

19 April 2005

Dear Member of Senate:

I advise you that a special meeting of the Senate of Acadia University will occur at **12:00 noon** on **Monday, 25 April 2005** in **BAC 132 with lunch available 15 minutes before**. The main purpose of this meeting will be to discuss "Liberal Education at Acadia University". The AGENDA follows:

- 1) Minutes of the Meeting of 11 April 2005
- 2) Announcements and Communications
- 3) Business of this Meeting
 - a) Liberal Education at Acadia University (**045-42-VPA**)
 - AACU "Views on Liberal Education" - Oct 1998 *
 - Liberal Education at Acadia University - 10 Jan 2005 *
 - "Educated Person" Roundtable - 10 Apr 2003 *

Yours sincerely,

Rosemary Jotcham
Registrar and Secretary of Senate

**Acadia University
Senate Discussion on Liberal Education**

April 25, 2005

Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU): Views on Liberal Education

(**Website:** http://www.aacu.org/press_room/media_kit/what_is_liberal_education.cfm)

AACU Definition of Liberal Education

“A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. Characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than a specific course or field of study, liberal education can be achieved at all types of colleges and universities.”

Statement on Liberal Learning

“A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions. Liberal education requires that we understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities.

We experience the benefits of liberal learning by pursuing intellectual work that is honest, challenging, and significant, and by preparing ourselves to use knowledge and power in responsible ways. Liberal learning is not confined to particular fields of study. What matters in liberal education is substantial content, rigorous methodology and an active engagement with the societal, ethical, and practical implications of our learning. The spirit and value of liberal learning are equally relevant to all forms of higher education and to all students.

Because liberal learning aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance, sectarianism, and myopia, it prizes curiosity and seeks to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. By its nature, therefore, liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives.

The ability to think, to learn, and to express oneself both rigorously and creatively, the capacity to understand ideas and issues in context, the commitment to live in society, and the yearning for truth are fundamental features of our humanity. In centering education upon these qualities, liberal learning is society’s best investment in our shared future.”

Adopted by the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges & Universities, October 1998.

**Acadia University
Office of the Vice-President (Academic)**

Liberal Education at Acadia University

On January 10, 2005, members of the Academic Senate of Acadia University discussed the principles of a “liberal education” and what that means (or should mean) to Acadia University. Points included:

- There has been significant growth in the number of required programs for majors. This has limited the options for students to pursue courses outside their major, thus limiting the “liberal” nature of the degree.
- Difficult to define a “liberal education.” Debate to whether an acceptable definition is possible or necessary.
- The major issue for Acadia is clarifying what kind of education we want for our students. This could include:
 - Developing competencies to critique social trends
 - Broad freedom to pursue truth and knowledge without being limited by current trends or budgetary burdens. Importance of knowledge for knowledge sake.
- Discussion of defining “liberal education” vs. “liberal arts education.” Other institutions define themselves as “liberal arts” institutions, where they encompass social sciences, humanities, and pure and applied sciences.
- Disciplines tend to “focus” by constricting choice with many requirements, which is contrary “liberal” which is suppose to be freeing individuals to pursue many areas of learning.
- Should not “water down” degrees; argument that more focus or depth to subjects is more valuable to students.
- Faculty of Arts currently discussing possible program changes to create more multi-disciplinary courses or programs.
- “Pass/Fail” options for some courses could increase the number of courses students take outside their discipline.
- Need to see where this discussion will lead; what are the next steps? (Ex: should a motion come to Senate to limit number of requirements per program?)
- Possible option: Workshop / forum on liberal education and what this means to Acadia.

- It is important to see this issue as 1) defining what we want and 2) linking our goals to resources that are available.
- Possible Option: Look at results or emerging trends in Acadia Conversations and set up series of discussions on the various themes.
- Acadia also should recognize that current courses should have elements of a liberal education imbedded in them (pursuit of knowledge, critical thinking skills, literacy / numeracy, etc.)

