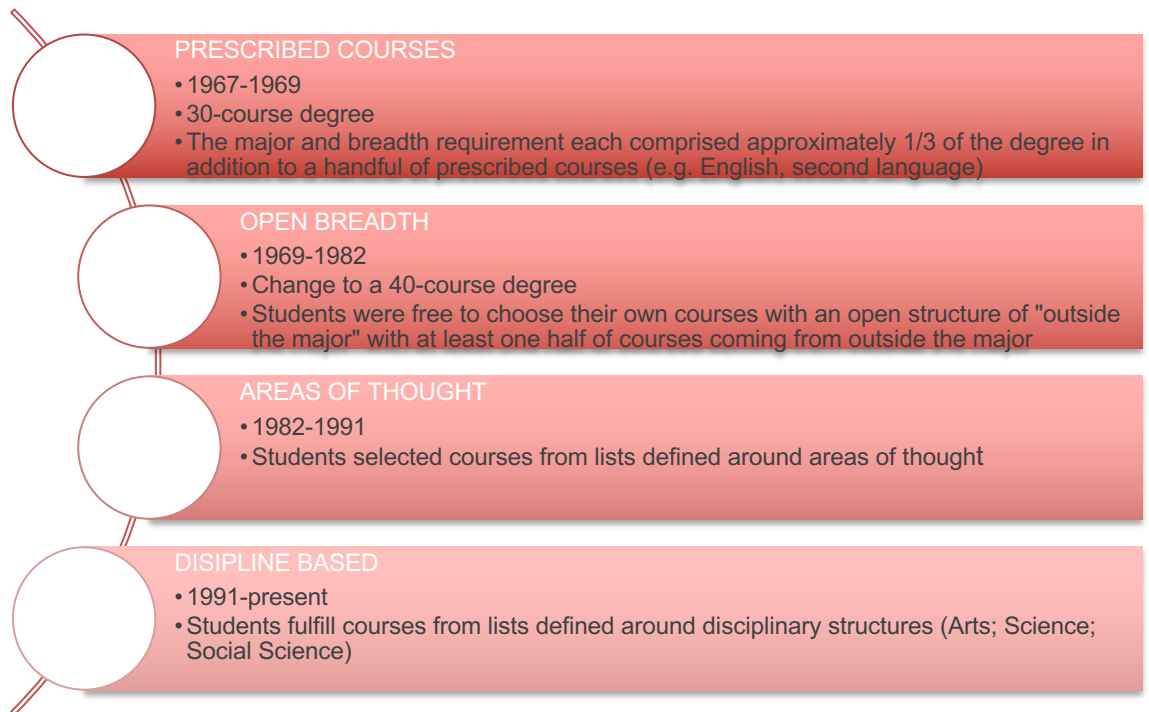
A SHORT HISTORY

The University's commitment to a liberal education is evident throughout its history. In foundational documents, planning documents, and curricular approaches, the emphasis on providing students with a liberal education serves as a fundamental principal.

In the 1967-68 University Calendar, the primary objective of the Faculty of Arts and Science was "*to provide a liberal education.*" Over time, this objective may not have

changed (for the Faculty and the University), but the approaches taken and the meaning given to the term have undergone significant change.

There have been four main iterations of liberal education over the 45-year history of the University of Lethbridge. Each of these approaches implies a certain emphasis on the most important elements of a liberal education.



OUR CURRENT APPROACH

All undergraduate students at the U of L are required to complete the GLER as part of their degree. The basic requirement has students take 4 courses from each of three lists: List I (Fine Arts and Humanities), List II (Social Science), and List III (Science).

The courses that fulfill GLER requirements are all Faculty of Arts and Science courses. There is some opportunity for other Faculties to include courses, but only through cross-listing. In providing these courses, there are many departments whose entire slate of courses may count towards fulfilling a student's GLER requirement. This would indicate that the purpose of GLER as it stands is simply to ensure some exposure to a variety of different disciplines.

