

## **Integration as the New (General) Education**

Cynthia Brandenburg  
*Champlain College, USA*

Michael Kelly  
*Champlain College, USA*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The authors articulate how the contemporary realities of higher education do not square with its existing structures. Specifically, the disciplinary siloing of knowledge inhibits our ability to sponsor learning experiences that prepare students to solve complex problems. The authors contend that allowing for the primacy of integration is a way to answer questions about the worth of a college degree from an increasingly skeptical public concerned about higher education's utility. Integration, the article contends, provides a bridge between the growing trend of higher education as vocational training and more classic forms of liberal arts education that remain an integral part of the academy.*

**Keywords:** Integration, Higher education, General education, Future of higher education, Institutional viability

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**T**he story of American higher education in the 21st century is told in many ways. Some versions offer up a transcendental beacon of hope for our collective future prosperity, while other more widely circulated ones read like a faltering tale of desperation and despair. Of course, the truth likely falls somewhere in the middle, which makes sustained efforts to intentionally explore—and reshape—the nature of current and future educational efforts all the more relevant.

The complexity of the contemporary landscape is perhaps best revealed through a short exploration of some of the variables which have contributed to such competing narratives in the first place. On the one hand,

many of the factors that distinguished the American system in the past persist. The enormous diversity in types of institutions, from research universities and residential private colleges, to community colleges, online degree programs, and for-profit options, allows multiple access routes for potential students. As Derek Bok (2013) notes in his book *Higher Education in America*, our typical conception of the residential undergraduate college experience now accounts for less than 20 percent of students enrolled. For the rest, higher education is obtained through commuter pathways, part-time, later in life, or online. From this perspective, the opportunity for the public to benefit broadly from educational offerings and engage in life-long learning has perhaps never been stronger. With increased potential access, the diversity of individuals who can receive a college degree theoretically expands, and a greater swath of the population can enjoy the accompanying economic prosperity while actively and meaningfully contributing to the advancement of society writ large. This is the dream of higher education for the public good.

On the other hand, with a college degree becoming the new high school diploma as a prerequisite for gaining entrance into the majority of career fields (and additional credentials required for upward career mobility), the pressures to attend--and the impact upon those who don't (or can't)--become magnified. The costs of earning a degree are escalating, and the burden of this reality is increasingly borne by individual students and their families as sources of public support dry up. As a result, the promise of increased access remains unrealized, and the importance that degrees translate into practical individual economic advantages, as opposed to some idealized form of an informed and engaged citizenry, takes precedent. Nowhere is this more obvious than on the United States Department of Education's College Scorecard, which features "salary after attending" as one of the top 3 criteria by which to judge a particular institution. Teaching with integrity in an environment that privileges future earning power over other important but less easily measured metrics can be a challenge.

Finally, there is a growing awareness that the biggest problems we face on a local, national and global scale are increasingly complicated--or "wicked," as described by Brown, Harris, and Russell (2010). Creating just and sustainable communities, tackling environmental threats, building comprehensive and inclusive global partnerships for peace--these are just some of the critical imperatives for the 21st century. Solving such issues will require broad-based, multi-faceted, inclusionary and collaborative efforts. The narrow expertise of a few elite and highly educated individuals can no longer sustain our future collective prosperity. We need all hands on deck, and in this regard, higher education plays a critical role. The same is true on a smaller scale in the professional world of the 21st century. The kinds of problems to be tackled and decisions that need to be made in professional settings increasingly require complex skill sets that don't neatly align with predefined academic disciplines or technical training programs. In order to

fulfill higher education's dual promise of personal and societal growth, the entire enterprise may need some remodeling.

How can we make sense of these realities in a way that helps to inform what we actually do on the ground within the academic institutions where we work? First off, we can begin by acknowledging that these complexities are real and worth paying attention to. As educators, we have a responsibility to respond to the challenges of how higher learning can—and should—most effectively serve societal needs. In order to meet the challenge, colleges and universities may have to shift their own structures to function differently than they have in the past, and be willing to explore modified approaches to historically entrenched disciplinary perspectives.

Once we accept that external world realities might necessitate internal institutional and academic accommodations, we can begin to reimagine what we do given the new context. Finally, we can embrace the idea that through experimentation, flexibility, and a willingness to reshape our own assumptions about disciplinary identities, we might discover more appropriate and meaningful approaches to the kinds of thinking, learning and teaching that the world needs most.

