

Jennifer Grant Haworth and
Clifton F. Conrad

During the past decade, many metropolitan universities have embraced an all-purpose mission and a limiting vision of liberal education. This has often led to a kind of illiberalism—as reflected in uncritical responses to seemingly insatiable community service demands as well as the maintenance of philosophical, structural, and symbolic barriers between liberal and professional education—that is undermining the university's unique role as the intellectual center for its broader community. Metropolitan universities can arrest the growth of illiberalism by re-visioning liberal education as liberal learning and developing strategies consonant with that end.

Liberating Education in Modern Metropolitan Universities

From the medieval universities of Bologna and Paris to contemporary research universities in Berlin and Baltimore, the city and the university have enjoyed a long and distinguished history. Over the past few decades, this relationship has been articulated and nurtured within our nation's rapidly growing and highly diverse metropolitan universities. Most of these institutions are *of* the city and not just *in* the city. They seek to fulfill a dual responsibility, serving as both facilitators for urban change and renewal and as teachers of the higher learning within their communities. While metropolitan universities have enjoyed great success, we take the position that this broad agenda has too often diluted their educational character.

From our perspective, it is by attempting to be all things to all people that many metropolitan universities have compromised their integrity as intellectual centers of liberal learning. In their race to serve constituent needs for specialized professional training, high-level technological research, and expanded noncredit continuing education opportunities, they have become more like all-purpose social service institutions than intellectual communities committed to enabling individuals to think broadly and critically about their profession, metropolitan settings, and global society. In our view, this orientation not only threatens their integrity as universi-

ties, but it likewise undermines efforts to liberate undergraduate education.

Our examination of metropolitan universities—which embraces a critique as well as a proposal for liberating education—is divided into three parts. To provide context, we begin by examining various definitions regarding the mission of metropolitan universities and liberal education. We then anchor our critique in what we view as the two major expressions of illiberalism in present-day metropolitan universities: their uncritical responsiveness to community service demands, and their continued maintenance of the traditional schism between liberal education and professional education. We then offer a revitalized vision of liberal learning and propose some strategies for achieving this goal.

The Roots of Illiberalism in Modern Metropolitan Universities

The mission of metropolitan universities has been broadly construed in recent years. These interpretations have ranged from general, all-purpose definitions to more focused accounts of the unique role of the university within a metropolitan environment. The idea of *liberal* education has also been widely debated in American postsecondary education. In tracing both broad and narrow conceptions of mission and liberal education, we suggest that different root understandings of these concepts may kindle illiberal or liberating tendencies in metropolitan universities.

Contrasting Views of Metropolitan Universities

In discussions of the mission of urban or metropolitan universities, one finds two sets of definitions that differ sharply in terms of their focus and specificity. In one conceptualization, metropolitan universities are viewed broadly as all-purpose institutions that respond, produce, and deliver a broad range of services to a diverse metropolitan clientele. This vision emphasizes responsiveness to meeting community-based business and industry needs through expanded educational programming and instruction, as well as a firm commitment to improving the quality of urban life through economic, social, and educational revitalization efforts within the university's larger community.

A contrasting conceptualization emphasizes the distinctive intellectual foundations of the university as an educational institution. *Intellectual activity* is the key term in this more focused conceptualization: It emphasizes that creative and critical inquiry is at the core of the university's mission as an educational institution. It also implies that the university as an institution is not principally concerned with meeting economic or business needs; rather it is committed to enriching the intellectual and educative dimensions of the community. This definition, of course, implies a more targeted vision for metropolitan universities as places where individuals gather together and give critical thought to a

range of topics that can, in turn, inform and generate reflective action within the larger community. The rich resources vested in the humanities, social and natural sciences, and professional fields can be employed to develop and contribute to the total enhancement of urban life.

