

**Faculty Development and the Global University: A Student-Faculty Vision of the Future of Higher Education**  
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How Liberal Can the Liberal Arts Be in a Global University?

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As has long been apparent, the ethos of globalization is in many ways a contemporary iteration of the ideals of the liberal arts. We are all here today because we believe in a global education that means broadening cultural perspectives, appreciating and learning from philosophical and religious traditions that are not one's own, and remaining alert to ethical dangers and contradictions in the systems our societies have set up in order to give direction to political and economic endeavors. Globalization, then, in this conception of it, demands that we be critical of what we see and what we know in whichever space we find ourselves (whether this be home -- however this gets defined; elsewhere; or even in "deterritorialization land," the trans-space often attributed to globalization.)

This internationally inflected vision of globalization and thus of "the global" contrasts with a strictly economic understanding of the term that would, in crude terms, reduce differences in order to build world markets for specific products, technologies, and even compartments. This latter vision of globalization is competitive and exclusionary, although it is often undergirded by an ideology of inclusivity. This kind of "global" is available to those who have the means to participate in it and who believe that there is such a thing as "the best or the only." Nonetheless, the two forms of globalization connect, intersect, and have an impact on

each other. Many of those who are leaders in economic globalization are well aware of, sympathetic to, or have even been formed by contact with a globalization whose impetus indeed stems from the long-standing goals of the liberal arts tradition.

These “liberal arts,” the philosophy of which harkens back to at least classical Greece, aim to invest the individual thinker with the tools that best equip him or her to live a productive, ethical, and thoughtful life, one in which personal needs and desires cannot be conceptualized without thinking about community, society, and the impact of one’s own actions on both the present and the future. Of course as cultures have evolved, and with them educational policies and positions, the thinking about which tools make the best intellectual equipment has also changed. Theatre, for example, my own area of inquiry, was once thought to offer the best nourishment for working through the meaning of existence. It was impossible to grasp the theatrical act in purely entertainment terms. These days, proponents of the liberal arts extoll broad coverage of many disciplines as well as depth in one particular area; and they applaud the capacity to link areas and disciplines together through interdisciplinary thinking.

These are also the overall academic goals expressed by the Vice Chancellor and Head of New York University Abu Dhabi in the first pages of the university’s 2015-2016 bulletin, the bulletin being the comprehensive catalogue housing the detailed descriptions of disciplinary divisions, programs, majors, and course offerings at NYUAD. The Vice Chancellor further adds that NYUAD exists in order to create leaders, thus to nurture and inspire its students through the liberal arts, so that they arrive at a place where they can take charge of directing, innovating, and moving

forward their home countries. At the same time, they are meant to forge bonds with each other that will guarantee transnational cooperation and inventiveness, that will realistically set them up to be successful and ethical in relation to economic globalization.

This is the inspiring and utopian vision (and I consider utopia to be a necessary component of successful living) that I have participated in from 2010, when I first began working towards the creation of the Abu Dhabi branch of New York University. It culminated in my tenure as Dean of Arts and Humanities there from 2012 through last August. And this is the project I will speak specifically of now, as I examine more closely the **challenges of implementing a Western-style liberal arts curriculum in a global university meant to serve both the local population of the United Arab Emirates and the world community**, and one in which the meaning of globalization can veer towards the fuzzy. I will, therefore, look at certain tensions inherent in the project, tensions that tend to undermine the ideal of interdisciplinary, indeed global, thinking.

I'd like to start by addressing what some might think of as the 2-ton camel (so to speak) in the room: that is what exactly does it mean to pursue the goals of the liberal arts in a new nation still striving to forge its own identity and harboring a set of laws and cultural constraints that might look and operate like a barrier to free expression. The newness of the UAE, a country which was for centuries a shifting crossroads for pearl divers, merchants, and Bedouin peoples and which was formed through the determination and savvy political maneuvering of Sheik Zayed Al Nahyan in 1971, is, in fact, both a hindrance and a boon. What hinders the implantation of the liberal arts is at base a lack of an institutional educational tradition. Elementary and

secondary schools are plentiful, but with the exception of several private schools, most of which are branches of British or American operations, these local schools, in operation only since the late 70s, are fairly mediocre, still promoting rote learning and not necessarily achieving a high standard of literacy either in English or in Arabic. (English being now the vehicular language of the UAE.) All Emiratis go to school, which is a real achievement, although that means, unfortunately, that the young generation is now somewhat out of step with their grandparents --not to mention how social media and global popular culture enlarge this gap. High school graduates frequently go into some form of technical training; and many aspire to work for the government. The ideals of thinking broadly and especially critically are quite foreign, and NYUAD has had to work constantly through its own public relations campaign to explain its mission to the nation it is supposedly serving.

Nevertheless, it was the forward thinking of the leaders of the most central and wealthiest Emirate of the seven that constitute the UAE who expressly brought the liberal arts into their country. The sheiks of Abu Dhabi (still from the Al Nahyan family), notably the Crown Prince, understood and continue to understand the liberal arts as promoting the kind of creativity necessary to forge a future in which oil will no longer be the source of wealth, and in which the cultural hub of the Arab world will no longer (and for tragic reasons) be situated in Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, or Cairo. These leaders want their own, Emirati children, and not primarily foreign brain power, to be capable of directing the transformation of the nation, and particularly of Abu Dhabi, into an ideas capital. They have, as have leaders in Dubai and Sharjah,

determined that one of the best ways forward to create these innovators and future leaders is through the liberal arts.

