



Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning

ISSN: 0009-1383 (Print) 1939-9146 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vchn20>

Giant Leaps for the Liberal Arts at Purdue

Melinda S. Zook

To cite this article: Melinda S. Zook (2019) Giant Leaps for the Liberal Arts at Purdue, Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 51:6, 45-51, DOI: [10.1080/00091383.2019.1674107](https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2019.1674107)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2019.1674107>



Published online: 03 Dec 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Melinda S. Zook is a Professor of History at Purdue University and the Director of Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts. She has authored or edited

five books and teaches courses in medieval and early modern European history, as well as the new Transformative Texts course, part of the Cornerstone program at Purdue.

Giant Leaps

for the Liberal Arts

AT PURDUE

In Short

- Both majors and course enrollments in the liberal arts have been in decline since the recession of 2007.
- The College of Liberal Arts at Purdue University has sought to reverse this by offering a new outreach program to science, technology, engineering, and math, and management students called Cornerstone.
- Cornerstone is a 15-credit-hour certificate that pivots faculty from their departmental courses to a new first-year sequence for students across the university.
- This new sequence, Transformative Texts I and II, marries written and oral communication skills with foundational readings and acts as a gateway to more advanced liberal arts courses.
- To complete that Cornerstone certificate, students take three more liberal arts courses that align with their interests, from science and technology to health care and medicine.

This is the story of how the College of Liberal Arts at Purdue University took bold measures to reverse the tide of dramatic enrollment declines. It is a tale of faculty and administration working together to solve a crisis and create opportunities. Administrators provided the platform and incentivized faculty, in part through a grant from the Teagle Foundation. Faculty from across our college came together to redefine the first-year experience for every undergraduate at Purdue, designing new gateway courses that develop students' communication and creative thinking skills as well as bring students into our more advanced courses. What we learned from this process was that we, the liberal arts faculty, hold the keys to our own survival and renewal.

These keys lie in the general education requirements that depend on the liberal arts, as well as in our ability to inspire and enrich young lives. They also require reaching out to other parts of the campus to develop interdisciplinary collaboration. Naturally, nothing we did went unchallenged, particularly by those invested in the system of general education that had been in place for over a half century. But the world around us has changed, dramatically so. If we are to survive, we must change as well.

THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES

The crisis in the humanities in America's colleges and universities has been widely reported. The number of bachelor's degrees conferred in the more traditional disciplines,

including history, philosophy, English language and literature, world languages, and classical studies have been hardest hit. In history, the number of degrees conferred is down by 45% since 2007, and the number of English majors has fallen in half since the late 1990s. In fact, a mere 5% of all 4-year Bachelor of Arts degrees awarded in 2018 were in the humanities. As for the social sciences, the number of majors in political science, sociology, and anthropology has also declined since 2011, and area studies are down by 20% since the recession of 2007 (Bachelor's degrees in the Humanities, 2017; Schmidt, 2018a). According to Schmidt (2018b), "Between 2016 and 2017, the number of history majors fell by over 1,500. Even as university enrollments have grown, history has seen its raw numbers erode heavily" (p. 19).

As students gravitate to the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines and other more directly career-tailored majors from computer science to engineering, universities have little reason to hire new historians, philosophers, or language teachers. Positions in English advertised in the Modern Language Association are down by 55% since 2008 (Kramnick, 2018). Worse still, between 2013 and 2016, over 600 colleges eliminated their foreign language programs (Johnson, 2019a). Other universities have jettisoned whole departments, while liberal arts colleges are closing at an increasing rate (Harris, 2018; Johnson, 2019b; O'Carroll, 2019). To say that the tenure-track professoriate feels dispirited is something of an understatement. Indeed, these days, humanists are academically adrift.

Defending the liberal arts has become a cottage industry. After all, we (the historian, philosopher, literary scholar, etc.) are a thoughtful and articulate bunch. We like to write. Books, articles, editorials, commentaries—all plugging the importance of a liberal arts education—are near daily fare. Many clear and persuasive voices have provided eloquent and convincing justifications for the power and importance of a liberal education. They have pointed to the threat posed by legions of technocrats, managers, and political leaders, as well as to an electorate with no sense of the richness of human history and culture, or of political and philosophical ideals, and with the poor communication skills to match (Anders, 2017; Delbanco, 2014; Nussbaum, 2016; Roche, 2012).