Contrasting Views of Liberal Education

Many individuals and groups have also articulated an array of general and focused perspectives concerning the idea of a liberal education. Many have equated liberal education with the general education requirements students are normally required to complete during their first two years of college. Others have restricted their vision of liberal education to include only disciplines in the liberal arts and sciences, even going as far as William Bennett and Allan Bloom in dismissing the professional disciplines as "crass vocationalism." Still others, following in the tradition of the Yale Report of 1828, have argued that a liberal education provides individuals with the "furniture of the mind" necessary for full participation within society. For many, this "furniture" includes an informed understanding of history and literature, including the tradition of Western civilization.

Other individuals, however, have offered a vision of *liberal* education that moves beyond these highly structural and instrumental definitions. Rather than limiting liberal education to a college's general education curriculum or liberal arts and sciences disciplines, they invoke a broader, more holistic outlook on liberal education. By viewing liberal education as a *perspective* rather than as a commodity, these individuals seek to liberate the spirit of liberal learning within the academy.

From our perspective, too many metropolitan universities have at once embraced a broad all-purpose mission and a constraining vision of liberal education. Unfortunately, these widespread interpretations of institutional mission and liberal education have nurtured the growth of illiberal manifestations in our nation's metropolitan universities.

Illiberalism in Metropolitan Universities

In the first issue of *Metropolitan Universities*, Henry Winkler argued that "If the urban university does not remain ... primarily an academic institution ... then its ability to be effective, other than as another agency of government, will be seriously compromised." Like Winkler, we believe that all universities—as universities—are first and foremost academic centers of liberal learning. Distinguished from other social institutions by their *solitary expressed intention* to engage in deliberate intellectual thought, universities should be expected to exercise a broadly developed critical awareness in fulfilling their research, teaching, and service responsibilities. In recent years, however, we have found this *critical awareness* too often lacking within many universities. The tendency to take the easy road and bypass the fundamental intellectual work unique to the university is what we refer to as *illiberalism*. We explore two com-

mon forms of illiberalism in our nation's metropolitan universities: their uncritical responsiveness to community service demands, and their unquestioning maintenance of philosophical, structural, and symbolic barriers between liberal education and professional education.

Uncritical Responses to Community Service Demands

A wide range of corporate and civic pressures has bombarded our nation's metropolitan universities in recent years. Metropolitan universities have been under considerable pressure from business leaders and local residents to do more to serve local needs within their communities. These demands have included growing requests to retool professional workers and to conduct technological, business, and social research for area businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies.

A wide range of corporate and civic pressures has bombarded our metropolitan universities.

Metropolitan universities have responded to these requests for two primary reasons. First, within a context of an increasingly competitive financial environment, these invitations often provide highly attractive external funding opportunities for metropolitan universities. Second, as institutions "of the city," administrators have experienced enormous pressure to respond to their community's service needs. They have done so through the creation of urban research institutes, applied research think-tanks, and more lenient faculty policies concerning external consulting work.

As a result, many universities have evolved into "service-oriented institutions that have—wittingly and unwittingly—made service the lodestar that heavily informs the daily lives of faculty and administrators." (Conrad and Trani, p. 20)

We contend that this exaggerated service mission—to be all things to all people—has quietly but relentlessly compromised the foundational purpose of these universities as liberating centers for administrators, faculty, students, and community members. Illiberalism appears when excessive faculty consulting demands take a toll on undergraduate instruction in the form of hastily prepared lectures, missed appointments, and canceled classes. Further, illiberalism is manifest when faculty and administrators propose quick-fix and technocratic solutions to highly complex problems because, in the interest of time and money, these individuals are not given—or choose not to take—the time to develop critically informed, comprehensive analyses. From our perspective, such illiberal actions seriously jeopardize the unique intellectually based perspective that a university can provide to its metropolitan audience.

Finally, such illiberal expressions not only affect the lives of administrators, faculty, students, and community members, they also reflect on the integrity of metropolitan universities as educational institutions. For an institution to have integrity, it must be true to its purpose, both in grand design and in detailed execution. At present, we question how

faithful many metropolitan universities have been to their unique purpose as academic centers of liberal learning. Rather, much like Winkler in his article in the first issue of this journal, we believe that “we must constantly remind ourselves that our urban universities are first and foremost universities, not social service agencies, dispensers of intellectual fast food, or even part of the entertainment community of their communities.”

