



**Final Report
Liberal Arts Study Group
Strategic Assessment**

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The Liberal Arts Study Group identified 14 external issues, summarized below, likely to be important to Davidson's strategic planning process. Original reports are included in their entirety in an appendix.

1. The Liberal Arts College and Its Value in a More Professional World

The first issue provided a context for those that followed: What is a liberal arts college, and what is its value in an increasingly professional world?

- We note that the liberal arts college is both a distinctively American phenomenon and, in the face of pre-professional educational institutions and large research universities, an increasingly endangered one. By 1999 only 5 percent of American undergraduates were enrolled in liberal arts colleges.

The core of the mission of the residential liberal arts college continues to be:

- teaching students to read closely, think clearly, write well, understand history and make effective choices;
- teaching students not only great books and the arts of thinking and speaking, but also mathematics, sciences and arts;
- fostering the kind of education that requires a place and presence;
- committing to individualized, collaborative, engaged and active learning; and
- professing ethical and spiritual values.

There remain a number of essential questions:

- What is the proper balance between the personal goals of liberal arts education and public duty to others?
- How will liberal arts colleges steer the right course between "meaning" and "market"?
- Are we still essentially citizens of nation states or citizens of a global community?

- What knowledge, skills and experience will students need to make wise decisions in a world as complicated and diverse as the 21st century?
- What are our ultimate goals, and how will we achieve them? How will we know whether we are, in fact, achieving them?

Finally, even if we look at education as “practical,” what is more practical than sending students out into the world to be agents for justice, humane and respectful connection with others, and wise and ethical decision making? What is, in fact, more practical than a liberal arts college?

We have noted as well that transitions are occurring. Although not simply a recent phenomenon, many liberal arts colleges have become “liberal arts-plus,” where various professional majors are added to the liberal arts curriculum. In fact, more than two thirds of institutions that highlight the liberal arts in their academic mission statement are actually dominated by professional majors. Of the 540 colleges classified by the Carnegie Foundation in 1987 as “Liberal Arts Colleges,” only 212 graduated more than 40 percent of their students with a major in a traditional liberal arts field. The number is smaller if “liberal arts college” is defined more narrowly as a school with an acceptance rate lower than two thirds, where the majority of students major in traditional disciplines and live on campus.

The small size, residential nature of the campus, and the student orientation of faculty and administrators, particularly at selective institutions, lead to certain outcomes:

- greater enrollment in graduate study
- an increased number of graduate fellowships
- higher numbers of graduates who go on to earn a doctorate
- greater student satisfaction.

We note as well the irony of the market value of a liberal arts education. When heads of companies describe what makes a good employee, they answer along the lines of critical thinking, excellent communication skills, application of quantitative skills, and other results of a liberal arts education. However, personnel departments often look for specific vocational credentials.

2. Curricular Trends within the Liberal Arts College

While remaining firm in its commitment to the investigation of knowledge and the pursuit of understanding organized by means of various academic disciplines, the liberal arts curriculum at the national level in general (and at Davidson’s peer institutions in particular) is also expanding into and incorporating interdisciplinary methods and perspectives. This movement toward interdisciplinarity finds expression within individual courses as well as in larger curricular structures, such as multidisciplinary concentrations and in newly emerging interdisciplinary majors and minors.

Within both disciplinary and interdisciplinary curricular structures, we also see at the national level a diversifying and widening of the scope within the various fields of study. Particularly in the humanities, but also in the social sciences, we see an increasing emphasis given to the cultural and cross-cultural context of material being studied, including nontextual as well as textual resources, rather than solely to literary or geographically specific resources.

At both the disciplinary and interdisciplinary levels within the liberal arts, we see at the national level an increasing emphasis on and opportunities for students to work with faculty mentors in undergraduate research. So, too, education in the liberal arts has increasingly incorporated the use of internships that are integrated into the curriculum. And, education in the liberal arts has seen rapid growth across the curriculum in the integrated application of new technologies and computational tools.

Recent years have seen at the national level an increasing internationalization of the liberal arts curriculum. This includes not only increased support for study-abroad programs and increased attention to course material drawn from different cultures and societies, but also inquiry into possible ways in which various methods of study themselves may be conditioned in part by cultural assumptions.