We know the arguments in support of the liberal arts. We need liberally trained citizens. Democracy demands as much. Employers seek graduates with critical thinking and communication skills who can assimilate and analyze information, think creatively, adapt to change, connect in multicultural environments, make sound judgments, and, above all, communicate their ideas with precision and clarity. In short, these so-called soft skills so valuable in the workplace are the hallmarks of a liberal education. And, of course, the humanities are what make us human, allowing us to attain a fuller experience of life, one that is, as Stanley Fish (2018) wrote, "more empathetic, more open-minded, less likely to impose a narrow partisan perspective on others."

But the numbers, always trending down, tell us that none of this is resonating with our students or the public. We seem to be merely bolstering ourselves in this time of crisis,

We seem to be merely bolstering ourselves in this time of crisis, perfectly unable to bring real relief to the fears and concerns of young adults and their parents. Economic pressures and a pervasively myopic view of the road to professional success drown out our voices. Perhaps we need, as Shakespeare put it, more matter and less art.

perfectly unable to bring real relief to the fears and concerns of young adults and their parents. Economic pressures and a pervasively myopic view of the road to professional success drown out our voices. Perhaps we need, as Shakespeare put it, more matter and less art. We need fewer humanists writing about the crisis and more stalwart university administrators, in partnership with faculty, solving it. We should avoid easy solutions such as axing programs or simply allowing an aging professoriate to retire. We need real programmatic solutions that change the way we deliver so as to retain the liberal arts as integral to every student's college educational experience.

PURDUE'S CORNERSTONE PROGRAM

Purdue's College of Liberal Arts had little choice but to act. Between 2011 and 2015, the college had declined by 2,000 majors and was teaching 5% fewer credit hours to students in our college and across the university. In 2015, for example, among all Purdue students, only 10% graduated having taken a class in literature, and a mere 7% enrolled in a class in American history. Last fall (2018) when Purdue set a record with the largest incoming undergraduate and graduate populations (8,357 students), over 60% chose a STEM course of study while a mere 6% chose the liberal arts. This third most STEM-centric university in the United States was growing in both numbers and reputation, celebrating its sesquicentennial with a campaign called the "150 Years of Giant Leaps" (a fitting testimonial for Neil Armstrong's alma mater). Yet its humanists and social scientists were falling dramatically behind in the enrollment gap.

With a new dean of liberal arts starting in 2015, the college developed a series of initiatives to attract students from across the campus. Under the leadership of David A. Reingold, the college launched "Degree in 3," allowing undergraduates to choose more than 20 liberal arts degree programs that they could complete in a cost-effective 3 years, and the "Degree+," which offers students a streamlined way to complete a liberal arts degree in addition to their primary degree program. Both sought to make study in the liberal arts a more attractive option.

But, the most ambitious new program is Cornerstone. Cornerstone is a 15-credit-hour certificate and outreach program to STEM and management students, who comprise the vast majority of the undergraduate population. Cornerstone's approach to bring these students into liberal arts courses is twofold. First, it offers a new first-year sequence that fulfills undergraduate core curriculum requirements. Second, it offers a certificate in the liberal arts; to complete the certificate, students must take three more advanced liberal arts courses in the Cornerstone program.

The planning behind what became "Cornerstone" began in 2016 with a task force of department heads charged with exploring options for a program of integrated liberal arts. The following year, seven liberal arts faculty members from different departments (history, classics, philosophy, political science, and English) came together to design an alternative general education sequence for first-year students, one to

“Our first goal, creating a course that our liberal arts colleagues would want to teach, revolved around this question: What could we all teach? For the vast majority, the answer was simple—great texts.”

act as a gateway to bring students into advanced liberal arts courses. This chronological sequence, Transformative Texts I and II, is centered on reading and discussing foundational texts, great literature from the world over, from *Gilgamesh* and Plato to George Orwell and Toni Morrison. It also fulfills the students' requirements in written and oral communication.

In short, the faculty created alternatives to the obligatory, skills-centered English composition and introductory speech courses at Purdue, primarily taught by graduate students. In designing Transformative Texts, we deliberately set out to create a course that all liberal arts faculty would *want* to teach. This would be a course that would do more than reinforce skills; it would also enrich the lives of our students and inspire them with a love of learning and all its related virtues: empathy, perspective, wisdom, and joy. We also wanted these classes to emphasize mentorship, giving first-year students across the campus a mentorship experience with a full-time faculty member, someone who could guide them, foster their talents and interests, and continue to be a resource throughout their college career.