Acadia University

“Educated Person” Roundtable

Wheelock Lounge, Acadia University

(12:30pm, April 10, 2003)

On April 10, 2003, the Office of the Vice-President (Academic) hosted a roundtable discussion as part of academic planning. Dr. Michael Leiter, Vice-President (Academic), asked six individuals to present their ideas of what constitutes an “educated person,” and how an Acadia University education can help achieve those goals.

The following is a summary of comments from the six main speakers, along with summaries of group discussions.

1) Dr. Heather Hemming, Director of the School of Education

- Being “educated” is not a final state of being, but rather a life-long process
- Need to develop a strong relationship with knowledge and a critical spirit
- Difficult balance between breadth and depth of content
- Need to review considerable content while maintaining critical thought
- Universities need to foster an open-mindedness to learning for students so that education will be ongoing
- Need to make connections with knowledge obtained and its application.

2) Ms. Erin Everett, 4th year Honours, Biology

- University is more than just “schooling”, but also involves sharing learning experiences with students and faculty one-on-one and in group environments.
- Education is like a building; it needs several parts to make the whole, including a knowledge base, communication skills, and critical thinking and analysis
- Required courses are a useful way to build a knowledge base
- Integrating different perspectives is important, including learning about other organizations through volunteer service.

3) Dr. Greg Pyrcz, Professor of Political Science

- Educated people cannot be produced, but rather enabled or realized
- Need basic conditions of knowledge base, skill development, and intellectual passion and democratized citizenship.
- There are different paths to education, but we need to provide effective contexts for learning
- Acadia does a good job at educating our students, and changes to curriculum should be subtle in nature rather than a major re-organization.

4) Ms. Sandra Engstrom, 4th year Honours, Sociology

- When looking at defining an educated person, we need to remember the different learning styles of students. (ex: I am a visual learner)
- All learners see their education as important, so we need to be open-minded about what and how others are learning
- Connecting with others in the university and outside communities is essential for integrating knowledge and becoming more community-minded
- Need to be careful on how much value we put on one type of learning
- Required courses were initially seen as a safe entry-point to university, but looking back they were quite valuable for learning and meeting new people.

5) Dr. Glenys Gibson, Associate Professor, Department of Biology

- Finding a consensus on the definition of an educated person is difficult, but the discussion itself is valuable and hopefully enjoyable.
- With that in mind, an educated person should have:
 - A joy of learning
 - An understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses
 - Basic literacy and numeracy skills
 - Experience in learning by doing, and an ability to learn from mistakes.
- This background will help enable the learner to have a fulfilling life and career.

6) Mr. Tyson Birchall, 3rd year Honours, Business Administration

- Many attributes are required to be considered educated, including;
 - Critical thinking skills
 - Open-mindedness
 - Application of knowledge / decision making skills
 - Adaptability – ability to analyze and use information from different contexts
 - Broad knowledge base
 - Appreciation of education (life-long learning)
- At Acadia, students need to be challenged to think, not just manage time effectively.
- Need more debates about current issues, an integrating those in the classroom.

The following are summaries of the discussions of the smaller groups.

Group 1 (Spokesperson: Karla Henderson)

- There is a need for more cross/trans/inter-disciplinary discussion and debate.
- Students need to get to know their professors better to create a better learning environment.
- We have to better define the role of graduate students at the university, and how they can help undergraduates become more “educated.”

Group 2 (Spokesperson: Pam Dimock)

- Knowledge base - need to take focused courses for electives rather than a bit here and there. With this, we need some traditional structure to ensure accountability in knowledge acquisition. Having learning wide-open doesn't push students to do and learn more.

