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My Thirty-Five Year Love Affair With Liberal Education at GVSU

It all started as so many such romances do: on the rebound. I had left my former passion for strictly science and math as an undergraduate at a leading engineering school. There the concept of a humanities elective was a course in geology taught at the liberal arts university across the street. Now I was ready to experience liberal education (in both senses of the “L” word) at the University of Wisconsin—Madison in the mid-60’s, an exciting time to be a new graduate student.

I fell with a thud for the seductive and well-established Integrated Liberal Studies Program, the educational version of The Graduate’s Mrs. Robinson. All the classes were connected through common themes and were often taught by teams of senior faculty. Those of us who were ILS teaching assistants thought ourselves the luckiest of the bunch of TAs at Wisconsin.

Unfortunately, the guardians of the program felt I was in danger of malingering just to be near my love. Consequently, they broke us up, gave me a degree and sent me out into the world. As good fortune would have it, I met a much younger and inexperienced version of ILS here at Grand Valley State College. At the time she called herself Foundation and Distribution, but looked like my old flame. Little did I know that our mutual passion would remain after thirty-five years together.

OK, so it sounds like a winning entry in the world’s worst story contest. However, metaphors aside, I continue to grow in my fondness for liberal education and the way most of us at GVSU feel about it and practice it. If anything is missing, it is perhaps the way we do not always (usually?) succeed in conveying this to our students. We have probably all been guilty of urging our young charges [sic] out of General Education courses once or twice.

While much of our approach to students through the Liberal Education concept is much like an old curriculum shrunken to fit today’s student, we can communicate this to all without sacrificing the essence of learning.

In all my courses, I try to give students an appreciation for our majors, while communicating with them about how they will spend their time as students, by talking with their peers and other majors.

Liberal Education is the idea of knowledge for its own sake. It is a course in a major, something learned in another major, for another level. Our job is not to make students to be aware of this when they start our courses, but to explain the course in a particular area, such as chemistry, where I am able to teach a very specialized student audience, biological science and health science courses for example.

The most exciting thing for students is to ask them to teach. I have asked students directly related to their majors to teach in cultural history courses, art history. A direct result of the late 1970’s liberal education curriculum, in the late 1970’s liberal education to art majors for art history courses, resulted in a shift of courses in the area of science study and examples of the
of urging our young first year students to "get the gen­
eds [sic] out of the way." Even when I served on the
General Education Subcommittee I recall saying that
phrase once or twice.

While much "Liberal Education" is conveyed to
students through the general education program, the
concept is much more inclusive. Courses throughout the
curriculum should emphasize how a GVSU graduate
can communicate meaningfully at the appropriate level
to all without showing either superiority or inferiority.
In all my courses, especially the senior capstone meant
for our majors, I emphasize written and oral commu­
nication with diverse audiences. Few of our students
will spend their entire careers in communication only
with their peers.

Liberal Education also must explicitly connect areas
of knowledge for the student. Even the most technical
course in a major has some relationship to material
learned in another discipline, often at the freshman
level. Our job as liberal education-oriented faculty is
to be aware of these relationships and make them clear
in our teaching.

For me personally the greatest joy of teaching at a
liberal education university is the opportunity we have as
a broadly prepared faculty to expand our own horizons
as members of a community of learners. As a generalist
with a terminal degree in two rather different subject
areas (chemistry and the history of science), I have been
able to teach a variety of courses in those fields to diverse
student audiences. Taking additional coursework in the
biological sciences has enabled me to teach a number of
health science courses as a member of the Biomedical
Sciences Department.

The most exciting opportunities came from my being
asked to teach in two areas of deep interest, but not
directly related to my specialties. As a graduate student
in cultural history, I had to take some upper-level art
history courses. That led to a long-term appreciation for
art history. A discussion with GVSU's art historian in
the late 1970's led to my teaching the art history survey
to art majors for two years during his sabbatical. It also
resulted in a sabbatical project resulting in a history
of science study guide using well-known art works as
examples of the links between art and science.