Our first goal, creating a course that our liberal arts colleagues *would want to teach*, revolved around this question: *What could we all teach?* For the vast majority, the answer was simple—great texts. Foundational texts are probably the one common denominator among liberal arts faculty and usually the reason we joined the academy in the first place, to share our passion for ideas and the pleasures of reading. We therefore designed a two-semester sequence, Transformative Texts, Critical Thinking and Communication I: Antiquity to Modernity and Transformative Texts, Critical Thinking and Communication II: Modern World. The first part emphasizes written communication and the second oral communication, but both continually reinforce these skills, requiring students to read, write, and engage in discussion every week, for a full academic year.

We began training faculty to teach written and oral communication basics while they prepared to teach what

“Pivoting the faculty from their departmental courses to courses for undergraduates across the campus gives them access to students they might never have taught otherwise. It also allows them to attract these students into their other courses or inspire students to double major or to minor in their field. These courses recruit students.”

they loved most, whether Sappho, *Beowulf*, Mary Shelley, Frederick Douglass, or Chinua Achebe. Both courses gave faculty plenty of latitude; they could create the course they always wanted to teach, so long as they taught with the learning outcomes in mind. Faculty chose novels, poetry, short stories, famous speeches, and works of non-fiction, usually around a theme such as utopia/dystopia, the quest for a meaningful life, war and society, or the promise and perils of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Making such a class exciting for both instructors and students was certainly not difficult. Cornerstone faculty take their students to theatrical performances and museums and hold film fests and fiction-writing contests, debates, and pizza parties. All the while, students hone communication skills as well as learn how important it is to listen to one another and about professionalism, the creative process, and, above all, how the liberal arts allow us to understand ourselves and the world around us. In short, they learn that ideas, history, the human saga, and questions about life, love, suffering, and justice are worthy of discussion.

Faculty also benefit. Pivoting the faculty from their departmental courses to courses for undergraduates across the campus gives them access to students they might never have taught otherwise. It also allows them to attract these students into their other courses or inspire students to double major or to minor in their field. These courses recruit students. After all, undergraduates who encounter “an inspiring and caring faculty member” at the outset of their college career are more likely to continue taking classes with that instructor (Jaschik, 2013). In short, our goal is to place our faculty, from the distinguished full professor to an incoming

assistant professor in front of our first-year students: to mentor these young people, foster in them a love of learning and an appreciation for ideas, historical contexts, and diversity.

Students in Transformative Texts are encouraged to complete the Cornerstone certificate by enrolling in three more advanced liberal arts courses, arranged into five themes:

- Science and Technology
- Environment and Sustainability
- Health Care and Medicine
- Management and Organization
- Conflict Resolution and Justice

We designed the themes to attract STEM students, allowing them to see their discipline, whether environmental engineering or astrophysics, through a wider lens. For example, there are courses in Global Green Politics and the History of the Space Age. Cornerstone also encourages students to gain another competency, be it in environmentalism or management. But the most concrete benefit for all undergraduates who complete the certificate comes from developing their analytical and creative-thinking skills, along with the ability to read critically, write with clarity, and speak with confidence through 15 credit hours of liberal arts courses.

The result is the Cornerstone Pyramid (Figure 1), which illustrates the pathway for students from Transformative Texts through thematic upper-level courses leading to the certificate in liberal arts.

Cornerstone has achieved early success and garnered some publicity (“In the news,” 2019). Our first challenge was to convince the rest of the campus to accept a new

general education sequence for their first-year students. Even as the program was in development, we met with leadership from every college in the university. Our efforts were bolstered by support from the university administration, particularly President Mitch Daniels and the Board of Trustees, who were invested in seeing more Purdue students complete coursework in history, literature, and philosophy.

