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Academic Freedom With and Without Academic Responsibility

We need to overcome the hyper individualism that is distorting higher education.

By [Steven Mintz](#)

For the first time in years, I feel genuine hope for the future of the humanities.

I recently attended a convening organized by the Teagle Foundation, supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and held at Austin Community College, that brought together representatives from 70 institutions committed to revitalizing the humanities by anchoring their general education curricula in transformative texts and life's most profound questions.

These programs focus on classic and contemporary works that confront moral, societal and philosophical questions—issues of citizenship, social justice and the nature of a good life. By inviting students to grapple with enduring questions about the human experience, these programs foster a deep engagement that goes far beyond rote learning, inspiring first- and second-year students to consider the ethical, societal and existential dimensions that shape both personal lives and civic responsibilities.

Through texts that resonate across generations alongside modern works wrestling with issues of identity, justice and belonging, these programs enhance students' cultural and historical awareness, preparing them to become more informed, reflective and engaged citizens. In an era when postsecondary education has prioritized marketable skills and career outcomes, these initiatives stand as a powerful reminder of the humanities' enduring relevance. By grounding students in questions of meaning and purpose, they nurture a generation capable of approaching life's challenges with empathy, insight and wisdom.

These innovative humanities programs are inspired by initiatives at two very different institutions: Purdue University and Austin Community College.

Purdue University's Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Program offers a 15-credit-hour undergraduate certificate that combines intellectual depth with flexibility. The program begins with a two-semester sequence called Transformative Texts, where students engage with compelling works of literature and philosophy that provoke reflection on human values and ethics.

After this sequence, students choose three additional courses centered on themes such as science and technology, environment and sustainability, health care and medicine, management and organization and conflict resolution and justice. This structure allows students to fulfill up to 60 percent of their university core curriculum requirements through a cohesive set of humanities courses that complement their major fields.

The Cornerstone program emphasizes history, literature, philosophy and the humanities to help students cultivate critical thinking and communication skills and a broad cultural perspective. Its overarching goal is to foster a well-rounded education that not only prepares students for professional success but also encourages ethical reflection and a nuanced understanding of society.

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Austin Community College's Great Questions Program engages students in transformative dialogue and inquiry through classic texts, which are integrated into required general education courses. This approach ensures accessibility for all students, regardless of major, and incorporates humanities deeply into their educational journeys, enriching both their academic and personal growth.

Through discussions of foundational works by thinkers such as Plato, Confucius, Mary Shelley and W. E. B. Du Bois, students explore big questions about society, ethics, human nature and their own lives, encouraging them to think critically and reflectively.

In addition to fostering intellectual exploration, Great Questions supports first-year students as they navigate college life. The program provides essential academic skills—time management, study strategies, note-taking and research techniques—and introduces students to campus resources, including libraries, writing centers, career services and mental health support. By emphasizing self-advocacy, resilience and goal-setting, Great Questions helps students adapt to the demands of college, take responsibility for their personal and academic choices, and balance coursework with other responsibilities.

Community-building is central to the Great Questions program, fostering connections among students to create a sense of belonging—an essential factor for retention and success. Faculty act as facilitators and mentors, guiding students through thought-provoking discussions and encouraging open dialogue, rather than delivering traditional lectures.

Faculty involved in Great Questions also receive training in discussion-based pedagogy and techniques for handling complex, sometimes divisive, topics. This preparation helps professors create inclusive classrooms where students feel safe exploring new ideas and viewpoints.

Both programs offer thousands of first-year students a shared experience that places [meaning and purpose at the center of the college experience](#). By encouraging exploration of fundamental human questions, these initiatives are revitalizing the humanities and demonstrating their enduring relevance in today's world.

How, you might well ask, were Purdue, with its STEM focus, and ACC, with its multifaceted mission emphasizing access, affordability, career and technical training and transfer education, able to develop rich lower-division humanities curricula?

These programs took root and flourished thanks to a strategic, phased approach. The answer, I believe, lies in a few core principles that propelled their success.

1. **Start small.** Aiming for incremental change rather than a wholesale transformation was key. Both institutions began with pilot programs or small course clusters rather than a complete

curriculum overhaul. By integrating the new initiative into existing degree requirements, such programs did not have to radically reinvent the wheel.

This approach allows institutions to test out ideas, fine-tune their courses and generate early results without the pressure of large-scale, immediate success. Starting small also allows faculty and administrators to gather feedback and adapt the program based on real experiences, making adjustments as needed before expanding to reach more students.

2. **Create a coalition of the willing.** These programs were driven by faculty who genuinely believed in the value of the humanities and were passionate about bringing transformative texts and big questions to students. By building a coalition of the willing—faculty members who are committed to seeing the program through, despite departmental silos or disciplinary divides—these institutions have been able to lay a strong foundation of support.

This coalition was built across departments, bringing together faculty from history, philosophy, literature and even STEM fields who see the value in a well-rounded, humanities-rich education. This interdisciplinary collaboration ensures a diversity of perspectives and helps create a more holistic, well-rounded program.

