The College Curriculum

A Reader

Edited by Joseph L. DeVitis
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Seeking “Productive, Caring, and Fulfilling Lives” Through the Environmental Liberal Arts at Green Mountain College

THOMAS J. MAUHS-PUGH AND MERIEL BROOKS

Joseph DeVitis introduces this volume by asking, “What should be the central aims of curricula?” As he notes, this leads to related questions about what purpose(s) a curriculum should serve; who should decide both purpose and content; how knowledge of student characteristics and the learning process might influence curriculum and pedagogy; and how curricula should be evaluated. These questions can be examined at both the particular and the general, or universal, levels. At the particular level, we might wonder what knowledge is of most worth for this particular student or group of students in this particular context. At the general level we might ask the same questions of a larger aggregation of people and expand the context. This distinction between the general and the particular is important, but is also ambiguous and fraught with tensions. One of the greatest strengths of higher education in the United States is its diversity. At least, that is one of its greatest potential strengths. That diversity comes in a context of significant pressures for conformity.

Green Mountain College in Vermont has developed answers to those pressures that are particular to it. Naturally, we think these are good answers, ones that others should entertain as possible answers for themselves. As John Dewey argues in Democracy and Education, education is “a freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims.” The conformity aspect—social aims—itself evolves through the development of individual capacities, which include critiques of and alternatives to inherited social aims. The individual is embedded in the particular communities of family, neighborhood, self-selected, identity-conferring associations, broader culture, class, race, and so on. As these communities help shape thoughts, beliefs, and practices of the individual, so the individual defines and modifies these communities in an iterative process. This is, in essence, the same argument J. S. Mill makes for freedom of thought and discussion in On Liberty: “[T]he peculiar evil of silencing the expression of
an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race: posterity as well as the existing generation.¹² While Mill may emphasize the individual and Dewey the social unit, there is a consistent emphasis from both on the critical role of education in cultivating diverse perspectives and ideas as a central justification of and foundation for democratic society.

Within higher education, therefore, it is as important to cultivate a diversity of curricula aims across institutions as it is to emphasize the diversity of individuals and their development within institutions. The particular capacities and aims of the individual interact with the collective aim of the group, which in this case is both the college (or university) and the larger society. To answer the question of “what should be the central aims of curricula” within an institution is to take a stand vis-à-vis the defining characteristics, problems, and potentialities of the society in which that institution exists. Whether you prefer Mill’s metaphor of the marketplace of ideas or Dewey’s more ecological and evolutionary one, we have an obligation not only to not rob the human race, but to contribute positively to its vibrancy and resiliency.

In the mid-1990s Green Mountain College (GMC) chose as its educational aim to prepare “students for productive, caring, and fulfilling lives by taking the environment as the unifying theme underlying its academic and co-curricular programs.”¹³ The faculty created a new general education program, which they named the Environmental Liberal Arts. Implemented in 1995, this curriculum has undergone multiple revisions over the years. Consistently, however, those designing and implementing the curriculum have focused on the environment as central to the education of all GMC students. This commitment has driven hiring decisions, staffing patterns, and all functions and activities of the College.

To say that the environment is a unifying theme is not, however, to say anything very specific. There is no doctrine there. “Productive, caring, and fulfilling lives” also lacks specificity, as well as suggesting educational overreach. In what ways do we mean “productive”? What do we wish our graduates to care about, and how does one develop care in another to begin with, and is it a good idea to attempt to do so? And, finally, who is to define what constitutes a “fulfilling” life? At its heart, however, the curriculum has been focused on the environment. This is our offering to the human race: students and faculty have thought deeply and broadly about the environment and who have considered, in some systematic way, what a productive, caring, and fulfilling life might entail.