Beyond the basic GLER, there are options that recognize the value of interdisciplinary studies. An interdisciplinary option was added to GLER starting in 1997/98. Students could take Arts & Science 3001 and 3002 thus reducing the required courses from each list by 1 course. Further, Liberal Arts 1000 could fulfill one of the course requirements for either List I or II. In 1999/2000, Arts & Science 1001 and 1002 were added with the same "3 for 2" treatment as Arts & Science 3001/3002. However, Arts & Science 1001 could no

longer be used as a GLER course. Finally, in 2001/02 the names of Arts & Science 1001/1002 and 3001/3002 were renamed to Liberal Education, but with no changes to how they fit into the GLER.

		OR	OR	OR
List I				
Fine Arts & Humanities				
List II				
Social Science				
List III				
Science				
LBED 1000				
LBED 2000/Library Science				
LBED 3010				
LBED 4000				
TOTAL	12 courses (36.0)	11 courses (33.0)	11 courses (33.0)	10 courses (30.0)

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CURRENT CURRICULUM

A. POSITIVES

- Strength of Programs and Majors
- GLER is relatively easy to administer
- Multidisciplinary experiences are available, though on a limited scale e.g., through specific Liberal Education courses
- Complementary student experiences such as co-operative education, independent studies, or applied studies
- Robust honours study options are available in many programs

B. NEGATIVES

- Lack of a unifying student curricular experience beyond the major
- No clear understanding by students of the value of the GLER
- No formal incorporation of skill development, specifically in written communication and quantitative analysis
- Beyond the few multidisciplinary opportunities (e.g. specific Liberal Education courses), the alignment of the GLER with traditional disciplinary areas does not reflect the increasing need for students to bring together these ideas and principles in interdisciplinary study
- Inadvertent identification of the GLER as constituting liberal education muddies the meaning of a liberal education
- Limited opportunities for Faculties outside of the Faculty of Arts and Science to fully participate in the delivery of the GLER

DEFINING A U OF L EDUCATION

1. WHAT IS A LIBERAL EDUCATION?

If we are to engage in a discussion about how to deliver a liberal education, we need to arrive at a shared understanding of what we mean. The discussion that follows is not meant to provide a definitive answer, but to present some perspectives on the definition of a liberal education as a starting point for further discussion.

Liberal education has been actively discussed in the United States for the past 15 years. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) released its *Statement on Liberal Learning* in 1998; they followed this in 2005 with the launch of *Liberal Education and America's Promise* (LEAP). The following definition of liberal education is at the heart of both of these initiatives:

*Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with **broad knowledge** of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as **in-depth study** in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as **communication, analytical and problem-solving skills**, and a demonstrated **ability to apply knowledge and skills** in real-world settings. [emphasis added]*

It is clear from this that a liberal education is more holistic than liberal arts or general education, although each may form a significant part of a liberal education.

This definition presents some key areas to consider: breadth of knowledge, importance of the major, intellectual and practical skills, and the application of these to new issues, whatever the setting.

While these may seem like obvious points for further consideration, coming to a common understanding of what a liberal education embodies for a student graduating from the University of Lethbridge is an essential step. Before we can discuss what we should be doing, we must explicitly agree on why we are doing it.

2. WHAT SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE DOES A LIBERAL EDUCATION PROVIDE TO OUR GRADUATES?

With a common understanding of what we mean by a liberal education, the discussion shifts to identifying:

- What are the desired elements of such an education?
- What broad knowledge should all students have?
- What skills do we want to instill and develop in students?

3. HOW DO WE ACHIEVE THE GOALS OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION?

With a common understanding of what we want to offer our students, the question becomes how we best accomplish our aims.

This will require a critical examination of what we currently do, not just in what we have typically called liberal education in the form of GLER, but more broadly. What activities do we support that promote the goals of a liberal education? What can be enhanced? How can these activities fit together more coherently?

Such considerations also require us to ask hard questions about what are we missing. Are there elements of a liberal education that are absent from a U of L education? What best practices can be adapted to the University's institutional culture?

A liberal education is likely not a series of course requirements; it is an approach to education. As such, how do we embed the value of a liberal education across a student's experience, across the curriculum and through other experiences? How does a liberal education show up in the in-depth focus of a major? How do students demonstrate their ability to integrate ideas and skills from across their experience at the U of L?

