

## **1. What is the overriding value of a liberal arts education today, and how is it particularly vital at Mills?**

Flexibility. It may seem ironic that something as rooted in tradition as liberal arts education could have as its chief value the flexibility it offers those who possess it. But recall the medieval roots of liberal arts in the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy). These evolved into the study of language, philosophy, history, literature, and science. All along the way, the content has been subject to change but the goals remain constant: acquiring general knowledge and developing one's overall intellectual capacities of reason and judgement. Done well, a liberal arts education is like a gymnasium for the mind as opposed to narrowly focussed training program for a single sport. Fitness for citizenship, one might say, is the goal.

This value of a liberal arts education rests on its capacity to produce highly skilled, non-parochial, non-provincial citizens who recognize the value of knowledge beyond their chosen specialty, and who strive to learn things there is not enough time to learn rather than cynically asking "why do I need to know that?" Liberal arts training produces people who are confident in the knowledge that they can learn anything they might need to know. They are curious. They want to find out and they know HOW to find out.

Thus defined, I don't think it is "particularly" vital today at Mills. It is, to be sure, alive and well for now, but we are faced with many challenges. What needs to be included in the liberal arts is rapidly expanding at a time when the institution is not growing – this means that educational decisions get transformed into contests in which there will be winners and losers. A liberal arts education works best when students are at least partially sheltered from the nitty gritty tasks of everyday life and yet more and more of our "full time" students are really part time and so are forced to squeeze their education into tighter and tighter schedules. Students arrive at college less prepared than ever and so fewer assumptions can be made about where the curriculum starts with them – "core knowledge" becomes "basic skills." An excellent liberal arts curriculum requires institutional focus and it has to be "job one," but at times we seem to be investing large amounts of energy and resources in programs that, while they enhance the institution's prestige, are not directly related to our "core business" of undergraduate liberal arts education. Excellence in liberal arts also requires openness to change and experiment but Mills is sometimes too dominated by legacy ("we have a long history of excellence in X" or "we tried that already"). Together these things represent serious challenges.

What **IS** particularly vital at Mills is the continued passion of the faculty for the ideal of the liberal arts education and their willingness to continue to explore ways to make it continue to evolve even in the face of such challenges. For a school of its size, Mills has an enormous stock of human capital that is highly invested in the liberal arts tradition. This is a resource that it has taken years to build and it is what makes a liberal arts education at Mills what it is. And so, despite the litany of challenges I just recited, I remain extremely optimistic about Mills' future as a liberal arts college.

## **2. What is the role of a liberal arts education in transmitting values through generations of students?**

Well, let's be careful not to imply that liberal arts education is a panacea for anything. It's a good thing, but giving some to everyone wouldn't solve the world's problems. One of the great flaws in American public policy and conventional wisdom in the second half of the century has been the consistent tendency to load onto schools and colleges tasks formerly fulfilled by church, family, and community. We need to be careful not to slip into that line of thinking when we talk about the role of liberal arts colleges in the contemporary world. Still, it is possible, I think, to identify two or three core values that continue to guide the process and, when we succeed, get passed on to the next generation.

The greatest value transmitted by liberal arts colleges is the idea that there is value inherent in being educated, in being literate, in being learned. In the face of rampant vocationalization, hyper-individualism, and the demand for short term returns to investment, a liberal arts education stands for the idea that there is value in learning some things for their own sake, that the long term investment in the development of one's mind is itself a worthwhile goal, that coherence of thought and clarity of expression are cultural values worth maintaining. Persons thus trained may also be highly sought after by employers and certainly we sell our services on this basis, but this does not constitute a value that we are transmitting in the sense meant here.

Related to this, we seek to instill the values of questioning authority and doing so with dignity, sophistication, and effectiveness. We are trying to create a new generation of women who take their own ideas seriously because they know how to weigh them against evidence, tradition, and the ideas of others. A role of the liberal arts is, in other words, the training of responsible and effective change makers.

A last "value" that the liberal arts education contributes is solidarity. We social scientists have known for a long time that shared categories are a strong basis for social solidarity. In the case of liberal arts, having a shared body of ideas, experiences, and texts across specialties, as well as across generations, promotes the possibility of what the structuralists might call diachronic and synchronic solidarity. When the liberal arts serves to teach each succeeding generation of students something about the categories used by their forebears and, simultaneously, something of the categories of their different contemporaries, the net result is a strengthening of both the warp and the weft of the social fabric. The health of society depends on this. The combined forces of narrow vocational specialization, identity enclavization, and legitimated hyper-self interest threaten a social fragmentation far worse than the "individualism" that has worried thinkers for so long.

### **3. How do we infuse globalism, multiculturalism and service into a liberal arts curriculum?**

These three things can't be talked about in the same breath. I would argue strongly for separating them, or at least separating the first two from the third. "Service" is a 90s reincarnation of a sentiment that has shown up several times in American higher education this century. It is tied to a complex set of political agendas and shouldn't be spoken of as something that "obviously" needs to be built into a liberal arts curriculum. Like globalism and multiculturalism, it is something to talk with, and listen to, one another about. One of the things we try to teach our students is not to grab onto slogans and buzzwords, but to listen to different perspectives, research the background, consider the opponent's logic, and so on, but we generally fail to do this in our own practice. Some of what "service" stands for resonates with what some of us believe in or what we are already doing and so we start

saying that it should be a central part of education. Maybe it should be, maybe it shouldn't be, but we don't find this out by jumping on a bandwagon or quoting what some famous person said in a speech. It will be adapted as a result of open, informed, and reasoned discussions about motivations, methods, and results.