The environment, for our purposes, means an overlapping set of complex natural and social systems. To take the environment as the unifying theme of the College is to embed the analysis of complex systems into all aspects of what we do. For example, campus landscaping involves consideration of invasive and native species as well as considerations of cost and the means, including forms of energy, used to manage the grounds. This conversation involves all campus constituents both inside and outside the classroom. The provision of food in the dining hall involves an ongoing examination of agricultural practices and distribution networks, analysis and discussion of what constitutes a sustainable food system, ethical dilemmas and religious belief with regard to what we eat, how it is prepared, and the conditions under which food is served. To cite one specific example, GMC has its own on-campus farm. A philosophy class studying animal ethics helped devise the animal-use practices and policies for the farm. At one point, some new students objected to the fact that we raise pigs for slaughter and use in the dining hall. Although the raising of pigs for this use had been part of an extended analysis and vetting process at the point of proposal, some years had passed, and the issue was raised anew. Rather than dismissing the new students’ concerns because the issue had already been
thoroughly vetted in the past, students, faculty, and administrators saw this as a teachable moment. After a series of forums, debates, and a panel discussion, all members of the campus were surveyed with regard to our raising and using pigs.

The examples cited previously might suggest that GMC is more a commune than a campus, or that we are mired in inefficient governance weighed down by a naive commitment to group process and direct democracy, or that we neglect traditional academic study for the random investigation of student-driven concerns. None of the above would be accurate. The Georgian architecture of the campus, with its brick and white-columned buildings and broad lawns shaded by 100-year-old maples, is that of a traditional, New England liberal arts college. We offer twenty-five majors covering a range of traditional liberal arts disciplines as well as some pre-professional programs. As with any school, we are proud of our graduates who receive national academic awards, prestigious scholarships, and admission to a range of graduate programs, from law and medicine to business, psychology, philosophy, and theater. We do, however, take seriously the charge to think systematically about what it means to live a productive, caring, and fulfilling life, and that this life occurs in the context of complex systems that need to be understood and engaged. One cannot achieve the College's educational aims by limiting intentional education to the classroom or by steering clear of reflection on personal dispositions. The education we seek is integrated without being narrow, character forming without being indoctrination. Green Mountain's general education curriculum reflects this tension, which is a result of taking seriously the complex and dynamic nature of natural systems.

A curriculum, as used in this book, refers to a stipulated, collegiate program of study. It is the course laid out for the student, the activity of progressing through that course, and, as we describe in our curricula vitae, the trajectory of one's life that results, in part, from running that particular course and doing so in a particular way and with particular results.

Notice that the previous description moves quickly from a particular course of study to a life, defined and evaluated in a very Aristotelian way, as it unfolds and ultimately and finally only upon its completion. There is both a particularity to the life—this course of study, with these repercussions, for this person, at this time in her development, and within the context of this particular culture—and a generality that allows us to recognize a sequence of activities as a collegiate course of study. There are rules, assumptions, and narrative arcs understood by those both within and outside of the activity. Herbert Spencer's question, raised in the introduction, of "What knowledge is of most worth?" treads ambiguous ground between the particular and the universal. The questions of what knowledge is of most worth, to whom, and in what context sit in tension with more universalizing conceptions of the same.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, there are 6,633 "postsecondary Title IV institutions" in the United States. Of these, 4,400 grant degrees: about 1,700 two-year institutions and about 2,700 four-year institutions. Those institutions diverge widely in terms of size, mission, funding sources and governance, and student body characteristics. They are, in many ways, particular institutions trying to accomplish particular educational goals for particular types of students in particular contexts.

In the competitive environment of admissions, grants, and fundraising, those particularities are emphasized. That particularity extends to academic majors and general education requirements. At the same time, these institutions operate within broader cultural narratives that expect common components and outcomes. A college must be recognizable as a college. Con-
temporary national politics combines with a heavy reliance on federal funding to emphasize accountability measures that seek common operating procedures and measures of success at the national level for all of these institutions, enforced directly or through regional accrediting bodies. For public institutions there is increasing pressure to respond to state legislative concerns and directives in light of funding constraints and ideological doubts about institutional goals, curricula content, and pedagogical practices. Meanwhile, private institutions, unless particularly well-endowed, are challenged to keep net revenues at or above escalating costs, while students turn increasingly to considerations of affordability.