3. **Build administrative buy-in.** Securing support from university or college administrators is essential for resources, institutional endorsement and program sustainability. Faculty at Purdue and Austin Community College effectively communicated the program's value to administrators, showing how these humanities programs could fit seamlessly into the school's mission and goals—and raise their institutions' national visibility.

For STEM-focused Purdue, the case was made that such a program would broaden students' critical thinking and communication skills, preparing them for a range of professional and personal challenges. At Austin Community College, the humanities program aligns with the institution's mission of producing well-rounded, socially aware graduates ready to transfer or enter the workforce with a strong foundation in ethical and humanistic thinking.

Administrative buy-in was achieved by demonstrating how the humanities program not only complements but enhances the institution's broader objectives and raises the campus' profile.

4. **Leverage outside resources.** By securing external funding and resources, these institutions gained the support and credibility needed to launch their initiatives with greater legitimacy. Grants from organizations like the Teagle Foundation or the National Endowment for the Humanities can provide necessary funding and, importantly, carry an endorsement that signals the program's value and rigor.

External resources also enable these programs to access specialized training for faculty, high-quality materials and even stipends to incentivize participation. These partnerships amplify the programs' reach and allow for enhancements that might not be possible on internal funding alone.

5. **Demonstrate impact and success.** To ensure longevity and garner more support, it's crucial for programs to demonstrate measurable success, whether through student feedback, retention rates or postgraduate outcomes.

At both Purdue and Austin Community College, the success of these programs is being actively documented through assessments, surveys and student testimonials. By showing that students find these courses impactful, both in personal development and academic engagement, these programs can further justify their place within the institution. Demonstrating the program's tangible benefits helps to expand it beyond the initial cohort and attract more students, faculty and administrative support.

Together, these strategies have allowed Purdue and Austin Community College to create transformative humanities experiences that enrich students' understanding of complex societal issues and cultivate essential critical thinking skills. These programs show that with a strategic, phased approach, even institutions with distinct goals and challenges can embed the humanities in ways that shape thoughtful, engaged citizens.

Interestingly, nearly all of the 70 campuses that have adopted integrated great books and big questions programs are neither small liberal arts colleges nor elite, high-profile institutions—with only a few exceptions, like Stanford and Vanderbilt.

Why is this the case? First, many liberal arts colleges mistakenly assume their students are already receiving a well-rounded, humanities-rooted education and may therefore see no need for structured great books programs.

Second, elite institutions have a culture that values disciplinary specialization, which can make it difficult to adopt interdisciplinary or humanities-centered curricula.

Third, hyper individualism among faculty discourages collaborative efforts and a unified approach to general education, limiting faculty involvement in shared, humanities-driven educational initiatives.

The result is that many institutions traditionally associated with liberal education are overlooking an opportunity to revitalize the humanities in a way that could make them more relevant and engaging to today's students.

One obstacle: A troubling hyper individualism has taken root among faculty at some of our most selective, well-funded campuses.

Too often, faculty emphasize their personal agendas over shared institutional goals, resisting accountability, peer feedback and professional development—all of which are crucial to sustaining academic quality and integrity. This hyper individualism, while not universal, has eroded the collective commitment to integrative humanistic experiences, like those offered at Purdue and Austin Community College, and creates significant challenges in fostering a more cohesive, more developmental, transformational and equitable educational environment.

One factor contributing to this trend is that faculty members increasingly expect academic freedom without the responsibilities that should accompany it.

Academic freedom is essential; it allows faculty to pursue diverse perspectives, engage in open inquiry and contribute to a vibrant academic environment. But freedom without responsibility can lead to unchecked use of academic platforms to pursue narrow personal interests or ideological aims that may undermine the quality and coherence of student learning experiences. Without any

limits, faculty can introduce polarizing content or prioritize pet topics in ways that ignore or even harm students' educational needs, undermining the very trust and integrity on which the academic community relies.

In many departments, this individualism has also led to a concerning absence of mechanisms for accountability in teaching and mentoring. Faculty at research universities are often required to undergo training in ethics, conflicts of interest and harassment policies, yet there are usually no requirements for professional development in pedagogy or mentorship.

The lack of mandatory, structured support for teaching excellence has left significant gaps in faculty development, particularly in relation to evolving student needs, effective teaching methods and the cultivation of inclusive classrooms. Without consistent standards or feedback, the educational mission is diminished, as faculty can essentially opt out of the kind of shared responsibility that quality teaching and mentoring require.

The result is a weakening of the integrative educational experience that many students desperately need. At institutions like Purdue and Austin Community College, great books and big questions programs have been developed to create common ground for students, encouraging them to wrestle with transformative texts and life's enduring questions. These programs foster cultural literacy, critical thinking and ethical reflection, all of which are increasingly valuable in today's fragmented society. However, such programs require a collective commitment, with faculty working across disciplines and embracing shared educational objectives—a commitment undermined by an ethos of hyperindividualism.