- The faculty development committee should be resurrected - put on sessions where you talk about topics like "what is critical thinking and how do you teach it in whatever discipline".
- Communication skills should be mandatory - a writing requirement to every program? Writing workshop? Writing Centre? Elements of literacy are required including grammar and spelling. Also need technological and research skills literacy (ie. Library). Academic Support Centre could help areas that need to be strengthened.
- Experiential learning is important - could we take an inventory of experiential learning on campus?
- Important to have students work, either through co-op (paid) or volunteer.
- Could we put a limit on the maximum courses required in a field? Important to have an opportunity in first year to take courses in various disciplines. Need to balance the breadth and depth. Maybe have a look at the requirements to see if the number of courses in the discipline is really necessary. It would support the liberal education model better.

Group 3 (Spokesperson: Uwe Wilhelm)

- A major issue is student learning outside the classroom. Work and volunteer experiences should be encouraged as part of courses. However, forcing individuals to volunteer, or institutionalizing these experiences, is not advisable, as that would change the nature of that activity.
- More required courses outside a discipline would help educate students even further. Students often have positive "accidents where they become interested in a subject outside their discipline.
- Depth of courses must not be ignored. Gathering information is an important part of every course, and lays the foundation for critical thinking. However, professors need to ensure additional assigned work makes students think, not just occupy their time.
- The joy of discussion is undervalued. Having events like these are positive learning experiences for all involved.

Group 4 (Spokesperson: Tony Pesklevits)

- A distinction was made between critical thinking and critical observation –both should be encouraged.
- There is a balance between openness/interdisciplinary and academic rigor (breadth vs. depth) – we must encourage interdisciplinary approaches without detracting from the need to pursue specific disciplinary academic goals. One solution to this problem is to create a pan-university first year seminar course, with several modules taught by rotating faculty. Similarly, a "capstone" course should be offered that encourages students to apply their critical thinking skills to post-university applications.
- Professional "legitimacy", or recognition of expertise, can be detracted from when interdisciplinary approaches are interpreted as insufficiently rigorous.
- It was agreed that students are forced to choose a disciplinary specialization before many are prepared to do so – this can detrimentally affect the achievement of some students.
- Students should be encouraged to become active members of the Acadia community and should be provided with "experiential learning" opportunities to make positive change at Acadia during their time here.

Group 5 (Spokesperson: Chris Graham)

- More events like these roundtables should be organized to create better dialogue between faculty and students. Faculty and staff should also be encouraged to eat at Wheelock.
- Courses should have more “active learning” to help students learn outside the classroom.
- Acadia should increase its efforts to foster favourable attitudes in the student body towards intellectual discourse. This could be partly addressed as part of orientation, with a session involving frosh, 4th year students, and graduate students entitled "What is a Liberal Arts Education?"
- More pass/fail course options for students would put the focus on becoming educated rather than simply achieving a desired letter grade.
- As mind and body are closely linked, more required physical activities could be useful, which would require further developing gym facilities.

Group 6 (Spokesperson: Jawad Al-Nabulsi)

- Goal setting is a key for students. We need to sit down with students to plan out their educational goals.
- We need to help motivate students. Some are self-motivated, but we need to create conditions where students can find motivation in education.
- We need events like these to create better relationships with faculty and students.

Group 7 (Spokesperson: Kevin Whetter)

- Students should have a better awareness of history and how current events have been shaped by history.
- We need continuous dialogue between students and faculty (like this event) to ensure we are working towards educating our students in the best way possible.
- We need to recognize the different learning styles of our students and be open to delivering the material in a different way.

Group 8 (Spokesperson: Jeff Britton)

- Depth and breadth of courses is always an issue, and we need to find the right balance. Professors need to be role models in publicly discussing current events. (Ex: September 11th discussion)
- Acadia has to avoid “turf protection” and allow for better interdisciplinary offerings and more course choices for students from different disciplines.
- Students find a lot of value in directed readings and special topic courses that can help create a better connection between the student and the material.
- Selected non-grading option courses can allow for greater exploration of topics with the added pressure of letter grades. There can be a weak correlation between grades and success.