The ideas we propose here have grown out of our own particular experiences over the past 10 years at one small, private, professionally-focused institution. When considering the differences between a professionally-focused college and a trade-school, situating professionalism within broader societal and cultural contexts and offering a holistic education that not only prepares students to be successful in the workplace, but more importantly, to be thoughtful contributing members of society, becomes paramount. For us, an intentional approach to this form of professionally-focused higher education began with reconfiguring the liberal learning students were exposed to as part of their general education requirements. But this reconfiguration turned out to be just the beginning of the longer, ongoing evolutionary story that has led us to embrace the notion of integrative teaching and learning as the very core of what ought we do.

In 2007, following Champlain College's shift from a primarily two-year degree granting school to a bachelor's and master's degree-granting institution, its approach to general education was fundamentally changed. Gone were the days of menu-driven general electives; in their place came a common, scaffolded, liberal arts Core designed to complement the educational experience for all students, regardless of profession focus. In keeping with our goal of creating a practically relevant and cohesive experience, interdisciplinarity was adopted as the defining feature of the new curriculum, and discipline-specific faculty members were required to adapt accordingly by using interdisciplinary teaching and learning techniques in the classroom.

Two components of this curricular reconfiguration were critical to our evolving understanding of integrative theory and pedagogical practice. First, as the interdisciplinary curriculum unfolded, the majority of faculty teaching in the Core had limited interdisciplinary experience. And second, as it was designed to support and enhance the professional major programs, the relevance and interconnectedness of the Core to those programs was frequently challenged. This meant that we had to repeatedly question our assumptions, adopt new terms and definitions, and reformulate our approach in the classroom to fulfill our goals. Courses were revised, new faculty with true interdisciplinary expertise joined the division, some elements of student choice were reintroduced, and a greater emphasis was placed on learning outcomes and program goals versus particular subject-matter and common content. Over time, this fluidity has led to a reconceptualization of what we do and how we do it, to the point that calling our curriculum truly “interdisciplinary” is probably a misnomer. What we actually are trying to teach students, through the version of liberal learning that we provide, is the ability to ask important and complicated questions and seek answers informed by a multiplicity of perspectives that transcend the confines of classic academic silos. This can occur without sacrificing rigor, but by applying rigor to contexts beyond the walls of the ivory tower. In the professional education battle between the swamp dwellers and the high ground, as articulated by Donald Schon (1983), we have ultimately chosen to take both sides.

It’s important to note two important caveats here: 1) We don’t aim to delegitimize the importance of disciplinary expertise in higher education. Without academics doing the Germanic model of scholarship that’s dominated our universities for the last century and a half, higher education could not compete with industry in terms of innovation. 2) We take a parallel stance when it comes to undergraduate teaching as well. However, we are also suggesting that integrative teaching and learning can be a powerful tool for exploring the expanding perspectives on contemporary world issues that academics should be caring about, especially if their work is to be discernible to the publics they serve. Put differently, regardless of the specific question at hand, we believe Integration (with a capital “I”) must be part of the answer.

So what exactly do we mean when we say “Integration?” Integration as a tool to invite multiple perspectives into the scholarly conversation is based on the idea that academic fields bounded by a particular canon or epistemology have inherent constraints that make incorporating unconventional perspectives into the discourse much harder. In contrast, Integration (both in terms of how we do scholarship and how we teach) is an inclusive opportunity to rethink how we create knowledge and perform teacher/scholar. At a time when the practical relevance of a college education supersedes learning for learning’s sake, Integration provides a compelling alternative narrative for understanding the important role liberal learning and multiple disciplinary perspectives can play. We believe adapting to the

contemporary needs of society can best happen through an open, collaborative, and inclusive integrative approach.

In her essay, “Beyond Interdisciplinarity: Expanding the Horizons of Integrated Learning,” Julie Thompson Klein (2015) traces the evolution of theorizing interdisciplinary and integrative learning. From William James, to Great Books advocates, to the formation of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies nee Integrative nee Interdisciplinary Studies, Thompson Klein effectively demonstrates how scholars who are interested in the ways disparate disciplinary knowledge fit together to make better sense of the world have been working in close concert with one another for a long time. For Klein, going “beyond interdisciplinarity” started with the idea that integration and interdisciplinarity were “inseparable but not identical;” an assertion that we, for all practical purposes, agree with.