So, the question of “What knowledge is of most worth” occupies a complex position within a nexus of institutional history, disciplinary training of faculty, cultural expectations, and pragmatic institutional concerns vis-à-vis sources of funding, oversight, and control. An attractive compromise for most schools is to commit to broad educational commonalities for all students, such as teaching effective writing and critical thinking combined with a smorgasbord of disciplinary majors while steering clear of doctrinal positions or anything suggesting the formation of character. It is only a slight overstatement to say that colleges are pushed and pulled by competing pressures of the particular and universal within specific revenue contexts, with the result that they try to be all things to all people without being too much of any one thing for anyone.

As higher education blossomed into the primary avenue for individual social mobility and economic advancement in the 20th century, traditional colleges that had aimed at building a person’s character “to speak well and think right” moved away from uniform curricula and a single definition (within an institution if not across institutions) of what it meant to think well and speak right. This was partly the result of the need to expand the applicant pool and revenue in the face of the expensive research model of higher education that was, to some degree, attributable to a reliance on research universities, with their emphasis on unfettered critical inquiry, as the source for faculty. The undergraduate major rather than the cultural-religious vision of the school became the defining identity of the student. One became a “biologist,” not a person whose character you might think you knew, or at least the doctrinal aspirations thereof, based on his or her alma mater. We moved away from character formation to biologist formation, as it were. Further, we understood “biologist” to be a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions well-segregated from a person’s core identity and attachments.

This shift on the part of schools was mirrored and reinforced by increasing expectations that college serve the social function of human capital development and achieve, for individuals, certification of professional competence leading to economic mobility. The economic development model of the land grants and the practical skills of the technical and normal schools became mapped onto the liberal arts traditions and rhetoric of the College. At the same time faculty apprenticed in and tried to replicate the research university model of disciplinary specialization, heightened theory, and narrow expertise. Character formation as a substantive part of the curriculum became a problem for all but the most mission-driven, church-related school. And, even for the latter, character formation often had to take a back seat to changing cultural expectations of higher education’s economic value.

A further influence on the conformity of institutional structures and curricula is the tendency of schools to seek higher status and thus move away from diversity and toward uniformity as they follow the lead of the most prestigious among them. Thomas E. Green called this the “reptilian procession” in his 1980 classic, Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System.
In effect, everyone wants to be like Harvard. More recently, Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring made essentially the same point in *The Innovative University.* The result of all of the previously mentioned influences is an education that is segmented, specialized, and without a cohering vision of either the person or the society.

The modern conservative critique of higher education covers a range of arguments and positions, from a Burkean cultural conservatism to those, like Allan Bloom, who decry what they see as a dissolution of the intellectual community into the authority of personal opinion, to E. D. Hirsch’s concern that curricula fragmentation thwarts social and economic mobility, to people like Eric O. Springsted, who asks, “Who Will Make Us Wise? How the Churches Are Failing Higher Education.” The columnist David Brooks shares Springsted’s concern that higher education prepares students for a career rather than as complete people, and that this constitutes a diminution of an educational mission to seek and develop wisdom.

These critiques have garnered their share of criticisms and alternative formulations from those who applaud the corrective actions of critical inquiry and a socially-progressive curricula (and co-curricula) orientation on what is often perceived as outdated, authoritarian, and culturally-restrictive worldviews. That is, there is a clash of competing conceptions of what it means to “speak well and think right” or a rejection of any such project as being inherently oppressive. Aside from those who dismiss any such normative educational project as oppressive, there is, among those who reject both the conservative critique and seek something more than an anomic, vocationally-oriented mission for higher education, a tendency to place the instructional emphasis on the preparation of citizens. With due wariness for illegitimately crossing the boundary of neutrality with regard to competing conceptions of the good, they seek a cohering, if limited, vision of instructional mission around the cultivation of civic virtues and skills.

