

Strengthening Liberal Arts Education by Embracing Place and Particularity
A Proposal to the Teagle Foundation from Calvin College
September 2005

At a recent “state of the community” breakfast, leaders from business, education, and the government discussed the present and future of the city of Grand Rapids. While all acknowledged we are going through tough economic times related to the loss of area manufacturing jobs, many expressed a measured optimism. They asserted that we have resources in Grand Rapids to help us rebuild and maintain our fine city, in particular the new biomedical corridor and the technological training offered by our community college.

This response by civic leaders prompted the following questions that now inform our proposal: In a city with ten colleges and universities (including branches of state universities), why weren’t the liberal arts mentioned as a valuable resource for enhanced city life? How can the liberal arts be identified as a major resource for the understanding and enrichment of a particular place? And how would this linkage between a particular place and the resources of the liberal arts transform, enrich, and strengthen the liberal arts themselves?

Big questions are the lifeblood of liberal arts education: Who am I? How do I relate to people and the earth around me? What is a good society? Are there standards for beauty? For justice? How do good communities work? For much of the history of the liberal arts, these questions took on a placeless, timeless quality. The questions of great philosophers, artists, and humanists were and are the questions that apply to us all. The proper educational movement was assumed to be from the concrete to the abstract, from the local to the global, and from particularity to universality.

These assumptions of timelessness and placelessness have changed in recent years. Colleges and universities have moved their theorizing from “ivory towers” to local communities through enhanced internships and practicums, well designed service-learning experiences, and college-community partnerships. Calvin is a leader in the academic service-learning movement and the national conversation about engaged scholarship, and places a high priority on the development of genuine educational partnerships within our community.

We are embedded in a particular community with particular issues, strengths, and needs. As we plan for engaged scholarship, it must grow out of the resources and issues where we are embedded. The needs here (urban revitalization, literacy, education, racial tension, environmental concerns) create the context from which our scholarship of engagement grows. This leads us to ask: how can the liberal arts tradition serve the common good in a particular place? How should this particular place influence and shape the liberal arts tradition at Calvin? How can we use our city as text to strengthen liberal arts education for our students?

Our questions about engaged scholarship also relate to our identity as an institution with a strong history in liberal arts and liberal-arts infused professional programs. Calvin College began its institutional life as a pre-professional program, designed first for educating future ministers and then future teachers. Throughout, the liberal arts have been central to Calvin’s educational philosophy and goals, with the contextual disciplines - philosophy, history, arts, and sciences – providing the frame and the foundation for work in the disciplines. We graduate a significant number of our students in professional programs (engineering, education, nursing, accounting), all of whom take at least half of their courses in the “core” curriculum. Our engineering majors read Plato and Shakespeare; our nurses study Descartes and Augustine. Calvin has taken the lead among liberal arts colleges in grounding professional programs deeply and thoroughly in the liberal arts.

We are well placed, therefore, to write a white paper at the convergence of these streams of theoretical work in higher education and to make practical suggestions to move the liberal arts forward, focusing our work on this question: *How will liberal arts be seen as an important resource for members of a particular community?*

We think the answer to this question lies in the attention to the relationship between liberal arts and place. We propose to write a white paper that addresses this issue. The specific structure will develop as we work together, but a tentative outline and questions that will guide our project include:

A. How have place and particularity contributed to the traditional liberal arts? (1) How has place functioned historically as a value in liberal arts education? To what extent have the classic questions about justice, beauty, civic life, tolerance, and so on, been based on questions that arise in a particular place? (2) What is the educational movement between particularity and the abstract? What are the epistemological implications of this movement for students? For scholars? For institutions?

B. From the city to the college: How does contemporary city life relate to big themes in the liberal arts? What are resources from the liberal arts tradition that enliven and enrich city life? How do city leaders and community residents describe the influence and continuing relevance of their own liberal arts education?

C. From the college to the city: How do faculty come to understand and contribute to the local community? Much has been written about “the rootless professors” who move from university to university in pursuit of advancement. (1) How do we help faculty “embrace their place” and thus conceptualize their academic, theoretical questions in ways that understand the strengths and challenges of a particular community. (2) How do university professors new to the city of Grand Rapids learn about the resources and challenges of a specific place, so that they can direct their scholarship toward local issues and collaborative work with colleagues in nearby colleges? (3) What are the promising approaches that we see in our own and other institutions that link faculty, classrooms, and community?

