Liberal Arts Lunch – 12/5/12

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In the movement from delivery of knowledge to development of skills, we find ourselves with too many requirements AND not enough requirements.

There’s not enough thoughtfulness regarding differences among types of inquiry in different disciplines. We have to build in reflection on students’ part.

Need recognition of the difference between being cultured and being educated. Liberal Arts implies getting our students cultured with the sensibilities they need.

We might not all agree on the meaning of the liberal arts, but we have to agree to ask the question.

It’s very desirable for a small subset of students to be able to deal with the uncertainty of the future and meet the challenges. How many of those can we reasonably afford?

As a campus, we can be more idealistic. The liberal arts mean inter-disciplinary awareness; differences and translation across. We need a variety of fields to address the big questions of our time.

We haven’t been successful at articulating the different modes of inquiry necessary to achieve that [i.e., variety of fields addressing big questions].

There’s a problem in that students don’t see the value of their education until later, and we ourselves don’t fully believe in that value.

It [educating students in addressing big Qs from a variety of modes of inquiry] exists here, but we’re not articulating and selling it well enough for every student to get it.

Question of whether “outsourcing” courses is a good model for achieving liberal arts goals

An example of a model curriculum: Studio Art has created categories of inquiry and students must take a selection and synthesize their studio art within their larger view of the world.

Changes might be needed to the distribution requirements. What if distribution req’s had to be completed early, and *then* declare their major afterward?

There are systematic forces in play that work against our efforts: e.g., increase in web use (which encourages targeted searching in favor of exploratory browsing); things that discourage advising (like moving to online registration for 1st-years); decreased opportunities for interacting with students outside of class; credit-seeking because of over-saturated schedules; ‘Efficiency vs. Philosophy’.

We need to structure things to sustain and follow-up on ideas from discussions like this one.

There’s an imbalance in the numbers of students in different majors. Should that be?

In Theatre, there’s been an intentional move to make requirements less obvious to students so they have to seek out advising and dialogue.

Question of whether we’re actually equipped to do the kind of advising that this discussion is suggesting we need.

Given students’ and faculty members’ many demands, we need systems in place that support relatedness among students and faculty.

Model for doing FYSEs [credited to Rich Wolfson]: Mondays = content, Wednesdays = skills, Fridays = How are you doing?

*Our* need to be more Liberal Artsy in order to make the connections well with and for students.

Admissions issues: Are we selecting for qualities consonant with our goals? Perhaps not. We take *driven* students who present profiles of measurable and measured skills – this is counter to our goals, and is supported by high school culture and by self-selection.

Are we asking students to develop another sort of portfolio here in their 4 years?

We have systems, procedures, and policies that drive student tracking; we can deconstruct some of those. Also, we can ask where it is and is not working. Some examples of where it’s working: Symposia that model the liberal arts by having 3 faculty presenting on their different approaches to the same question or problem; team-teaching; example of Ursinus College’s “Common intellectual experience” that brings in a variety of disciplines.

We need to ask the ‘Why’ of liberal arts, not just the ‘What.’

There’s value in rethinking the distribution requirements, possibly along the lines of “key capabilities” such as public speaking.

The world of cost and relevance is an uncomfortable one for us and brings external pressures that we have to confront.

Debate about the extent to which we do or do not control the cost.