Some liberal arts colleges at the national level are restructuring their graduation requirements to stress ways of thinking rather than familiarity with particular fields of knowledge. So, for example, some colleges have shifted or redefined a math requirement toward a qualitative reasoning requirement that could be met through coursework in departments outside of mathematics.

A number of Davidson's peer institutions now offer courses or seminars specifically for first-year students focusing on writing and the cultivation and refinement of research techniques. Many of these courses also help first-year students acclimate to that college's particular scholarly standards. So, too, most of Davidson's peers require their students to undertake some sort of capstone project within their major or focus of study.

3. Learning Approaches

The most notable trends in learning approaches include the following:

- individualized learning (self-regulated)
- collaborative projects
- increased use of technology
- active learning (as opposed to passive, lecture-driven learning)
- personalized education (e.g., our Center for Interdisciplinary Studies)
- one-on-one teaching
- "learner centered" instruction
- multi-tasking
- student-to-student learning (rather than just professor-to-student)
- "portable" learning (not tied to a specific location)
- "learning by doing"
- interactive learning (combining lectures and group discussions)

4. Internships, Service and Extramural Activities

We note mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's definition of education as a lifelong process wherein we acquire and perfect "the art of the utilization of knowledge," and in which "theoretical ideas should always find important applications within the pupil's curriculum." Internships, service and extra-curricular learning have a well-appreciated potential to prevent a curriculum from becoming "inert." But with their vitalizing potential comes risks:

- a tendency to divorce "real world" practice from "ivory tower" theory

- a tendency merely to put students to work, performing service, without further demanding analysis, reflection and discussion to highlight the artfulness of connecting (or the culpable failure to connect) practice with theory
- a tendency to over-emphasize pre-employment/pre-professional appearance-management, job-interview skills, and contact-development.

Several of Davidson's peers define internships as work-related and career enhancing. Others ensure that they are situated within an institution's philosophy of education and values. At least one acknowledges the financial constraints of students' participation in internship opportunities.

All of Davidson's peer institutions enable easy access to information about their internship opportunities. Many house this information in their careers office, where the link between internships and *jobs* is understandably emphasized. Many career offices provide Web links to additional information, or even to on-line applications. Fewer institutions link internship programs with a *philosophy of education*, one which Whitehead (and John Dewey) would have readily recognized and endorsed. How well these philosophical aspirations are actually met is beyond the scope of this report.

In the future, institutions will be challenged to expand internship opportunities in a manner that coheres with their philosophy of education and that enables all students to have equal access to these opportunities.

5. Technology in the Classroom

We note the key question to be: In a private liberal arts institution, what should be the interplay between a liberal arts curriculum and the current age of high technology? Is technology a boon or a hindrance to learning?

One of the positive aspects of technology is that it can create an immediacy and interactivity that goes beyond what a lecture may achieve and in ways that can heighten the learning experience. Students who can use and create software systems are also better equipped for the global work place.

However, technology by itself is not a panacea, nor is it the right fit for every classroom. There are security concerns, as well as concerns that students are losing their research skills. In addition, as Ph.D. programs rarely teach pedagogical skills, adding technology in the classroom may not help instructors learn how to be good teachers.

New trends in the classroom caused by the use of technology have included the following:

- a move away from lectures to more active-learning
- more project-oriented course structure
- implementation of an entire course or section of a course that teaches technology as a liberal arts tool as part of the first-year experience.

A final question remains: Can technology assist liberal arts colleges in their mission, and, if so, are liberal arts colleges willing to make the capital expenditures required to use technology as a helpful and perhaps even an essential tool in attaining that mission?

6. Role of Individual Research and Creativity

We document a number of trends in undergraduate research:

- summer undergraduate research programs are expanding rapidly and attracting with competitive applications;
- science programs tend to have more established models of undergraduate research and more outcomes studies than humanities programs;
- undergraduate research societies are expanding from a science focus to a focus that includes humanities;
- offices of undergraduate research/scholarship are being established at colleges and universities;
- undergraduate journals are being established to disseminate outcomes and provide editorial experiences;
- campus undergraduate research presentations are becoming regular events;
- undergraduate research conferences are becoming more common;
- undergraduates are presenting at national scholarly conferences;
- problem-based learning (PBL) techniques are being employed in many types of courses to mirror research experiences;
- research is being integrated earlier in the college experience;
- research opportunities are being targeted to "honors" and "at-risk" students to enhance retention and representation; and
- research experiences (including publications) are becoming expected for graduate school admittance (the boundaries between undergraduate/graduate school are blurring).