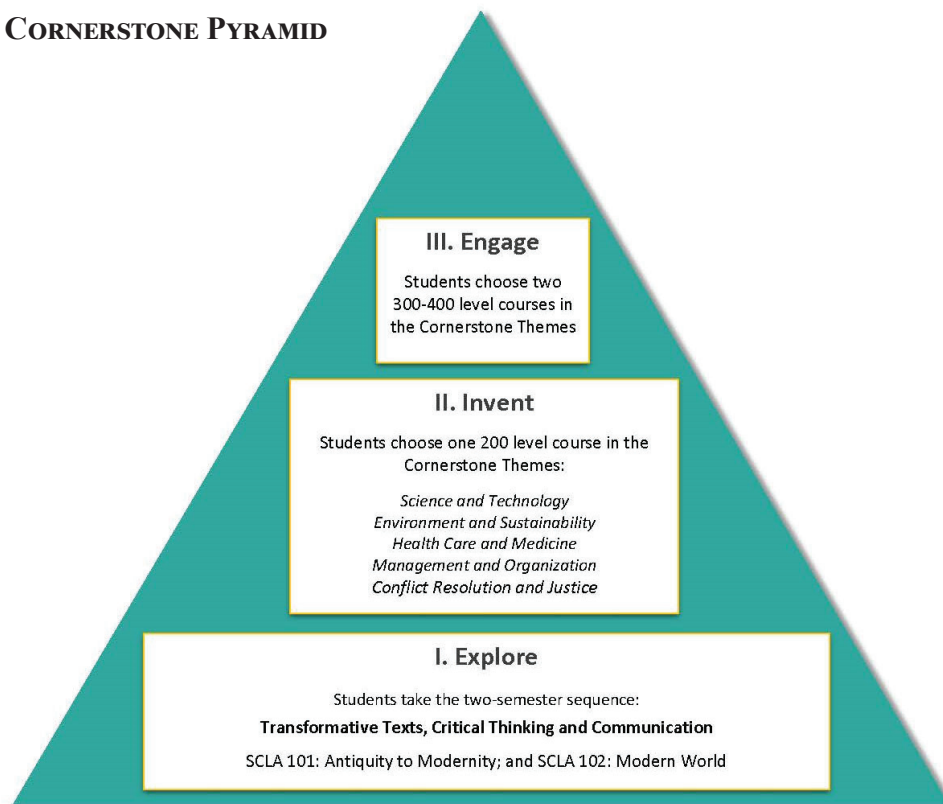
After a small, controlled launch in fall 2017, our first big rollout was the fall semester, 2018. By strategically proportioning the distribution of seats offered in our courses that fulfill written and oral communication requirements, we filled every section of the Transformative Texts sequence. Last year, 2018–19, we offered 66 sections and 1,980 students enrolled. In 2019–20, Transformative Texts is set to double those numbers.

But how many will complete the certificate and funnel into our advanced liberal arts courses? We expect that several hundred will, at least initially. In particular, many of the degree programs in our Polytechnic Institute (formerly the College of Technology), require the Cornerstone certificate for their majors. We should begin to see a surge in enrollments across our upper-level certificate liberal arts courses in the coming years.

The introduction of the Cornerstone program has produced other benefits. Preparing faculty to teach Transformative Texts has reenergized liberal arts faculty and helped make them better teachers. These courses are teaching intensive; every class session is an exercise in active learning and problem solving. Faculty require at least some retooling to teach it. Through a variety of workshops, one-on-one meetings, and retreats, faculty learn the best practices for teaching skills in basic research, critical reading, writing, public presentations, and peer review. They embed the learning of these skills within the themes, ideas, and inspirations evoked by their readings. For example, one workshop series offered for Cornerstone faculty is called “How I Teach this Text,” in which a faculty member leads a discussion around a reading they require in their section of Transformative Texts and speaks to how the assignments they employ with it reinforce the learning outcomes of the course.

Cornerstone also takes the faculty out of their academic silos. Disciplinary departments, with so much of their focus around publication and promotion and tenure, act as bubbles where faculty can become isolated from student life. They might be concerned with the state of their profession but not as much with the rest of the college, much less

FIGURE 1. THE CORNERSTONE PYRAMID



CORNERSTONE
INTEGRATED LIBERAL ARTS
PURDUE | College of Liberal Arts
UNIVERSITY

FIGURE 2. CORNERSTONE AND THE DATA MINE

Cornerstone is currently working with the Purdue Data Mine, a project within Purdue's Integrative Data Science Initiative.

In the Liberal Arts Data Mine Learning Community, students will live, study, and perform data-driven research together, introducing them to data science concepts and preparing them to take on real-world problems.

In the section of Transformative Texts I attached to this Learning Community, students apply data science to close readings of Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, including using GIS mapping to recreate the routes of the heroes of these epic tales and using textual analysis to explore the socio-cultural themes. Such skills can be easily applied to modern problems, such as analyzing complex systems of human migration and climate change.

the university. Cornerstone puts the philosopher, musicologist, sociologist, and art historian in the same room, sharing ideas, learning from each other.

They also learn more about how their college and university work. Faculty are often “disconnected from the actual running of the university,” Andrew Delbanco (2014) has aptly pointed out (p. xiii). This poses a challenge. If faculty have little or no understanding of the wider problems their college faces, they are more likely to become impediments to solutions rather than willing participants in constructive change. A college's richest resource is its faculty, and a program like Cornerstone brings faculty into the conversation about the health and future of higher education.