The civic education vision of education has been complemented in recent years by an environmental vision. The first enduring organization to promote an environmental education at the post secondary level is Second Nature, a group founded in Boston in 1993 with a mission “to create a sustainable society by transforming higher education...by serving and supporting senior college and university leaders in making healthy, just, and sustainable living the foundation of all learning and practice in higher education.” This emphasis has gained particular traction and prominence over the past eight years, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) established in 2005 “to help coordinate and strengthen campus sustainability efforts at regional and national levels.” These organizations have worked to coordinate, amplify, and direct action supportive of environmental sustainability within the broad array of higher education practices and functions.

Complementing the resurgence of the environmental movement in the United States, growing concern about climate change and peak oil, and institutional desires to reduce long-term operating costs in light of rising energy prices, these groups have had particular success in focusing attention with regard to higher education facilities and operations. As Second Nature’s mission makes clear, however, there is a transformative vision here with broad and deep implications for the curriculum. Second Nature’s president, Anthony D. Cortese, made the point clearly in an address he gave at the National Cheng Kung University in Taiwan in 2010.

The content of learning would reflect interdisciplinary systems thinking, dynamics and analysis for all majors and disciplines with the same lateral rigor across, as the vertical rigor within, the disciplines. The
context of learning would change to make human/environment interdependence, values and ethics a seamless and central part of teaching of all the disciplines, rather than isolated in programs for specialists, or in special courses or modules. The process of education would emphasize active, experiential, inquiry based learning and real-world problem solving on the campus and in the larger community.\textsuperscript{14}

The sort of learning Cortese envisions has one set of its modern educational roots (or echoes) in the work of thinkers such as David Orr and C. A. Bowers, who offer sweeping critiques of modern society vis-à-vis the environment that can only be addressed through a fundamental restructuring of formal education.\textsuperscript{15} There are threads here of communitarian theory, place-based education, ecology, bioregional theory, and even the early-20th century's Country Life Movement and the rural social theory of Liberty Hyde Bailey.\textsuperscript{16} While diverse in their critiques and proposed solutions, these thinkers share a sense that the individual needs to be conceived of as essentially embedded in a natural and cultural context as opposed to being atomistic; that complex natural and human systems are the proper subject of as well as method of study; and that education needs to address the person as an integrated whole, rather than as just a student of this or that subject. In the introduction to \textit{Earth in Mind}, David Orr lists a series of environmental problems and concludes that our seeing these as disconnected things represents a “failure to educate people to think broadly, to perceive systems and patterns, and to live as whole persons.”\textsuperscript{17} Bowers’s concern is that philosophic liberalism’s basic assumptions governing the status of the individual, the emancipatory power of education, and the linear and progressive nature of change “may be causally related to the deepening of the ecological crisis, the loss of meaningful community life, and... nihilism.”\textsuperscript{18} In part, Orr and Bowers caution that educating for sustainability requires addressing the formation of character, i.e., the intentional promotion of certain ways of acting in the world and learning to see in terms of complex and interconnected systems. The intentional formation of character rightly raises concerns about individual liberty and the intellectual freedom of teacher and student.

In a sense, Green Mountain College seeks a three-way balance between the virtue development and character formation of classical republicanism and modern social conservatism, the environmental critique of education, and the individualism of philosophic liberalism. The environment, then, is the context for study, but it is not the source of doctrine. We do not preach a set of beliefs labeled environmentalism. The general education program, in its title, couples the theme of the environment with the critical inquiry and disciplinary analysis of the liberal arts, hence the “environmental liberal arts.” This is the same set of tensions faced by those who advocate for civic education as a cohering aim for higher education. However, most attempts to bring moral or civic education into the curriculum do so at the fringes of institutional activity. There is a required course or courses. There are speakers series and institutes, perhaps an endowed chair or graduate program. These are good things, but Green Mountain is trying something different, more expansive, and integrative. The general education program lies at its curricula and institutional heart.