There are benefits to the increasing focus on undergraduate research. Experiential learning is effective and can be tailored to specific student interests. There is better retention, particularly for minorities and first-generation students, and an enhanced sense of connectedness. Students develop planning, critical thinking, analytic, trouble-shooting and problem-solving skills, as well as independence, maturity, flexibility, creativity, innovation, ownership and confidence. Research projects enhance opportunities for interdisciplinary approaches, require engagement with other scholars and/or scholarly work, and encourage and prepare undergraduates for graduate and professional study.

There are, of course, also costs and challenges. These research opportunities require a significant time commitment from students and mentors, as well as a significant and ongoing financial commitment by the institution. Faculty must accommodate undergraduates in their research and/or mentor a broad range of projects potentially beyond their expertise. The ability to offer mentors and opportunities to meet varied student needs/interests can be difficult, and the research productivity of the mentors can decrease as they direct energy/resources to training students. There remains the problem of evaluating student performance (experiential transcripts vs. traditional grades vs. P/F).

The logistics of undergraduate research generally contain the following elements:

- Personalized guidance from faculty member(s) is nearly universal.
- The intellectual origin of the inquiry is generated from student(s) and/or faculty (independently by the student, collaboratively between the student and faculty mentor or primarily/initially by the faculty member).
- Depending on the discipline, the inquiry is conducted independently by an individual student, collaboratively between two or more students (in series or parallel) or collaboratively between student(s) and faculty.
- The focused inquiry can occur full-time (summer), with a stipend and sometimes compensation for the mentor, or part-time (semester), during which students pay

tuition and receive course credit, and mentors are sometimes awarded teaching credit.

7. Global Competition and Its Implications

We have identified a number of challenges stemming from the increasing impact of technology, international business, the clash of cultures and the speed of knowledge's dissemination. International competition for students and faculty over our next planning horizon takes a back seat to more pressing global issues. Universities and colleges are being pressed to become more international in scope and to connect their faculty, students and communities to the international flow of ideas and new initiatives. Both leadership and vision are required to prepare student and community for the challenges of globalization. Most universities that have successful international programs provide a broad framework of policies and priorities related to developing a global culture on campus and, at the same time, trust and depend on a motivated and entrepreneurial faculty to make it happen.

There are serious challenges to the very nature of higher education, as the world more and more treats education as a commercial product to be sold and regulated. On the other hand, when higher education today often is perceived as a "private good" benefiting those who research and study, the thought is that it should be paid for by those who benefit. Further, there is a growing divide between the increasingly powerful universities backed by multinational corporations and their second cousins in the poorer countries with much less autonomy, funding or potential to compete. We may find that the World Trade Organization and other trade and regulatory bodies will begin to set rules for universities and the transfer of knowledge among nations.

It seems clear from the trends identified above that liberal arts colleges will have to focus intently on both maintaining their role as liberal arts colleges and expanding their international reach. We will need an expanding world vision, with faculty, staff, students, trustees and a curriculum relevant both to the past and to our global future.

8. Expectations of Students

We asked how the expectations that students (and parents) have of a liberal arts education have changed. We note the following:

- Students expect a more occupationally oriented education.
- Technology has increased connections between students and parents, leading students to depend less on faculty and staff.
- Students and parents are more concerned about getting their money's worth and more concerned with the comforts and amenities on campus.
- Students are looking for an education tailored to their interests, as well as an education that prepares them for the global competition they will enter after college.
- Families are paying more attention to indicators of academic quality as well as college-ranking lists, and expect those higher-ranked schools to supply an education that will make graduates competitive candidates in the workforce.
- Students and parents are looking for an easy, smooth transition from college to the workforce and/or graduate school.
- Students are now seeking help in answering fundamental questions about life, purpose, and human existence.

