

## Liberal Arts, Diversity, and Our Times

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The past five years have seen world horizons shrink as a result of the pandemic—even as they have expanded artificially in its aftermath as a result of new technologies. This special issue of *Innovative Teaching and Learning*, “Liberal Arts, Diversity, and Our Times,” combines reflections on liberal arts and the associated educational and cultural mission when driven, but also challenged, by the complex social, historical, economic and technological developments of our times. With the global rise of joint ventures in liberal arts education crossing Western and non-Western divides, ventures that experienced an important surge in the late twentieth century, it is important to understand how diversity, in the sense of addressing the needs of the whole person but also the widest variety of individuals comprising a student body,

is reimagined in global contexts and at important intersections of learning traditions across spaces.

The influence of intersections of learning traditions such as John Dewey’s visit to China, the Humboldtian model of liberal arts in Chinese education and the broader East–West dialogues set in motion by academic cooperation, was evident in broader discussions at the Liberal Arts in Global Contexts symposium I organized at Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University [BNBU] (formerly United International College [UIC]), in May 2024. As a liberal arts institution operating at spatial crossroads and as a member of the Pacific Alliance for Liberal Arts Colleges, BNBU shares many of the alliance’s cross-cultural ideals for liberal arts education while facing the same dilemmas. Several of the

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essays submitted for this issue, beyond posing questions about the mission of liberal arts in our age, also address strategies for achieving and understanding diversity. Other essays focus specifically on institutional missions and the response to our times that the liberal arts have informed. When examining diversity and its current constraints, it is worth looking back at past strategies for internationalization in the context of liberal arts education in global contexts, and there is particular importance in understanding the current challenges that liberal arts education faces.

The 2001 essay “Assessing the Transformational Power of a Diversity Course” concluded that diversity-focused courses at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst effectively helped students open their minds and hearts to people from other cultural or racial groups (Disch & Palma, 2001, p. 18). The authors write that “a pedagogical model based on the contact hypothesis [of prejudice reduction] combined with on-going self-reflection seems effective in fostering [open minds and hearts].” The authors conclude that, rather than serving as “[tests] of prejudice,” “the more qualitative, self-reflective measures used seemed to them effective both for looking at students and for helping students to look at themselves” (Disch & Palma, 2001, p. 19). Based on the essay’s findings, it

appears that diversity is both a form of assessment of others and a method of critical introspection.

Studies have shown that, when embarking on classes where students learn about foreign cultures, many students hold views based on stereotypes, either negative or positive (Chavez, 2002). Several scholarly meetings have focused on understanding how stereotypes can be overcome while expanding the curriculum but also broadening student horizons in the key of “diversity” and foreign language education. For instance, an event held by the NeMLA (Northeast Modern Language Association) in March 2023, in Niagara Falls, NY, examined among other things a series of themes that included “the state of diversity,” decolonization, and the curriculum in the various modern languages and literatures. A roundtable centered on diversity invited participants to explore how students can be led to “connect with critical race, gender, sexuality, migration, Indigenous, and disability studies” and examined how such connections shape “curriculum design, pedagogy, and praxis so they are relevant to and transformational for [our] students.” That this roundtable occurred suggests that connecting foreign language instruction and curricula with achievements in fields such as migration and critical race studies has provided a positive interdisciplinary turn in

liberal arts education.

Inspired by the prevalence of diversity as a topic in liberal arts higher education, participants at a roundtable incorporated into the Liberal Arts in Global Contexts symposium held at BNBU in May 2024 reflected on strategies for and definitions of diversity in their field and in their classroom practices. Coincidentally, the day before the symposium opened, an essay published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* thematized how diversity has become a “master concept of our age.” The essay was an adapted version of “The Moral Economy of Diversity,” a piece first published in *History of the Human Sciences* by Nicolas Langlitz from The New School for Social Research. In the essay, Langlitz signals “the epistemological and political paradox at the heart of diversity, which pertains not only to the business world but also to higher education.” He writes, “An ideal diversity would need to be inclusive of the many forms that nondiversity and even anti-diversity can take” (Langlitz, 2024, para. 46). In reality, Langlitz concludes, “diversity is always selective and advances the viewpoints and interests of some groups at the expense of the viewpoints and interests of others.” (Ibid.)