We agree with the assertion not because we dismiss contributions like Allen Repko’s important work on the nature and form of interdisciplinary research, but because being heard in a crowded higher education landscape requires us, as practitioners of the liberal arts, to speak in relative unison about the things we agree upon. The structural realities of most liberal arts departments have contributed to a kind of horizontal violence where humanities programs competitively fight one another for funding and resources instead of having the important collaborative conversations about how professional and liberal education may work in concert. As Repko (2012) himself contended, the problems to be solved are the issue, and the disciplines are “simply a means to that end” (p. 7). For our purposes in reimagining the structure of higher education, it’s not just the disciplines that are a means to an end, it’s the interdisciplines and the multiple integrative pathways that also serve as tools to help us along the way.

In the midst of budget cuts, program discontinuances and myriad world problems seemingly intractable in their complexity, the distinction between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and integration don’t seem as important as making cogent public arguments championing the utility of combining the liberal arts with professional education. At a time when higher education as a public good has been scrutinized and materially judged as less than worthwhile, Integration as we’re defining it is one compelling way to return higher education to the place of relevance that it can and should occupy.

Like Thompson Klein (2015), we believe imagining “quadrangulating integrative learning” (p. 10) to be the next step in the evolution of our understanding. In a refreshingly holistic argument, Thompson Klein contends faculty members trying to facilitate integrative learning need to be conscious of “disciplinary depth, multidisciplinary breadth, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary integration, and interprofessional cooperation” (p. 10). Put simply, we need the student studying quantum physics to push on the boundaries of what’s known in the

field, but we also need the engineer to practically apply her findings as well as the philosopher who weighs the ethical component of uncharted scientific territory. In this example, everyone but the quantum physicist herself has to be able to think integratively at a high level in order to create new knowledge. A deeper exploratory dive will allow us to elucidate each relevant point of the quadrangle and uncover where the proper balance of the four can be found within a professionally-focused curriculum.

Furthermore, we suggest a critical look at how this quadrangulation applies not only to traditional graduate professional education, but to novel undergraduate professionally-focused fields as well. For example, it seems rather obvious that in the realm of healthcare, a physician needs deep disciplinary depth coupled with an ability to integrate knowledge with other professional practitioners (such as nurses, psychologists, social workers, physical therapists, pharmacists, etc.). The ideal physician also has the capacity to understand the complexity of the human condition, a recognition of the structural disparities build into the system which result in widely variable outcomes for various populations, a sense of compassion, and an ability to communicate clearly and effectively with multiple stakeholders. It may be less obvious that the student majoring in game art and animation as an undergraduate needs a parallel set of skills, which include technical expertise, the collaborative ability to work on a production team with writers, designers, and programmers, a broader appreciation for the power of media in culture, and a recognition that their artistic and symbolic representations can have profound societal consequences. Given the fluid nature of evolving professions, careful attention to how best to balance the essential components of an integrated educational experience in a professionally-focused undergraduate context might be even more important if we are to ensure that degrees provide long term sustainable skills and perspectives rather than short term expertise that lasts no longer than the latest career fad.

Even though what it means to do integrative and interdisciplinary work is fraught with multiple definitions and interpretations within sites of higher education and has been for a long time, outside the weediness of academe, the common habits of mind associated with the terms are (for good reason) both publicly palatable and academically reputable. For example, using holistic ways of knowing to approach authentic problems and capitalizing on collaborative expertise to make decisions are two phenomena that are not at all unique to higher education. This is the kind of thinking that smart people in positions of authority and power do (or at least should do) all the time when faced with real problems that need good solving. And it is precisely what thoughtful and meaningful professionalization could look like in the context of American higher education.

The paradoxical reality for most contemporary American college students holds they simultaneously cannot afford to go to college, but cannot afford to forgo college either. According to the Federal Reserve (Board of

Governors of the federal reserve System, 2018), as of June, 2018, student loan debt in the United States exceeded \$1.5 trillion. The average amount of student loan debt now exceeds \$37,000 (Friedman, 2018), but over the course of a lifetime, today's college graduates can expect to earn 84% more than their non-college graduate peers (Carnevale, Rose and Cheah, 2011). Couple these facts with the idea that our structural beliefs about the importance of a college education have shifted as well. As opposed to considering an educated populace as an overall collective good, we now consider investing in higher education to be a personal choice that individuals elect to do to better themselves and their personal lot. Because it's up to the individual choice of the person pursuing the degree, the argument goes, publicly funding that individual's college degree is low on the priority list for expenditures the general public should spend their tax dollars on. For sites of higher education, this paradigmatic shift has meant that in order to remain solvent, they must primarily serve the individual student as opposed to serving a society made up of a series of individual students. This distinction is subtle, but important- especially for colleges who must compete in a crowded marketplace selling a product few can afford. We use this transactional language intentionally here because it is the inevitable, if unintentional, result of higher education's shift away from the idea that it exists in part to serve the collective good of the communities it serves.