D. How do students move into an awareness and embrace of place? (1) How does attentiveness to place interact with the virtues presumed to be an outcome of a liberal arts education? How do the traditional student outcomes of liberal arts education relate to the demands and desires of city life? (2) How do students learn to embrace this city with its resources and challenges? How do they learn how their particular actions as residents contribute to the public good or public harm? (3) Is “embracing your place through civic engagement” a transferable value? I.e. how have our alumni become involved in the particular communities where they now find themselves? Do these graduates have recommendations for the kinds of liberal arts education that would have been particularly helpful to them? (4) How can the students involved in Grand Rapids colleges and universities identify with the city as an important place, and identify their own liberal arts education as a valuable resource for helping them live as involved citizens of a particular place?

E. Reclaiming and renewing the liberal arts.. (1) Do we risk overplaying place in a virtual, globalized, “flat” world, or is there enduring value in emphasizing place and particularity? (2) What is the role of class issues in the relationship between liberal arts and a community? Is there a way that community responsibility can keep a classical liberal arts education from being a classist education? (3) How can multiple universities, bound by place, work together to create “higher education synergy” around significant city issues? (4) How does commitment to a place and its intertwined relationships lend itself to alternative ways of understanding philosophy, history, the arts, the sciences?

What resources do we bring?

- Calvin College has a very strong faculty in the liberal arts.
- Our curriculum, in both the traditional and professional programs, gives priority to an extensive liberal arts core, with courses in philosophy, religion, sciences, and the arts, *for all students*.
- We have actively promoted academic service learning (www.calvin.edu/admin/slc), engaged scholarship, and community/college partnerships. We have just completed a HUD COPC grant that involved 15 academic departments, and our faculty publish widely on community-based scholarship.
- Many Calvin alumni hold positions of civic leadership in Grand Rapids and surrounding communities.
- Colleges and universities in Grand Rapids are beginning to explore ways to work together for the city.

Participants:

A faculty, administrator, trustee, and alumni team will lead the campus in an investigation into these issues, directed by Claudia Beversluis, Dean for Instruction and Professor of Psychology, and Gail Heffner, Director of Community Engagement. Team members include:

James Bratt, Professor of History
Lee Hardy, Professor of Philosophy
Ruth Groenhout, Professor of Philosophy
Jennifer Holberg, Professor of English
Janel Curry, Dean for Scholarship and Research,
Professor of Geography

James Haagsma, Calvin College Board of Trustees
David Warners, Professor of Biology
Jeff Bouman, Dir. of Service Learning Center
Michael Van Denend, Dir. of Alumni
Relations
Clarence Joldersma, Professor of Education

Research and Writing Timeline:

A. Reading and writing group—In spring, 2006 the team will form a reading group to study the literature on history of the liberal arts, applied scholarship and professional education, new urbanism and the concept of place, concepts of place and civic engagement, and ethics of care to move our conversation and conceptual development forward (see critical bibliography, Appendix A). The team will gather for an intensive week of reading, discussion, and writing in the summer of 2006 to identify and plan for the larger liberal arts themes we will further explore in subsequent thematic working groups.

B. Thematic working groups—We will divide into at least three working groups based on larger liberal arts themes, inviting several city leaders to participate and adding students to each group. Over the summer and fall of 2006 we will conduct interviews with a variety of city leaders and residents, and begin analyzing these interviews for the ways that larger liberal arts themes influence decision making and quality of life. For example, we will identify leaders in non-profit and for-profit housing and explore how themes of beauty and justice influence their work. Calvin has an extensive summer research program for students, and the students assigned to this project will be supervised in the context of this summer program.

C. Research on Faculty—We will conduct focused group interviews with faculty from the four academic divisions of the college to explore the connections between their academic work (including teaching and scholarship) and current city issues. We will describe in detail the steps faculty members go through to link the abstract approaches of their disciplines to specific opportunities of a unique place. We will explore the teaching and scholarship results of a faculty bus tour of learning sites in the city.