Cornerstone has also created partners with other units across campus, equally concerned about the liberal arts and the welfare of our students. These include our galleries, centers for performing arts, cultural centers, residence halls, and honors programs. Inspired to collaborate, faculty are creating new interdisciplinary courses, housed in Cornerstone, including two new Cornerstone courses on civics education and another on data storytelling. Cornerstone is also involved in a new initiative on professional ethics as they relate to big data and AI (Figure 2).


A GROWING MOVEMENT IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

Cornerstone has much in common with other innovative programs and courses that have lifted the liberal arts. At the University of Kentucky, Peter J. Kalliney (2018) reversed the English department's plummeting enrollments with a few simple solutions, placing the “best and most experienced professors to teach introductory and general-education

courses on a regular basis” and opening up their writing requirement to new courses with wider appeal.

The point Kalliney makes is simple: deploy your best instructors in gateway courses to recruit students. Across the country, new programs and classes focused on great books and big questions are finding success with students. These include the Lyceum program at Clemson, which takes a great-books approach to the study of the history of political ideas (Bauerlein, 2019); Notre Dame's entry-level philosophy course on Big Questions (McMurtrie, 2019); and the new two-semester, team-taught course at Oklahoma, modeled on W. H. Auden's great books course from the 1940s (Bauerlein, 2018).

The liberal arts have always had that wonderful ability to inspire creativity, design, innovation, and vision. Yet so often we find ourselves tucked away, isolated, tossed aside as somehow irrelevant in this new world. Nothing could be further from the truth, given the dramatic need for articulate, farsighted, knowledgeable *human beings* who can make the case for ethical, just, and humane solutions. While we still control much of what counts for general education, let us deploy it to our advantage. We can translate this crisis into an opportunity to reach students across our

campuses with full-time faculty and to integrate our disciplines into the life of our university, and most importantly, enrich the lives of our students. At Purdue, we have taken that giant leap, engaging students from the moment they set foot on campus. 

We can translate this crisis into an opportunity to reach students across our campuses with full-time faculty and to integrate our disciplines into the life of our university, and most importantly, enrich the lives of our students. At Purdue, we have taken that giant leap, engaging students from the moment they set foot on campus.

REFERENCES

- Anders, G. (2017). *You can do anything: The surprising power of a “useless” liberal arts education*. New York, NY: Little Brown & Co.
- Bachelor’s degrees in the Humanities. (2017). *Humanities indicators: A project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Retrieved from <https://humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatoroc.aspx?i=34#fig197>
- Bauerlein, M. (2018). Is this the hardest course in the Humanities?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Hardest-Course-in-the/242896>
- Bauerlein, M. (2019). Wisdom first, job skills second. *City Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.city-journal.org/humanities-crisis-in-higher-education>
- Delbanco, A. (2014). *College: What it was, is, and should be*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fish, S. (2018). Stop trying to sell the Humanities. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Stop-Trying-to-Sell-the/243643>
- Harris, A. (2018). The liberal arts may not survive the 21st century. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/12/the-liberal-arts-may-not-survive-the-21st-century/577876>
- In the news. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/cornerstone/news.html>
- Jaschik, S. (2013). Majoring in a professor. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/08/12/study-finds-choice-major-most-influenced-quality-intro-professor>
- Johnson, S. (2019a, January). Colleges lose a ‘stunning’ 651 foreign-language programs in 3 years.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Lose-a-Stunning-/245526>
- Johnson, S. (2019b, April). Storm clouds over Tulsa. *City Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.city-journal.org/university-of-tulsa>
- Kalliney, P. J. (2018). We reversed our declining English enrollments. Here’s how. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/We-Reversed-Our-Declining/243009>
- Kramnick, J. (2018). What we hire in now: English by the grim numbers. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-We-Hire-in-Now-English/245255>
- McMurtrie, B. (2019). Can students handle the big questions? *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Can-Students-Handle-the-Big/245753>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2016). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- O’Carroll, E. (2019). *Can small liberal arts colleges survive the decade?* Retrieved from <https://www.csmonitor.com/EqualEd/2019/0213/Can-small-liberal-arts-colleges-survive-the-next-decade>
- Roche, M. (2012). *Why choose the liberal arts?* South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press.
- Schmidt, B. M. (2018a, 23 August) “The Humanities are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisis-of-confidence/567565/>
- Schmidt, B.M. (2018b, December). “The History BA since the Great Recession.” Retrieved from <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report>