While it's not obvious what this macro-analysis of higher education has to do with anything related to integrative learning, interdisciplinarity or the liberal arts more generally, we argue that these variables are actually inseparable from one another. As a cultural institution, higher education is uniquely positioned to be a site where complex ideas come to be synthesized, theorized and eventually applied. Even though this has historically been understood to be a primary responsibility of the academy, there are two noteworthy differences that we believe are important for our purposes in advocating for an alternative framing for a meaningful 21st century education.

1) Instead of taking a deep esoteric dive into isolated disciplines, higher education must do a better job of prioritizing approaches to problem-solving that emphasize Integration. The complexity of major world problems necessitates sifting through multiple perspectives and academic specializations. This is not a new thought. Historically though, higher education has privileged a Germanic model of isolated pockets of expertise and let the world outside the academy do what it will with the results. In order for higher education to remain a viable way for citizens to spend their money and time, making room for the breadth of integrative work as opposed to just the depth of academic knowledge needs to occur.

2) Because here's the thing--this integrative work already is privileged when people attempt to solve real problems attempt in industry. The fact of the matter is that the type of integrative learning academics champion already happens with a relatively high degree of frequency out

there in the “real” world. Admittedly, it is with some trepidation that, as faculty members teaching in a liberal arts core curriculum, we are advocating for the academy to take some cues from industry, but we believe the following is true: higher education must begin to recalibrate the ways it relates to other sectors of society in order to stay relevant--both culturally and financially. Being able to dialogue with industry will help academic expertise reach a broader audience and also help colleges and universities justify its high cost to students and their families.

At our own institution, we have moved away from our original conceptual design to one which better aligns with our professionally- and globally-focused institutional mission, and we have become more comfortable identifying not as interdisciplinarians, but as transdisciplinarians and integrationists. We now need to further embrace our role in complicating student perspectives regarding what professional education and professional success look like, as we test their assumptions about the workplace through the integrative liberal learning we provide. In this context, our current goal is to figure out how to navigate through authentic self-curiosity and meaningful curricular change in a healthy and productive fashion, while simultaneously communicating the relevance of what we do across all our professional programs.

While we continue to negotiate and navigate the complex terrain of higher education in the 21st century and our efforts to serve the dual promise of what our degree should provide for our students, it is clear to us that "Integration" can provide the theoretically rich soil upon which future growth can occur. From our vantage point, Integration (as opposed to interdisciplinarity) offers the most authentic way for our students to gain a particular career-focused expertise while simultaneously preparing to engage with complex problems that extend beyond the bounds of a discrete discipline or single profession. Put simply, integrative thinking as we understand it has become the common hinge to propel us forward.

We suspect that our experience as professors teaching in an interdisciplinary general education program at a professionally focused school may be broadly applicable to other contexts, given the contemporary realities of higher education. Specifically, our story provides some insight into how the nexus of integrative, interdisciplinary learning, and the increased professionalization of the academy might be applied both out of and inside the classroom. As colleges and universities of all stripes argue for the viability of their offerings, promising the start of a rewarding career is a necessary reality for convincing the public to sign onto the treatise. Fulfilling the promise then becomes part (but not all) of our commitment and obligation as educators. Through Integration, we are attempting to lay the groundwork to do just that, with integrity, and without sacrificing the idealism that drew us into this profession in the first place.

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**CYNTHIA BRANDENBURG** is a scientist turned integrationist who is a Professor at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont. She holds a PhD in Anatomy and Neurobiology from the University of Vermont and now teaches interdisciplinary courses in Champlain's Core Curriculum and is the Lead Faculty in Champlain's Degree Design Lab. E-mail: [c.brandenburg@champlain.edu](mailto:c.brandenburg@champlain.edu)

**MICHAEL KELLY**, is an Associate Professor of Rhetoric at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont and teaches in the College's interdisciplinary Core Curriculum and is the Lead Faculty in Champlain's Degree Design Lab. He earned his PhD in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. E-mail: [mkelley@champlain.edu](mailto:mkelley@champlain.edu)