Established by the United Methodist Church as Troy Conference Academy in 1834, GMC went through many of the shifts in higher education outlined earlier. In 1995, the faculty, administration, and board concluded that our general education program “did not lend definition and cohesiveness to the baccalaureate experience of all Green Mountain College students.”\textsuperscript{19} That conclusion led to the overhaul of the College’s general education program

\textsuperscript{* \textit{Report of the Task Force on General Education to President Thomas Benson, January 18, 1995 (revised, February 10), p. 1.}}
and eventually its mission statement and many of its practices. Curricula reform that took seriously the question of what knowledge is of most worth ended up transforming the institution. The general education program became the repository and generative heart of the institution's educational vision. As general education programs often function in relative isolation from the academic disciplines and indeed many faculty (as well as being on the periphery of institutional practices), it is worth articulating some of the reasons why the results were different at GMC.

Structurally, the general education program (ELA, for Environmental Liberal Arts) is central to faculty hiring, pedagogical development, and instruction. All candidates for full-time faculty positions interview with the director of the ELA program and must articulate how they will contribute to the ELA program. That interview is not thematically isolated as questions relevant to the ELA program are also addressed in interviews with the dean, provost, and search committee. Once hired, every faculty member is expected to contribute one-third of his or her annual teaching load to courses within the ELA program. These courses have a distinct prefix. Few are cross-listed with major courses and few count toward satisfying any major requirements.

As part of their contribution to the ELA program, faculty are expected to teach at least one core course. The ELA program has four core courses required of every student, and enrollment is capped at twenty, so many sections of each are offered every year. These courses share a common syllabus. Thus, teams of faculty work together annually to revise the syllabus, respond to the prior year's course evaluations and assessment results, and then meet regularly throughout the course to discuss content, instructional strategies, and to coordinate administrative tasks. These faculty teams comprise representatives from the range of faculty disciplines. So, a team might have an economist, chemist, biologist, sociologist, philosopher, historian, artist, English professor, and someone from education. They share disciplinary perspectives on course content and work together on pedagogical technique. The result is that the students across the College share a common set of educational experiences and similar if not identical readings, and large numbers of faculty share that experience as well. This structure also stimulates cross-disciplinary contact between faculty that translates into collaborative research projects, grant writing, co-teaching (including linked and block courses), and cross-disciplinary course integration in subject majors. It also ensures that all faculty have a stake in the content, delivery, and success of the ELA program. Further, it stimulates intergenerational conversations among faculty of what knowledge, skills, and dispositions are of most worth. There is a common aim, the delivery of a general education program that marries an environmental theme to the liberal arts, but much diversity of knowledge and perspective. This keeps the curriculum robust and evolving.

As part of a periodic review of the ELA program, we convened the faculty for a three-day workshop after the spring 2008 semester and asked them to re-envision the ELA program. Specifically, what did they think all GMC students should know, be able to do, and what dispositions should they possess by the time they graduate? Approximately 75% of the faculty attended this voluntary activity. We refined the product of this group at a faculty workshop prior to the start of school in August and then asked what structure for the ELA program would best deliver these results. By February of 2009 we had restructured the distribution categories and distributed what we were now calling student learning outcomes across the ELA curriculum. We then systematically reviewed every ELA course to determine the extent to which it met the new learning outcomes and which distribution requirement, if any, it would meet. As a result, over the next two years we eliminated twenty-three ELA courses from the catalog, substantially
revised thirty-four, and created twenty-two new courses. The resulting program structure and content is summarized below.

Green Mountain College General Education Program

Structure
Core Courses: (All students take)
- Images of Nature (first semester, first year)
- Voices of Community (second semester, first year)
- Dimensions of Nature (second semester, sophomore year)
- A Delicate Balance (capstone)

Distribution Categories: (All students take one course from each category)
- Quantitative Analysis
- Natural Systems
- Human Systems
- Aesthetic Appreciation
- Moral Reasoning
- Historical Context
- The Examined Life

ELA Goals and Student Learning Outcomes

I. Systems Thinking: Students will understand the structure and dynamics of representative social and natural systems and their interrelationships.
   a. Students will demonstrate knowledge of social systems and their historical development.
   b. Students will demonstrate knowledge of ecological systems and how they have been historically conceived.
   c. Students will demonstrate the ability to integrate knowledge of social and ecological systems to predict, assess, and analyze the effects of human activities.