Given these new expectations, what are liberal arts institutions doing to respond? They are:

- creating initiatives that emphasize internships, increased academic guidance and support, off-campus education, stronger contact and connections with the alumni network, and any other programs that can help prepare students for the work force and put academic theory into practice;
- reshaping the curriculum to integrate more participatory learning;
- working to collect more data about graduates and their post-graduate tracks, in order to supply information regarding academic quality and the ability of the institution to prepare students for the postgraduate world;
- responding to the “consumer” (student) demands and renovating facilities on campus to provide a healthier, better-quality experience for students;
- creating curriculum or focusing their “core” or “distribution” requirements on addressing fundamental life questions;
- focusing orientation programs on boosting interaction between students and faculty and providing more information to parents in order to improve guidance for students through their academic experience; and
- maintaining, even while the demand for pre-professional education increases, dedication to their liberal arts mission statements.

9. Expectations of Faculty

We asked how faculty expectations of a liberal arts education have changed. We note the following:

- Faculty members still are expected to be strong teachers as well as productive researchers and publishers.
- Institutions are attempting to respond to the student demand for innovative learning experiences by asking faculty for new, innovative pedagogy. This gives faculty members room to explore, but also adds more pressure and time constraints.
- Institutions also have very high administrative expectations, asking faculty to serve on committees, participate in task forces, head departments, etc.

There is a strong correlation between the increased expectations that incoming students and their parents have of the liberal arts institution and the expectations that those institutions place upon their faculty. It seems that as students have an increased demand for a personalized, high-caliber education, the faculty is being pressed to develop new teaching styles and curricula that bend to the demands of student consumers. At the same time, the demands for administrative involvement and publishing expectations have increased, partially because students use this information to measure academic quality. Faculty members are expected to publish, serve in administrative positions, give students dynamic and innovative classroom experiences and be available outside the classroom. In effect, faculty members of liberal arts institutions have seen an increase in expectations, relating to the increase in student expectations of the institution, creating a very serious time crunch.

In terms of teaching, faculty are expected to do more in class courses (survey courses and more specialized courses), direction of student research, writing instruction (either first-year or within the major), oral communication initiatives, interdisciplinary efforts, and advising. They are expected to participate in conferences and publish as well.

Specific challenges include the following:

- Faculty are frequently more deeply trained within their specialized areas, enticing them to teach upper-level courses in those areas, and leaving them, frequently, less prepared for broader survey courses.

- Directing student research and projects is a very time-intensive effort, added to very high demands.
- Most faculty are not trained specifically to teach writing and oral communication.
- Interdisciplinary efforts often leave faculty caught between two directions and subject to the evaluation of two groups: their home department and their interdisciplinary colleagues.
- Students are increasingly concerned and worried about postgraduate life: either career or graduate school. Advising demands in this area have increased.
- Cocurricular engagement of faculty has been increasing.

Finally, it is difficult to add increasingly to the demands of faculty without some concurrent response: lessening of demands elsewhere or rethinking of our compensation schemes (including salary, leave time and recognition). Moreover, this issue clearly becomes intertwined with that of overall faculty size and the use of visiting faculty.

10. Expectations of Student Affairs Staff

Current efforts on campus suggest increasing congruity between the traditional goals of student affairs and broader institutional goals; research on efforts by student affairs organizations aimed at student development, once regarded as peripheral, demonstrates the area's increasing importance to an institution's vitality. Student affairs organizations enhance students' involvement, working to establish multicultural environments, confronting violence on campus, managing enrollments and helping faculty to understand students unlike themselves. As recognition grows for student affairs professionals' efforts in pursuit of the traditional goals of student development, an expanded role for student affairs is demanded.

To better serve as integrators within the institution, student affairs professionals must:

- Assess and understand the institutional environment.
- Foster collaborative problem solving.
- Develop professional collaboration with faculty.
- Disseminate strategic information about students, their expectations, needs, interests and abilities.
- Translate student affairs goals to others in the institution in meaningful terms.
- Contribute to the quality of the academic experience.
- Contribute to the effective and efficient management of the institution.
- Develop skills for a broader role.

Institutions need to recognize, enhance and support the efforts of student affairs, consider student affairs professionals full partners in the institution and challenge student affairs professionals to make greater contributions to the institution.