It is undeniable that diversity programs in Western university contexts have

contributed to greater ethnic diversity in teaching and research and have challenged patriarchal and heteronormative values. As Ervin Malakaj and Regine Criser put it in *Diversity and Decolonization in German Studies*, however, diversity and decolonization have often been coopted by administrative processes in Western university contexts, “precisely not bringing into effect the changes they name” (Arslan, 2021, p. 422). While dilemmas that arise when striving to practice diversity without turning it into a vacuous formality have preoccupied academic circles, the perception of diversity as an ideological tool of exclusion rather than inclusion has motivated the current measures against “diversity, equality and inclusion” (DEI) initiatives in the United States. Such measures were anticipated by a 2023 Supreme Court decision dictated by the court’s conservative majority, which, as Langlitz also mentions in his essay, reconsidered and revised the diversity justification for race-conscious affirmative-action admissions programs, programs that had long made educational diversity a central concern in American higher education.

In February 2025, a “Dear Colleague” letter from the now dissolving United States Department of Education (2025), was sent to many colleges in the United States. The letter identified discrimination

based on “race, color, or national origin,” along with “race-based admissions” as threats to White and Asian students in particular. Behind the apparently innocuous support of anti-discrimination sentiments, the letter also denied the existence of “systemic and institutional racism,” and charged DEI with “smuggling racial stereotypes” so as to put unfair “moral burdens” on certain racial groups—primarily, it seems, White males (“Dear Colleague,” p. 3). In response to this letter, Cornell University’s then Interim President Michael I. Kotlikoff re-affirmed Cornell’s “founding principle of opportunity and access” as “an institution where any person can find instruction in any study.” Kotlikoff went on to highlight how Cornell, founded in 1865, opened pathways to higher education which were at the time “closed to women, to non-Christians, and to people of color.” His definition of diversity emphasizes the term’s relevance beyond ideological factions but pointedly de-emphasizes race or gender in the equation: “Diversity comes in many dimensions, including viewpoint, life experience, and geographic diversity, along with diversity in socio-economic, first-generation college student, and veteran status. We interpret diversity in the broad terms of our ‘any person’ history: we are stronger when all voices are included.”

Including all voices and articulating

global citizenship has been a goal of many joint liberal arts ventures initiated since the mid-2000s, ventures that have sought to continue the educational dialogues established by Dewey and others and echoed since the late nineteenth century by private liberal arts institutions established in Asia as well (for example, see Waseda University). Global citizenship came to be defined as a “chance” at “adequate dialogue across cultural boundaries if young citizens know how to engage in dialogue and deliberation in the first place” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 738). The precondition Martha Nussbaum sees for such a dialogue is “a learning of self-examination and reasoning on why [students are inclined] to support one thing over another.” Nussbaum’s thoughts resonate with a “civic minded” education which encourages involvement in social life in the world and promotes active citizenship and public service. She also identifies learning a foreign language as a precondition for such involvement: “seeing that another group of intelligent human beings has cut up the world differently, and that all translation is interpretation, gives a young person an essential lesson in cultural humility” (p. 741). In addition, all young citizens should acquire the rudiments of world history and knowledge of world religions, she writes.

By the early 2010s, governments and

enterprises in Asia were investing heavily in creating a new set of liberal arts programs and, within the context of Asia's economic expansion, the United States and the UK were looking at China but also Singapore as new territories for the cultivation of knowledge and the combination of learning and doing. "No college can succeed without a dash of utopianism," claims a Yale–NUS College report (2013, p. 11), as it articulates a vision held close by many other joint venture counterparts. As iterated by Duke Kunshan University, likewise established in 2013, one of its missions is to "[p]ractice and promote the internationalization and innovation of higher education." Fast forward to 2024, some of these joint ventures closed as a result of economic and ideological clashes. As with many institutions predicated on utopian ideals Yale–NUS College would eventually dissolve.

The Yale–NUS report articulated the joint vision of a liberal arts institution uniting East and West, but also embraced a kaleidoscopic view that ranges beyond binaries. The university starts its mission statement by referencing the famed Yale curriculum report of 1828, which asked what a young person must learn in order to "lead a responsible life in this century." Further, the Yale curriculum was set up to provide students with "the discipline and furniture of the mind," expand the power

of the mind and "store it with knowledge." The Yale–NUS curriculum, a product of the late twentieth century, followed up on this task by adding "patterns of thought from a variety of cultures." The ultimate goal was to bring Western and Asian cultures into a broad global perspective but also bring forth projects that "emphasize character development and citizenship," with others emphasizing "interdisciplinary study and creativity" (McEachern, 2024). The solution is to cultivate an education that discourages early specialization ("the British colonial model in Asia") or overly technical specialization ("the Russian model") and promote an education that crosses disciplinary divides (Yale–NUS report, p. 18). Emphasis on small class size, close integration between curricular and co-curricular activities, and residential living were identified in the Yale report as further keys to a diverse liberal arts experience.