D. Student research—We will conduct in-depth interviews with upper-division students that 1) live on campus, 2) in intentional Calvin-owned neighborhood housing, and 3) in rental housing close to the city core. These interviews will explore student knowledge of and care for their neighborhoods and city issues as we attempt to describe the liberal arts building blocks of learning to care for a community.

E. Alumni Survey—We will include questions about involvement with and identification with a specific place in our annual survey of alumni, and attempt to link this involvement with undergraduate experiences. We will engage the Alumni Association and Board of Trustees in strategic focus groups around this question: How do our alumni understand the movement between the practical questions of their local involvements and the larger questions of their liberal arts education?

F. Invited Speakers: Several experts in these issues will be invited to address campus and consult with the team in 2006. Possible speakers include Nel Noddings, Martha Nussbaum, Henry Louis Gates.

G. Consultation with other colleges and universities— During the summer of 2007 we will invite colleagues from three local and two non-local colleges and universities for a workshop with two purposes: intensive analysis our findings and an identification of possible next steps for higher education collaboration within the city. This workshop will allow us to test a theory of place-based liberal arts learning, to refine our case-studies, and to provide feedback for a first draft of our Teagle white paper.

H. Final Analysis and Writing—In summer 2007, drawing from both practice and theory to identify best practices and determine next steps for Calvin College and the Grand Rapids community, we will describe multiple ways in which the liberal arts can and should influence the burgeoning “civic engagement” and community-partnership literature and practice in higher education. Finally, we will describe ways in which our study helps to enliven and enrich our understanding of the traditional liberal arts.

Outcomes and Evaluation

We will produce a white paper organized around the theme of place and the liberal arts that distills our learning as described above. This paper will include a critical bibliography and analysis, relevant data, promising approaches, and implications for the future.

As a result of our process, we will also have the following outcomes. Objectives that also serve as a quantitative metric to determine the effectiveness of the project are marked with an asterisk.

- Three or more working groups will be formed around the traditional themes of the liberal arts. Each of these groups will include Calvin liberal arts faculty, several students, and at least two city leaders.
- * At least four links will be strengthened between liberal arts faculty and Calvin alumni who work in strategic areas in our city. These links will lead to further educational collaborations and a renewed sensitivity to the resources of and need for liberal arts education.
- Six city-based case studies will be developed for liberal arts classes. We will describe the critical educational building blocks required for student use of these case studies.
- * We will begin conversations with at least three other local colleges around the issues of the liberal arts and local engagement, and we will begin some collaborative planning.
- We will involve 25 alumni who hold positions of leadership in this community.
- The college will highlight this topic at its fall faculty conference in 2007.
- * On at least one public occasion, Grand Rapids city leaders will identify the liberal arts resources within this city as important for city health and future planning.

Finally, this process will position us to take the following “next steps” in civic engagement that is informed and shaped by liberal arts questions and discussions:

- * Three liberal arts departments will include civic engagement in their strategic planning and will identify ways that their disciplines are uniquely able to address important city issues.
- * At least two additional Grand Rapids colleges/universities will join our civic engagement bus tour
- * At least two intercollegiate faculty research collaborations will develop with the purpose of linking liberal arts and city issues.
- * Collaborations between local colleges and universities will continue to help college students understand and embrace their roles as residents of Grand Rapids.

Evaluation—The ultimate evaluative question, of course, is this: will our examination of place and particularity provide valuable resources for other places and other liberal arts communities? To answer this question, we will involve representatives from three local and two non-local colleges and universities as a review board to assess a penultimate draft of our white paper and to consider its usefulness for their institutions and communities. The group will consider questions such as these: can the case studies be used as a model for producing case studies in other communities? Can the specific bridges between big questions and local issues be replicated in other communities? In other colleges? These conversations, about the move from our particular situation to broader application, will also be described in our white paper.

Conclusion—Calvin is positioned particularly well to address these questions. Having taken a leadership position among undergraduate institutions not only for excellence in liberal arts education, but also for integrating the liberal arts deeply within and throughout professional programs, we bring honed resources to this discussion of the liberal arts and the particularity of place. We look forward to researching these questions and producing scholarship that will strengthen the role of liberal arts education in today’s world.