Editor’s Note

General Education in a New Era: Reforms, Challenges and the Possibility of East-West Learning

Jing Lin
University of Maryland, College Park

More than 2500 years ago, in Greece as well as in China, and maybe in India and other parts of the world, teachers and students sat under a tree and learned. There were no small topics to discuss, as students probed with their teachers about what was the origin of the universe, what were the elements that made our world, or what were the meaning and purposes of life. Learning was for freedom and growth,¹ for exploration, for cultivating the “inner light”, and for building a student’s character. Subjects such as philosophy, physics, math, astronomy, arts, music, were not taught and learned separately but organically integrated. The eventual goal of such an education was for students to find “truth” in life and become an “educated being.” In Plato’s term, this being would be a “Philosopher King” who embodied wisdom, virtue and leadership quality to govern a state,² and in Confucius’s mind this person would be someone called Junzi who exemplified perfection in knowledge and virtue, who had the capability to serve the community and the world.³

Today, we are living a highly fragmented and diversified world. Learning has become very specialized. Students who study natural and social sciences do


not have to learn philosophy and be “bothered” with critical issues such as those about the world’s origin, life’s purpose and human-nature relation. They just need to be highly focused and acquire some very specific skills and knowledge in a narrow field, and those that are granted the most advanced degree in learning are given the title of “Doctor of Philosophy,” with the term philosophy rendered almost irrelevant to what they learn.

Meanwhile, we are living in a world that is becoming smaller with globalization, and countries are learning from each other and competing against each other. Despite the predominant trend to specialize and narrow down in higher learning, there have been endeavors to maintain some elements of the traditional pursuit of “wisdom”, through history, philosophy, math, arts . . .—that maintains some breadth and depth in the students' learning, and partially help students to maintain the spirit of curiosity and imagination. While students are recognized as distinctive individuals, they also are urged to be social beings that should have the qualities of an engaged citizen, with moral integrity and a sense of social responsibility. These endeavors in higher education have been termed “liberal arts education,” which has been vigorously pursued in many liberal arts colleges in the United States, and which is provided through a general curriculum for all students, regardless of their major or field of study in big public and private universities. In the United States, today, many universities provide a general education for the teaching of some common core values, such as democracy, and aim at outcomes such as ethical reasoning, analytical skills, communication skills and critical thinking. Students take a number of courses from natural sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities, and some have requirement for study abroad, multicultural learning and civic services.

Although liberal arts education is a term borrowed from the West to China, and the provision of liberal arts education to students is a phenomenon attempted by Chinese universities only for a decade, ancient Chinese education has exemplified the mentality of liberal arts education. For example, Confucius conducted his teaching through dialogues, urging his students to be reflective and mindful of integration of knowledge and action, and Confucian scholars needed to equip themselves with knowledge in classics, poetry, painting, archery, music. They need to be active intellectuals serving this world.4 Taoist scholars strongly focused on freely opening up their mind and heart to be engaged in the universe, and be immersed with the spirit of the mountains