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Gen Z Is Ready to Talk. Are Professors Ready to Listen?

How a successful gen-ed program is using the humanities to reach this very different generation of students.

By *Melinda S. Zook*

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LJ DAVIDS FOR THE CHRONICLE

One day last spring, I took my students to the Wabash River, in Lafayette, Ind., where we took turns reading aloud the last chapter of Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, in which the river tells Siddhartha its secrets. As we read, we, too, listened to the river as it “still resounded, sorrowful, seeking.” It was a powerful and unusual experience — both for me, as a professor of history teaching core literary texts to first-year STEM majors, and for the students in their first seminar-like course.

When the hour was up, I noticed a student lingering on the riverbank. We sat together on the sand. He was a pharmacy major whose best friend from high school had recently attempted suicide. He needed to talk, and someone to listen.

Our students often do. But are we listening and are we ready for them this fall? Ready to both cultivate their minds and mentor them?

I'm part of a liberal-arts, general-education program that seeks to make college a transformative experience. Called [Cornerstone](#), the program is now in its seventh year at Purdue University and being replicated at 60 other institutions (and counting). Our aim is to develop students' thinking, reading, and writing skills — *and* their confidence.

In 2019, an [essay in these pages](#) by Leonard Cassuto described Cornerstone in its early days as a “modern Great Books solution to the humanities’ enrollment woes.” Since then, we’ve learned a lot about how to mentor first-year students, how to collaborate across departments, and how to better use the campus resources available to us. Above all, we have learned about the students themselves. I’m sharing those lessons here for professors and administrators looking to revitalize the first-year curriculum in ways that will better engage undergraduates. Because they’ve changed. They are not the college students of 10 or even five years ago. Those setting foot on our campuses this fall were high-school sophomores when the world shut down in 2020. Their horizons were just opening when they were forced back into their childhood bedrooms, their world shrunk to pixels and bytes. They have been challenged — psychologically, socially, academically — and many have suffered.

Now out and about, they often find the world demanding and frightening. They may have missed certain milestones of adolescence, from getting a driver’s license and holding a summer job to opening a bank account. They date less than previous generations, giving them less opportunity to have their hearts broken, but also less chance to know the sweet sadness of love. Going somewhere, anywhere, without their parents knowing is often not part of their reality.

Given less responsibility and independence, their coming of age has been delayed. Less time “IRL” (in real life) and too much time in the addictive and flat digital realm has harmed their ability to concentrate, read with attention, and think abstractly.

In short, we can no longer assume that new students are ready for college, so onboarding them during their first year is more critical than ever before. Our students

need role models and mentors. They need social interaction and connection but, above all, they need nourishment for the mind.

Those of us in the liberal arts are in the best position to provide for the varied needs of Gen Z. And we can do it through small, coherent, and purposeful general-education courses taught by full-time faculty members. Our experience at Purdue proves it can be done. At the heart of our two-course sequence are “great books,” or what we call “transformative texts.” Meaning, simply, great works (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama) from across the centuries and around the globe — works as varied as *Gilgamesh* and Octavia Butler’s *Bloodchild*. These readings have transformed the world and can transform us.

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At the same time, Cornerstone seeks to give students a homeroom experience, a space where the instructor knows their names, and they know one another. When our students are absent, visibly distressed, panicked, or fatigued, we know and can reach out to offer help. Often that is simply a matter of listening — as I did for that student on the riverbank of the Wabash. We can also steer students to campus resources, both academic and health related. Sometimes that means conferring with counselors or academic advisers. But most students just need to talk with a professor — about books, family, careers, their future.

Inspired teaching and transformative readings have fueled Cornerstone’s success. As the third most-STEM-centric university in the nation, Purdue might seem like an unlikely candidate to lead a liberal-arts reform movement. But with a declining number of humanities, arts, and social-science majors — especially following the 2008 recession — we needed to do something big and bold.

The start of Cornerstone in 2017 was a risky bet on a different future for our liberal-arts college, but one that’s paid off. No longer on the path to extinction, the college hired 77 new faculty members in the past two years, and nearly all of them teach in Cornerstone as well as in their home departments.

But something more important has happened at the same time. As we have tried to save the liberal arts at Purdue, we have also been able to aid our students by meeting their changing needs.

Cornerstone is a collaborative effort, in which faculty members share information and teaching techniques. Together we have adapted — to the pandemic and its aftermath, to the growing mental-health crisis among students, and to new technologies. We have been able to reach students in the ways they learn best. If many educators found students disengaged and apathetic after the pandemic, it may have been because they expected students to simply sit and listen. But the days when we could simply lecture in front of the classroom have passed.

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Gen Z hungers for educational engagement — with teachers, with one another, and, yes, with books that inspire and enlighten. To that end, our “Transformative Texts” courses for first-year students center on active learning: workshopping, small-group assignments, peer review, debates, student presentations, play-acting, and poetry readings are among the possibilities. Project-based assignments allow our students to take what they have read and discussed and create something new, be it a screenplay, a podcast, or a grant proposal.