As for globalism and multiculturalism, the most important things are, first, not to assume that we all know and agree on exactly what they are, and, second, to recognize that there are about these things differences of opinion among intelligent people of good will. One of Mills' (and other institutions too) greatest weaknesses is the lack of open, intelligent, and rational discussion about topics like these. Instead they are treated as positions that one is simply for or against, and those who won't parrot the buzz words are labeled as being "against change" or "not in touch with the changes taking place in the world." That rhetorical move is the greatest impediment to wider integration of globalism and multiculturalism in the liberal arts curriculum.

In reality, globalism in education is a still emerging concept and multiculturalism is highly multidimensional. There is no one single style of either, no agreed upon set of texts, values, or procedures. That means it's not just a matter of more or less of it or being for or against it. These are not the intellectual equivalent of the new math or a change in technology that carry a mandate of "adopt or die." Instead, we need to talk about their varieties and their various plusses and minuses. Unfortunately, though, the very diversity of opinions and "takes" on these topics makes us afraid to start really talking about them. Too many people have allowed these issues to turn into the latest fad that should be joined because it is the latest thing. That's not the liberal arts tradition. We need to push one another to explore our disagreements, defend our positions, and modify our positions in the face of new evidence or persuasive arguments. We need to try new things and assess the results. Those ARE the liberal arts tradition. To my mind, this is something that Mills isn't very good at these days. The community seems to lack role models for how one has a reasoned discussion about this stuff. The very thing academics are trained to do – reasoned discourse, evaluation of evidence, open minded consideration of alternatives – is too seldom practiced here.

In academia one should always be skeptical of the charlatans who tirelessly campaign either for and against things like globalism and multiculturalism. There are a lot of people in academia today who are trying to make their careers "infusing" these into liberal arts as if they were brand new ideas that run completely counter to the conventional wisdom. There's a certain disingenuousness about that project, though, because, in fact, the roots of globalism and multiculturalism are already there in the liberal arts tradition. The obvious first step toward "infusing" is to build on what is there, but there's little hay to be made that way. People don't make their careers recognizing what is already going on or guiding gradual change. Deanships are created, grants sought, and centers established to transform and "redo the whole thing." We would rather spend ten million to start an interdisciplinary center for global cultural studies than spend one percent of that amount to implement a foreign language requirement, that old stalwart of multiculturalism and globalism both. Only an unrealistic optimist would argue that the former will give you 100 times the "multicultural impact" of the latter, but just try suggesting a language requirement at most schools – even the foreign language faculty will be against it!

There are signs here that Mills is going about the "infusing" process in the right way although those who want to make "transformation" their claim to fame are probably not

satisfied with the pace. Neither, I suspect are those who are in the game for the short term rewards it offers those who know how to ride bandwagons. On good days we focus on building on our strengths and progress to date, of teaching old dogs new tricks, on enhancing rather than replacing. Given resources and incentives, instructors retool and rethink, question premises, experiment with new approaches. It's a slow process, but that's an inherent property of the liberal arts. They've been experimenting with the new and transforming themselves for a very long time. Their resistance to fads qua fads, when paired with their self criticism, experimentation, openness to reason, readiness to debate and discuss, is part of why we value them in the first place and why they are still worth doing well.

#### **4. What's unique about the Mills "brand" of liberal arts?**

I'm a little leery about using the language of commerce here – resistance to commercial culture might be added to the list of values we talked about earlier.

One must, of course, be cautious about claims of uniqueness. Most such claims reveal more about the narrowness of the speaker's experience than the special qualities of the thing being described. Still, there are two things that distinguish the liberal arts education one can find at Mills. One is rooted in history, the other in change.

First, let's make no bones about it, one thing that sets Mills apart is that we are a liberal arts college for women. It's so central that we often think we need to dress the fact up with line after line of verbiage about what that means, but we don't need to do that. There are not that many institutions still doing what we are doing. What we've come to call "women centered" education means different things to different people, but if we honestly pursue excellence in "developing the student's overall intellectual capacities" and we are doing that for a student body of all women then our "brand" of liberal arts remains a revolutionary act in a still gendered society/world. That doesn't make us unique, but it does put us in a very small and select group of institutions in the world. The centrality of this feature, the fact that everyone in the learning community is self-conscious about it, continues to give the Mills liberal arts tradition an "edge."

Second, Mills is actively trying to discover how it needs to evolve for the new century and millennium. Some among us think they know the answers, but enough of us aren't sure to keep the search active. We are blessed by a relatively labile tradition that provides a firm foundation without holding back change. We continue to grapple with how to combine honoring our legacy of fine arts and education with strengths we need to develop in the new century. We are daily learning how to work with a student body composed of women of diverse class and cultural backgrounds and life situations. We struggle with how to use graduate programs to enhance rather than compete with our "core business" of undergraduate liberal arts. These ongoing challenges keep the entire Mills community engaged in discovering how the liberal arts curriculum will evolve here. This ongoing creative tension between tradition and innovation makes the Mills "brand" what it is.