A promising trend is the growing popularity of "Freshman 101" courses. In this case, we are encouraging students to look at their education in a more holistic way, and to make deeper connections between their academic work and their sense of meaning and purpose in life. Potential allies are the growing numbers of faculty who are involved in the field of service learning.

11. Integration of Living (Residential) and Learning (Academic)

The one educationally enriching experience in which liberal arts colleges do not lead the pack is participation in a learning community. At the same time, one distinguishing

characteristic of a liberal arts education is that outcomes are viewed as multidimensional. Their achievement requires integration across areas that have traditionally been separated.

Skills associated with people who are highly curious and likely to pursue lifelong learning include:

- Cognitive: The individual explores what is not understood, examines the basis of beliefs, acknowledges the evolving nature of knowledge, and continually examines forthcoming information.
- Intrapersonal: The individual identifies and arranges priorities for intellectual inquiry; takes into consideration how further intellectual inquiry will affect who one is, what one can do, and one's sense of self.
- Interpersonal: The individual uses relationships with others to share and gain knowledge and wisdom; seeks out multiple perspectives based on others' experiences; strives to understand others' dispositions and motivations to learn.

Strategies for incorporating liberal arts learning outcomes include wider incorporation of campus-wide learning outcomes, finding opportunities to discuss them as a campus, making use of the multidimensional aspects of these outcomes, increasing their accessibility, consideration of campus-wide teaching events that highlight the interconnectedness of the outcomes, and inviting other educators to facilitate both conversation and reflection as a means of professional development.

12. Cultural Diversity

There are three trends happening around diversity in student learning:

- articulating a commitment to diversity in the mission statement;
- beginning an assessment of whether the cultural diversity core requirements are meeting the college's academic and cultural expectations; and
- investigating the private liberal arts colleges' responsibility to promote tolerance and acceptance of differences at a time when global dynamics are center stage.

An investigation of the mission statements of Davidson's peers finds that nine of them do not presently require a "diversity" curriculum requirement.

There remains, even for those that do include such a requirement, the difficulty of assessing its success. Some institutions are using course evaluations that include items geared specifically toward diversity; others look to student journals or other writing.

13. Ethics, Morality and Honor

It seems important to address three questions related to the external environment for honor, ethics and morality in higher education.

Do students find it appropriate/expect that colleges will help with spiritual/moral development? Apparently so:

- Almost 75 percent of students entering college campuses in 2004 said they came looking for a higher purpose.
- Nearly half the students expected the college to help them find it.
- Almost half of the first-year members of the class of 2008 say it's "very important" or "essential" for their college to encourage personal expressions of spirituality.

- Three fourths of students have discussions about the meaning of life with friends.
- Almost half of students consider it essential to seek out opportunities to grow spiritually.

What do colleges see as their role? Many Davidson peers include references to honor, ethics and/or morality in their mission statements. A sample of public and private university overlap institutions shows that private universities are far more likely to include such references than public universities. Our non-liberal arts overlap institutions focus more often on research, development of knowledge, service to their home state (if public) and graduate or professional programs.

What does the future hold? In higher education, the liberal arts, philosophy and the humanities—the nonscientific ways of truth seeking—have been put on the defensive. While still valued as high culture, they have lost ground as ways of knowing and finding truth. It is incumbent on higher education to take the reins on moral education again. The liberal arts colleges in particular seem poised to do so.

14. Consortial Arrangements

Educational consortia play an important role in U.S. higher education. From regional groups involved in accreditation, to larger policy groups, to relatively local groups that serve more functional purposes, most institutions become affiliated with several consortia.

Benefits, particularly from the local functional groups, include:

- opportunities to discuss of issues of common concern;
- opportunities for sharing institutional data;
- sharing of costly resources (professional journals);
- specialization in course offerings;
- shared applications for grants to both the federal government and private foundations that like to see their outlays spread over larger numbers of affected students;
- team-taught courses with instructors and students from different institutions participating;
- opportunities for shared study abroad programs and experiences; and
- opportunities for interaction by faculty in common areas of interest.

Some concerns, however, are the following:

- dilution of the individual identity of an institution;
- possible incompatibilities of schools bound simply by close geographic proximity;
- Over reliance on online teaching in team-taught courses; and
- possible diversion of grant funding from the individual institution to the consortium.