Unquestioning Maintenance of Philosophical, Structural, and Symbolic Barriers between Liberal and Professional Education

Operating from a deeply rooted and strongly reinforced assumption that a liberal education is restricted to a liberal *arts* education, many administrators and faculty members in our nation’s metropolitan universities have failed to question critically the philosophical, structural, and symbolic barriers between liberal and professional education within their own institutions. The unchallenged maintenance of these barriers is particularly distressing given the significant percentage of students who pursue professional undergraduate education in metropolitan areas. From our perspective, this marginalization of knowledge and faculty activity into *liberal* and *professional* is both illiberal and illogical, particularly in the complex environment of most metropolitan universities.

The schism between the *useful arts* and the *liberal arts* has existed for many years in American higher education. Bruce Kimball (see Suggested Readings) has aptly portrayed this division as largely philosophical and semantic:

Contemporary society argues that the useful is more important than the liberal; Faculty from liberal arts disciplines argue that the liberal is better than useful; Faculty from professional fields argue that the useful is actually liberal; and Faculty teaching the liberal arts argue that the liberal is actually useful. (p. 577)

This partitioning of the liberal arts and professional disciplines has served as a philosophical “great divide” within universities—metropolitan and otherwise. Biting criticisms of both the liberal arts and professional fields in recent years have only deepened the gulf between faculty in these disciplines. For example, liberal arts faculty have been reprimanded for failing to teach students how to think critically, communicate with clarity and force, and understand the cultural heritage of different groups. Faculty in professional fields have been sharply attacked as “crass vocationalists” who have failed to teach the broader contextual knowledge of their disciplines to students.

Critics have not stopped short of proposing various solutions to eradicate these *illiberal* tendencies among university faculty. Most commonly, many of the reform reports of the last decade have petitioned universities to strike a balance between liberal education—usually defined as the general education curriculum—and professional study, or the major. But as Joan Stark and Malcolm Lowther have argued, this balancing

act solution fails to recognize the common ground between liberal and professional study and, in so doing, only reinforces an illiberal schism in academe:

Balance implies that the two types of education are separate entities, one of which can be gained only at the expense of another. We submit that such a win-lose concept of balance is counterproductive. A student's whole education must be greater than the sum of its parts and is a joint responsibility of all faculty. We must avoid artificial distinctions, either between education for life and education for work or between liberal study and professional study. (p. 9)

University reward systems have reinforced the philosophical division between liberal and professional study.

The disciplinary structure and reward system within universities have likewise reinforced the philosophical division between liberal and professional study. For example, the traditional structure of the university into separate departments housing individual disciplines has frequently isolated faculty into narrow units and silenced the scholarly exchange of ideas across disciplines. In turn, interdisciplinary research and instruction have not always been supported. Similarly, symbolic barriers within our nation's universities have also discounted liberal learning among faculty and students. For instance, tenure and promotion criteria seldom acknowledge—much less reward—multi- and interdisciplinary research and service activities. Instead, they symbolically encourage faculty to reify narrow specialization at the expense of more expansive inquiry. Even more distressing is the minimal attention placed on good teaching in our nation's universities.

We submit that these constrictive policies compromise liberal undergraduate instruction in two interconnected ways. First, structural arrangements and reward systems that break knowledge down into discrete parts encourage faculty and students to do likewise. In today's complex and highly interdependent world, an interdisciplinary, holistic perspective is clearly needed to grapple with the technological and social problems of our metropolitan communities and global society. Insofar as universities create policies that militate against multi- and interdisciplinary activity, they fail to liberate faculty and students to explore, critically analyze, and make connections between disciplines. Second, and in a related fashion, barriers that separate faculty and students from each other undermine the development of a liberating community. We must not forget that the concept of a university was originally based on the Latin *universitas*, or a guild or community of scholars. Recent history has shown that policies and structures that support the artificial distinction between liberal and professional study promote illiberal philosophical divisions that frequently create cleavages, rather than connections, among individuals in the academy.