The "how" phase will be where we must move from the ideal of a liberal education to the practicality of delivery. It is one thing to consider what it would be nice to be able to do; but for it to be an effective exercise, we need to consider the reality of the University's culture as well as our aspirations. For example, how do we make liberal education a common experience when our students don't necessarily have a common relationship with the University? Students come to the U of L straight from high school, as transfer students, as students with previous diplomas or degrees, and after having taken time away from formal education. The flexibility demanded not only by their circumstances but by the students themselves provides added challenges with respect to the design of a meaningful experience for every student. This is our reality; but do we want it to be our future? Or do we aspire to have more students come to us for all four years of their education? The answer to this question might change the choices we make.

Moving from ideal considerations to practice will also have implications for the implementation of any changes. For example, if we decide that flexibility for students is an important element, how do we ensure that students are aided to still make choices that promote the ideals of a liberal education and not a random assortment of course offerings. On the other hand, if we decide that there is a more formal common education that students should have, how do we make sure that it is broad enough to provide value to all students.

4. ARE WE DOING WHAT WE SAY WE'RE DOING?

A final consideration in deciding how we deliver a liberal education is: how do we monitor the impact and success of our actions, including how we measure outcomes? Defining a new liberal education at the University may involve an iterative process of trial and error. We must be prepared when we make any changes to identify what it will look like to succeed. Designing these measures as we identify the actions will be critical to delivering on our promise to our students.

PROPOSED PROCESS

- ➔ Ensure that the next iteration of the University of Lethbridge Strategic Plan identifies liberal education as a priority item for action

- ➔ A task force to (1) clearly set the definition of liberal education at U of L and what skills/knowledge that includes; (2) identify who will be responsible going forward for implementing and maintaining liberal education; (3) to shepherd through any changes to GLER and/or the broader approach to liberal education.

- ➔ Committee(s) of GFC

The first phase to defining the outcomes of a 21st century liberal education for the U of L will be a broad discussion to define the qualities of a U of L education. A Liberal Education Task Force, drawing from across the institution, will consider questions 1 and 2 identified above: what is a liberal education and what skills and knowledge does a liberal education provide? The second part will be the actualization of this definition through curriculum, programs, or support services.

The Task Force will include representation from across the institution. Faculty members and students must be at the core of this group, but representation from other areas such as the Registrar's Office, the Teaching Centre, and academic advisors will also be crucial to develop a holistic definition of liberal education. In defining liberal education for U of L, it is anticipated that there will be opportunities for participation and input from the whole University community. While the decisions of the Task Force will be its own, it is expected that they will consider guidance from administrative bodies (e.g. Deans' Council) in the process.

A corollary to this will be identifying what additional structures (e.g. committees, policies) may be necessary to realize the definition. For example, it may be appropriate that there be a Liberal Education Committee as a Standing Committee of General Faculties Council in addition to the current ad hoc GLER Committee, with one responsible for the broader implications and one responsible for the details of curriculum. Alternately, there may be recommendations that the GLER Committee be replaced. In addition, there may be other groups that should be brought together for any non-curricular activities and supports.

The second phase will depend on the work of the Task Force and the resulting structural approach to liberal education at the U of L. One thing that will be certain though, that curricular changes will continue to be the charge of General Faculties Council, through whatever committee is deemed appropriate.

WHO WILL BE INVOLVED?

Any discussion of liberal education requirements needs to encompass curricular design. Curriculum is an academic matter, the realm of faculty members and General Faculties Council. Thus, **faculty** members must be at the heart of any directions and decisions around liberal education.

It will also be critical to include the group most impacted by liberal education reforms – our **students**. This should also include our former students – our **alumni**.

Finally there are numerous **other contributors** to the various possible elements of any articulation of liberal education scheme. From the Registrars' Office to academic advisors to the Teaching Centre, there are any number of units and people across campus who will have direct impact on the success of any model our community designs for liberal education.

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS

- How do we accommodate flexibility for students' various pathways through post-secondary? Specifically for Calgary and Edmonton campus students and transfer students.
- How do we ensure quality courses?
- Who will have input on the definition of liberal education and any changes?
- How do we show the outside community the value of a liberal education?
- What models are there for a centralized school or centre of liberal education?
- How do we make sure liberal education courses are more than hurdles to students' degrees?
- How does liberal education show up beyond designated courses?
- How does a liberal education prepare graduates for their future – whether academic, professional, or personal?