The surviving joint ventures will tell us the follow-up story about this adventure and so will the other pioneers of an education conceived as a "nexus" of and "bridge" between cultures and traditions, as BNBU presents itself. Will the answer be "rooted globalism," as the Duke Kunshan agenda tells us? Will education open up to students from increasingly diverse classes? As BNBU enters its third decade with a new name and a revamped mission and reflects

on dialogues with the outer world, some of these questions will inevitably follow its growth. How can one disentangle oneself from cultivating discrete skills that can be measured on standardized tests to an education based on critical reflection and an opening of the mind? What is the promise of diversity now and what can liberal arts do, especially on soils where East and West converge? The essays collected here reveal a wide range of highlights of recent contemporary discussions of both diversity and the mission of liberal arts in our age.

Dianjing Li's essay, "Teaching Media Studies at a Liberal Arts College in China," provides "a pedagogical reflection on social diversity, difference and critical thinking" and surveys important tendencies of the joint-venture universities, including their foreign student populations and ethnic diversity. While her essay echoes a general concern of joint ventures with building a rootless elite of citizens of the world, she also provides sound advice from her own teaching experience on how service-learning projects and community-based activism can counter neoliberal marketization. She proposes the term "social difference" as an alternative to static "diversity" and examines how social inclusion pedagogies may work in a Chinese context.

Xuan Ning and Ruonan Li's essay, "Teaching a General Education Course in a University in China: Insights from an In-

novative Experiential Learning Activity," puts the spotlight on a pedagogic activity designed to teach students empathy for and identification with the "Other." In this case, it relates to a "gender swap" experiment in which students experience the fluid nature of gender conventions and expectations while deconstructing them from within.

Ruixue Zhang's essay, "Gender and Genre: Knowledge Transformation in Liberal Arts Education," presents her findings pertaining to developing and teaching a course at a liberal arts institution in the United States. Her inquiry into the intersections of genre and gender and her students' parodic work offer "critical insight into the underlying assumptions, structures, and power dynamics that shape how established knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated."

Taran Kang discusses how an eagerness to align liberal arts with contemporary trends and demands may ultimately lead to the dilution of a humanistic system of teaching and learning. One of the unwanted consequences of such "accommodationism" could be the transformation of human beings into sites of reaction, potentially losing their ability to engage thoughtfully with texts and with other people's thoughts and assertions. A sympathetic imagination, Kang claims in his "Untimely Education Today," enables us to understand the foreign "on its

own terms” and expand our horizons from solipsism to an expanded consciousness of the world.

The essay written by Vincenzo de Masi, Qinke Di and Siyi Li, “The Age of Generative AI: Redefining Work, Leisure, and Society in the Metaverse,” immerses us into ethical dilemmas that arise when considering human values and equitable access while immersed in digital capitalism and the universes proposed by artificial intelligence and the metaverse. As the authors underscore, “ensuring equitable access to new technologies while safeguarding individual privacy and autonomy in virtual environments requires coordinated efforts from public authorities, corporate entities, academic institutions and international organizations.”

Among the recent lenses through which liberal arts have been debated, the debate over “their utility” has been among the most intensely fought. The mission of liberal arts in neoliberal times is discussed by

Pedro Erber in “Liberal Arts in Neoliberal Times,” which could be read in conjunction with the fall 2024 issue, *How the Liberal Arts Work*, in *Profession*, a publication of the Modern Language Association (2024), which “promised to answer the question that students and faculty grapple with: In an era of neoliberal restructuring, political division, widespread misinformation, rising costs, and skyrocketing student debt, how and why and when do the liberal arts ‘work’?” Erber challenges the tendency to emphasize vocational training over liberal arts skills and unmasks the co-opting of critical thinking itself within the logic of neoliberal capitalism. He offers the idea of one’s college years as a moratorium, “a time for intellectual exploration and the freedom to pursue knowledge as an end in itself—for those who can afford it.”

A final section of this issue is devoted to language-learning strategies and internationalization efforts at an EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) institution.

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