II. Critical Thinking and Communication: Students will develop and apply strong problem-solving skills and communication skills.
   a. Students will demonstrate the ability to communicate complex issues and ideas to diverse audiences in a variety of media.
   b. Students will demonstrate the ability to evaluate reasoning and to create effective arguments that address these issues.
c. Students will demonstrate information literacy through the ability to access, understand, apply, and evaluate sources of information critically and to distinguish fact from opinion.

d. Students will apply these skills in service to their community.

III. Environmental Awareness: Students will understand the factors contributing to our domestic and global ecological challenges and demonstrate the ability to evaluate proposals for creating a more sustainable future.

a. Students will understand contemporary environmental issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss as well as the complexity of proposed solutions.

b. Students will understand the history of land use and the changing relationship between humans and nature over time.

c. Students will be able to articulate a positive vision for a just and sustainable society.

IV. Reflective Self-Awareness and Responsibility: Students will demonstrate ethical responsibility, aesthetic sensitivity, and multi-cultural awareness.

a. Students will demonstrate reflective self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

b. Students will demonstrate empathy for others and the ability to entertain multiple perspectives.

c. Students will demonstrate the ability to clearly identify the ethical dimensions of environmental issues.

d. Students will understand the roles that concepts such as race, gender, sexual identity, religion, socio-economic status, and ethnicity may play in identifying problems or responding to events.

e. Students will demonstrate an ability to respond to and reason about aesthetic considerations.

V. Liberal Arts Understanding: Students will demonstrate interdisciplinary integration of traditional liberal arts areas.

a. Students will demonstrate familiarity with the subject matter and methodologies of the arts, humanities, natural sciences, mathematics, and social sciences.

b. Students will draw on the knowledge base or methodologies of two or more disciplines to analyze, evaluate, or solve a complex problem.

c. Students will demonstrate the ability to use quantitative and qualitative methodologies to interpret and analyze natural and social phenomena.

The central role of the ELA curriculum in terms of the explicit curriculum that all faculty and students engage produces ripple effects throughout the institution as faculty use institutional practices and contexts as the basis for student research and case studies and students apply what they are learning to life outside the classroom. This integration of the curricula and
the co-curricula has led to an increasing emphasis on service learning and applied study. For example, first-year students study the local watershed, including the sewage treatment plant where college effluent goes and which discharges that effluent into the river students swim in. A chemistry class analyzes the contents of a 19th century doctor’s medicine chest on display at the local history museum. Students establish a campus greening fund, with one of its first projects being a feasibility study that leads the College to build a biomass plant.

A GMC education echoes the classical definition of curriculum implied by the curriculum vitae: the trajectory of one’s life that results, in part, from pursuing a particular course of study and practice in a particular way and with particular results. Yes, there is a self-selection bias in the faculty and staff and students who come to GMC, but the details of what it means to be well-educated and to live a good life, the cognate questions to “What knowledge is of most worth?” are re-envisioned and renegotiated in a community of practice through the continual participation of its members. And the answers are applied, tried out and not merely considered, within a community of others well-versed in the questions and the variation of plausible answers.

Notes

8. Early in the twentieth century, Alfred North Whitehead advised that the “essence of education is that it be religious...an education which inculcates duty and reverence. Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events... And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.” (Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* [New York: The Free Press, 1957], p. 14.) Whitehead uses “religious” in a specialized sense, emphasizing reverence and duty in light of the grandness of life, and is not referring to any particular doctrine, concept of divinity, or narrowly construed culture. The tone, however, brings to mind Edmund Burke’s admonition that we see ourselves as part of something larger than ourselves and to recall that we “have duties and responsibilities to the past as well as to the future.” In particular, he warns us against turning “our everything, the love of our country, our honour, our virtue, our religion, and our security to traffic—and estimate them by the scale of pecuniary or commercial reckoning. The nation that goes to that calculation destroys itself.” (Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Perils of Edmund Burke* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. xvi.

17. Orr, p. 2.
18. C. A. Bowers, p. 48.