In its absence, most students at these well-funded, selective campuses miss out on the transformative potential of a humanities education that engages them with big ideas and universal questions. This lack of a cohesive, integrative approach weakens the institution's educational mission, leaving students to navigate a fragmented curriculum that too often reflects faculty members' individual interests rather than a unified vision for intellectual growth.

Academic freedom, in its true spirit, does not preclude oversight, collaboration or expectations of ongoing professional growth. A balanced approach, one that honors academic freedom while upholding faculty responsibility to students and their institutions, is essential.

Such an approach would make room for more robust peer review and professional development, ensuring that faculty continuously strive to improve as educators, not only as researchers.

Moving toward a more responsible, integrated approach to academic freedom and teaching excellence would strengthen the quality, coherence and integrity of the educational experience, preparing students more effectively for the ethical and intellectual demands of an increasingly complex world.

In my eyes, the biggest challenge raised by academic freedom, when unaccompanied by academic responsibility, is that it fosters an educational model where courses function in isolation, depriving students of a coherent and integrative learning experience.

Without a sense of shared responsibility among faculty for developing a unified curriculum, courses risk becoming stand-alone silos, with each instructor pursuing their individual interests rather than a collective educational mission. This approach not only leaves students with a fragmented understanding of their field but also undermines the broader goals of a well-rounded education.

Current distribution requirements, designed to encourage student choice, may seem to address this issue but fall short. While they allow students to select courses across different disciplines, they do little to ensure that students leave college with the comprehensive literacies and skill sets expected of an educated individual.

This model of education, which prioritizes flexibility and options over a structured curriculum, does not lead to the acquisition of essential competencies—such as critical thinking, writing, quantitative reasoning and digital literacy—that graduates need to navigate today’s complex world.

Furthermore, a system focused solely on course choices fails to provide students with the structured exposure to humanistic and social issues that a college education should offer. Humanistic concerns—questions about identity, purpose, ethics and the human condition—are foundational to understanding one’s place in society and making informed, empathetic choices. Without a deliberate, integrative approach, many students graduate without ever engaging rigorously with these vital questions.

Similarly, without exposure to a cohesive social science framework, they may miss out on the essential insights these disciplines offer into the complexities of societal, political and psychological dynamics, leaving them less equipped to interpret the social world.

This disjointed educational model also deprives students of a sustained encounter with the scientific method, which teaches critical skills in observation, analysis and evidence-based reasoning. Exposure to the frontiers of scientific investigation, structured within a curriculum that emphasizes intellectual synthesis, could help students grasp how scientific principles intersect with social and ethical considerations—knowledge that is increasingly relevant in today’s world of rapid technological and environmental change.

The absence of a more holistic, integrative approach in education makes it difficult for students to connect the dots between disciplines, to see how historical, cultural, scientific and social phenomena are interwoven. This is not only a missed educational opportunity but a disservice to students, who graduate without the ability to view knowledge as an interconnected web rather than a collection of discrete facts.

Moving beyond a system of isolated courses to one where academic freedom is balanced by a collective responsibility to ensure educational coherence would allow institutions to cultivate graduates who are not only knowledgeable in their chosen fields but also intellectually agile, culturally literate and ethically grounded.

Over the course of a very lengthy academic career, I have made multiple attempts to create integrative, transformative learning experiences with mixed results.

At one urban public university, several colleagues and I designed a team-taught curriculum that blended U.S. history, American literature, art history, technology and rhetoric and composition, meeting over half of the campus's general education requirements. This innovative structure allowed students to complete the program either on Tuesday and Thursday mornings or all day on Saturdays. Despite its potential, the program was not expanded—my then-dean deemed it unscalable and chose not to invest further.

At another public institution, we developed an integrated biomedical sciences curriculum aimed at professional identity formation. This pathway included courses on pain and illness in literature, the history of medicine, the sociology of health, health-care economics and health informatics, alongside essential courses in chemistry and physics featuring biomedical examples. Although remnants of this program remain, sustaining the full, integrated vision has been challenging.

Further, at yet another institution, I tried to transform a freshman composition course into career-aligned learning communities enriched with student success initiatives. However, resistance from some faculty members and department-level administrators blocked the project.

Despite this setback, we succeeded in expanding a special admissions program for economically disadvantaged students, enhancing their sense of belonging, career development opportunities and personal support. This initiative fostered a sense of community and provided a cohort-based learning experience with more holistic support.

Finally, attempts to establish a freshman research experience in the humanities, modeled after a successful program in the natural sciences, haven't—yet—succeeded. This initiative involved archival research, ethnography, textual and semiotic analysis, material culture, performance studies, and the digital humanities. While it has yet to take root, I remain hopeful about its potential.

In short, transforming a lower-division curriculum into a more holistic, developmental and transformative experience is not easy. Institutional inertia and resource limitations play a role, but the greatest barrier is often a campus culture that prioritizes individual agendas over what's best for students.

True educational transformation requires a shift toward collective vision, shared commitment and a focus on integrated, student-centered experiences. Only by embracing this vision can we fully realize the transformative potential of a holistic, interdisciplinary education that genuinely prepares students for the complexities of adult life and the knotty world they'll inhabit.