Our goal is to place Gen Z in the driver’s seat to steer their own learning. That may mean that an instructor is never fully sure of what will happen in a given class session, but it definitely means that the students are active learners.

Faculty members teaching “Transformative Texts” choose at least half their readings from a list drafted by consensus. In collaboration with other departments on the campus, we try to choose at least a few books that have been adapted to theater and film, so we can enhance our students’ understanding by showing them different versions of a story.

Last fall we read Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, and we took the students to see a modern feminist adaptation, *Nora*. I saw one young man completely entranced by that performance. He rushed to the nearest faculty member when it was over with a flood of questions. She introduced him to the director and the costume and set designers, and the conversation lasted long into the evening.

I hear a lot of stories like that from Cornerstone faculty members. They’ve described students play-acting *Antigone* in a hallway, staying after class to debate Edmund’s villainy in *King Lear*, or creating teaching websites based on Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. That kind of magic happens often enough to show us that we are reaching our young adults, using the liberal arts to get them into the world. Many of our faculty members (published, award-winning scholars, mind you) have declared that teaching

“Transformative Texts” has been the most gratifying classroom experience of their careers, and I share that view.

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Cornerstone is not a one-off. Thanks to grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Teagle Foundation, 60 campuses nationally are in the planning or execution phases of replicating our program. For those of you interested in adapting this program to your own campus, here are answers to some of the most common questions we hear about this effort. (And for those looking for more-detailed advice, we’ve written [this how-to guide](#).)

How do you make the case to your administration? That is, of course, Job 1. In advocating for a first-year, liberal-arts curriculum that emphasizes small class sizes and instruction by full-time faculty members, don’t be afraid to speak in the language of “service.” One of the jobs of the liberal arts (broadly construed) is to serve students across the campus and, in doing so, become indispensable.

Use programs like Cornerstone to show that this can be done — that teaching core skills and helping students get used to college both better serve students and help with retention. The very sort of learning and guidance that we can foster as faculty members cannot be offloaded to technology, graduate students, or advisers.

How do we pay for this? Start looking in your own backyard: Our start-up costs were paid for by the liberal-arts college at Purdue. Our dean, David A. Reingold, offered one-time, \$7,000 stipends (for course design and curricular development) to a group of nine faculty members from different disciplines to build and test the program, focusing on the first-year “Transformative Texts” sequence.

To save money, we tapped our own experts on core skills and pedagogical methods, rather than bringing in expensive consultants. Once the program was under way, “Transformative Texts” became a regular part of the teaching load for those faculty members who joined the program. In 2019, Reingold made teaching half time in Cornerstone a requirement for all new faculty hires. This helped us scale up significantly. Today nearly 80 faculty members participate in the program.

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Grant support is another option. Institutions interested in Cornerstone can apply for funding through the NEH/Teagle program, [Cornerstone: Learning for Living](#). That

project is now supports a wide variety of institutions including liberal-arts and community colleges, HBCUs, and Research 1 universities.

How do you handle disputes over what counts as a “transformative” text? Whatever you do, don’t let the inevitable politics of that question derail such an important project. An open-minded and generous approach is the surest route to a solid, diverse list of authors and texts.

Keep in mind that transformative texts are simply readings that have the power to affect students (and teachers). They can challenge, provoke, and change us. They can be as simple as a sonnet or as powerful as a speech heard around the world. Some texts have been influential for centuries or generations. Others will be more recent, and their impact not fully clear, yet we do know when an author has changed our perspective about ourselves or others.

We developed a list of around 200 works for our first-year students, and we revisit the list every summer. Remind your colleagues that the most important criterion is whether a text is accessible and inspiring — to a first-year student. Some classics (*Frankenstein*) work better than others (*The World as Will and Idea*) with young adults.

Finally, build in flexibility: Cornerstone faculty members choose a theme for their course (such as “Monsters and Heroes,” “A Meaningful Life,” “Technology and Citizenship”). They select the readings (at least 50 percent of which must be drawn from our approved list) and design their own assignments and activities.

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How do you convince full-time professors that teaching this kind of seminar for first-year students is in their interest, too? Remind them that the liberal arts, and particularly the humanities, is in survival mode. It is in everyone’s interest to join a program that can reach students across the campus and even draw them into liberal-arts degree programs.

But beyond expanding our majors, Cornerstone gives faculty members in the humanities, arts, and social sciences an intellectual hub where they can meet, collaborate, and support one another. They can also look forward to a deep sense of satisfaction.

Nothing beats turning young people onto the things we value: the power of words and ideas and the beauty of art, music, literature, theater, and film. Serve these students well, and we just might save the liberal arts, too.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

TEACHING & LEARNING STUDENT SUCCESS CAMPUS CULTURE

Melinda S. Zook

Melinda S. Zook is a chaired professor of history at Purdue University and director of its Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program.