In short, we contend that metropolitan universities, in their efforts to respond to the insatiable demands of their academic, civic, and corporate communities, have embraced both an all-purpose mission as well as

a narrow conception of liberal education. It is these root interpretations of mission and liberal education, we believe, that have nurtured the budding growth of illiberalism within many postsecondary institutions. From our perspective, the corollary illiberal actions have undermined the university's unique role as the intellectual center for its broader community and, in a similar way, uncritically undermined the educational integrity of many metropolitan universities.

Liberating Education in Metropolitan Universities

If metropolitan universities are to stop the growth of illiberalism within their institutions, we believe they must rededicate themselves as academic centers devoted to liberal learning. From this perspective, the metropolitan university becomes a place where individuals systematically explore a range of issues from a *liberating perspective* based on holistic, critically informed thought. We offer a revitalized version of liberal education as liberal learning and propose some strategies for achieving this goal.

Re-Visioning Liberal Education in Metropolitan Universities

In recent years, a number of scholars, including Stark and Lowther, Peter Marsh, and Ernest Lynton and Sandra Elman, have dismissed the traditional schism between liberal and professional education as "little more than a tautology ... that is obscured by lingering evaluative connotations that associate liberal education grandly with thought and professional education crudely with skills." (Marsh, p. 12) In its place they have argued for a more holistic and integrative philosophy of liberal education that "liberates" learning across all disciplines, liberal arts and professional fields alike.

According to Zelda Gamson, a "liberating education" is premised on three central features. First, it values the development of a broadened, contextualized critical awareness among all individuals. Second, it stresses the importance of applying this critical awareness to everyday problems. And third, it encourages individuals to develop and use their knowledge and skills to liberate and empower themselves and others.

When specifically applied to undergraduate education, this "liberating" perspective takes on special importance. No longer are the liberal and professional disciplines illiberally conceived as the *thoughtful* and *useful* arts. Rather, these barriers are transcended by a common belief in liberal learning across all disciplines. As Lynton and Elman explain (see Suggested Readings), it is this "liberating" approach that is at the crux of a truly liberal education for all students:

Liberal education is concerned with relationships and complexity, with exercising judgment and dealing with conflicting values ... acquiring such [liberal] competence is inherently a synthesizing, multidisciplinary activity, bringing together the insights and methodologies of several pertinent

disciplines. Whether liberal education is seen as helping professionals understand the context in which they function in their occupation or enabling individuals to exercise their civic responsibilities in a knowledgeable and rational fashion, the central need is to be able to bring a variety of perspectives to bear on complex issues. (p. 64)

By emphasizing liberal learning across disciplines, a liberating approach seeks to develop the skills of holistic thought, critical awareness, contextual understanding, and synthetic reflection in students and faculty. These skills, in turn, assist liberal arts and professional education students in understanding the context in which various professions are rooted and likewise help them to practice their professions not only knowing how but also knowing why.

Why emphasize "liberating education" as a focal point for the metropolitan university? We offer three reasons. First, the diverse (cultural, occupational, age, gender) student population in metropolitan universities begs us to be open to a variety of ways of knowing and to the liberating views that such a context-aware and interdisciplinary perspective can offer to these students. Second, with the high percentage of professional education students enrolled in metropolitan universities, the need for contextual and critical awareness is absolutely necessary to

*Achieving liberal learning
within our nation's
metropolitan universities
will be a complex task.*

help them develop the skills of professional judgment and what Donald Schön calls "reflective practice" in addition to general technical skills and competencies. Finally, when faculty and administrators begin to work together and see the common ground between their disciplines, not only will students be more liberally educated, but university responses to metropolitan issues will be more broadly construed and liberally defined. It is at this point that the university as an intellectual center devoted to liberal learning can be reasserted.

Strategies for Liberating Education in Metropolitan Universities

John Steinbeck once quipped that it was the "nature of man as he grows older ... to protest against change, especially change for the better." There is no question that achieving liberal learning within our nation's metropolitan universities will be a time-consuming and complex task. We cannot expect to convert overnight thousands of academics who have uncritically accepted illiberal attitudes and beliefs for many years. However, by committing ourselves to the intellectual work unique to the university, we believe that in pressing for change we can go a long way toward liberating education in our nation's metropolitan universities.

In their 1988 report, *Strengthening the Ties that Bind*, Stark and Lowther offered a host of administrative and faculty strategies for integrating liberal learning into undergraduate education. Developed in concert with approximately forty administrators and faculty members from

colleges and universities across the nation, their more than thirty suggestions can be reduced to four general strategies.

- University administrators might initiate discussions among liberal and professional education faculty members targeted toward creating a definition of, and identifying the skills associated with, an educated person in today's society.
- Together with faculty, university administrators should revisit campus policies with a critical eye. They might consider asking the following questions: Are there unnecessary structural barriers that militate against liberal learning in the university? Do tenure and promotion criteria reward faculty for interdisciplinary research and teaching activities? Are funds available for integrative projects? In doing so, new policies should be developed that would facilitate liberal learning activities within the university.
- Administrators, in keeping with strategies one and two, should cultivate a campus culture that encourages integrative and collaborative activities focused on the goal of developing educated professionals.
- Faculty should be encouraged to develop a coherent curriculum that stresses not only breadth and depth, but interrelatedness and focus. A problem-solving focus can be helpful in achieving curricular integration (for example, viewing ethical misconduct in business within the broader context of philosophy, sociology, and psychology). Further, if students are required to study topics that are often viewed as tangential to their professional objectives, faculty must ensure that these requirements are viewed not as "added burdens.... It is essential to clarify for students the crucial relation of this knowledge to practice." (p. 40)

Metropolitan universities are a vibrant and growing facet of American higher education. We fear, however, that in their rush to respond to the overwhelming service demands of their broader communities as well as in their unquestioning acceptance of a constrictive vision of liberal education, they have often unwittingly compromised their integrity as universities rooted in the intellectual work that is at the core of higher learning. By redirecting their focus back to their original mission as academic centers of liberal learning, we believe that metropolitan universities can become liberating educational institutions for themselves as well as for their larger metropolitan communities. The new challenge of metropolitan universities, in the words of William Toole (see Suggested Readings) is:

to be professional in our devotion to our discipline and academic unit but at the same time liberal in our commitment to the goal of completeness—to the development of students [as well as others in the university] who will understand the importance of striving to see their education, their careers, their society, and their lives steadily and whole. (p. 31)

Suggested Readings

- Conrad, Clifton F., and Eugene P. Trani. "Challenges Met, Challenges Facing the Modern American University and Its Faculty." Clyde Wingfield, ed. *Faculty Responsibility in Contemporary Society*. Washington, DC: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1990: 1–25.
- Gamson, Zelda. *Liberating Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984.
- Kimball, Bruce A. "Liberal Versus Useful Education: Reconsidering The Contrast and Its Lineage." *Teachers College Record* 87 (1986): 575–587.
- Lynton, Ernest A., and Sandra E. Elman. *New Priorities for the University: Meeting Society's Needs for Applied Knowledge and Competent Individuals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
- Marsh, Peter, ed. *Contesting the Boundaries of Liberal and Professional Education: The Syracuse Experiment*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988.
- Rudnick, Andrew J. *The American University in the Urban Context: A Status Report and Call for Leadership*. Washington, DC: The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 1983.
- Schön, Donald D. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Stark, Joan S., and Malcolm A. Lowther. *Strengthening the Ties That Bind: Integrating Undergraduate Liberal and Professional Study*. Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 1988.
- Toole, William B. "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge: A Perspective for the 1980s." *Educational Record* 68 (Winter 1987): 27–31.