This brings me to the issue of integrating Emirati students into the learning community of NYUAD. Most international students coming to NYUAD have had excellent training in independent schools: they have passed their A-levels or have earned international baccalaureate diplomas. Even if they do not come from cultures where the idea of the liberal arts is a major way of apprehending education, they adapt fairly easily and usually with pleasure to the kinds of courses that feature broad cultural analysis, critical thinking, and structured and evidence-based argumentation. The Emirati students who enter NYUAD, however, can often come up short on adaptability (and this was particularly true in the first years of the university) – even if they are definitely smart. But while they are smart, they are not necessarily in step with the competitive ambitions and real thrill in learning that most of our other students possess in abundance. NYUAD has had, then, to work with them in a bridge program to build their basic skills in composition, math, and especially in independent and analytical thinking, as well as to inflect their general attitude towards the value and relevance of intellectual work.

I wish I could say that NYUAD has found the perfect formula for this integration/remediation program. But the bridge program has had mixed results for a number of reasons; and NYUAD has not yet discovered the most productive format for implementing it. Part of the problem stems from the nature of a bridge program itself: separating out certain students into a specific curriculum marginalizes or, some of the students feel, stigmatizes them. Bridge students do not encounter and

make friends with “regular” students in their courses. Part of the problem stems from the fact that Emirati students, and especially the girls, tend to live at home and not in the dormitories, where a great deal of learning and integrating takes place. Thus many Emirati students continue to be surrounded by a family who loves them, but who does not really understand the pressure of what they are being asked to do in a liberal arts university. Another part of the problem rests with the quality and forcefulness of the teaching and the materials being taught: There has not been enough coordination between the professors in the bridge program and other university colleagues.

Administrators of the bridge program are currently addressing these issues by placing each bridge student in at least one course that is part of the normal curriculum, and by making sure that bridge students participate in some of the myriad extracurricular activities and clubs. The hiring of more highly trained teachers, colleagues sensitive to the needs for both encouragement and rigor in any work of remediation, and, also, manifestly aware of the cultural background of the students, has also helped. Moreover, as NYUAD’s reputation as an excellent school grows in the UAE, more Emirati students from the better private high schools seem to be applying, thus reducing the need for a bridge program specifically for them.

At some point, it will probably be necessary to re-conceptualize the bridge program as a space of remediation for entering students from other countries as well as the UAE. (While NYUAD is very careful in terms of admissions, it does even now, and certainly will in the future when the freshmen class grows to 500, admit some international students who could use extra help in English, numerical, scientific, and

historical literacy.) In addition, it seems patently obvious in a place where students have committed to learning from each other that student-to-student tutorials could be a productive way of moving forward. NYUAD might well set up a **peer-learning program** in which older students would tutor and supervise younger students. For the Emeratis, it could be especially helpful to a sense of community if senior Emerati students were to engage with their younger colleagues. Whatever improvements are made to the bridge program, the matter of how to achieve similar levels of knowledge and of how to best integrate all students into the many different layers of what we call the university environment will probably remain a work in progress for some years to come.

Related to this question of integration into the environment of a liberal arts university is the somewhat thorny issue of content, that is the materials to be studied and acted upon by the students, particularly those in the humanities, arts, and social science fields. It is illegal in the United Arab Emirates to attack critically the government or Islam. Anything with overt sexual content and any deviation from the norms of heterosexuality are proscribed. NYUAD is legally obliged to pay attention to these constraints, while at the same time it is morally obliged, as an educational project, to maintain open inquiry into these areas. This makes for a complicated dance, and all the more so because our students - emerging artists and thinkers in their 20s - are often profoundly engaged with questions of politics and sexual identity. NYUAD has handled this challenge by a policy of free expression within the community (for example, no censorship of topics to be covered in classes and no refusal of arts projects that speak of same-sex desire, of rape, or the abuses of

oligarchy.) Young creators are, however, encouraged to cultivate subtlety and allusion – strategies they might also need to put into play if they do art in their home countries.

When student-generated plays are staged, arts projects are curated, or films are shown that might rub cultural sensitivities in the wrong way, such as, for example, the play *The Vagina Monologues* or the critique of institutional arts voiced by the Gulf Labor movement, NYUAD does not permit open access to these events: Only members of the university community are allowed to go to performances, to open-mike sessions, or to on-campus galleries. However, more often than not, the creative work students do invites viewing and commentary from the greater Abu Dhabi and Emirati communities; and many people from off campus flock to campus events. In the social science area, a frustrating problem for doing certain forms of research has become evident in the attempt to get government permission for local canvassing or interviews. For example, permission to conduct a sociological survey of Emirati mothers about what it means to educate children was denied. It has frequently been very difficult if not impossible to get approval for this type of local behavioral research.

The tension most worrisome to me in terms of promoting a liberal arts agenda has ironically come to the fore in recent changes in what was meant to guarantee the permanency of liberal arts thinking: that is in the CORE, or what we might call the general education requirements. Now in its 6<sup>th</sup> year of existence, NYUAD was recently visited by an accreditation team whose advice, and I quote the current Dean of Arts and Humanities, was: “Whatever you do, don’t change the CORE.” And yet the CORE

has been a major bone of contention, bitten into and contorted this past fall even while the accreditation team was singing its praises.

At the inception of NYUAD, the CORE was meant to be the central academic focus that would impart both uniqueness and unity to the student body. It is important to consider here that NYUAD's student body --originally from 60 different countries-- currently consists of a nearly even number of male and female students from some 110 different countries, with Emirati students making up around 13% of the student body and with other sizeable student representations from South Asia, Australia and New Zealand, China, Hungary, and North America. In other words, and as mentioned earlier, because of the diversity of origins, we are looking at vast differences in student exposure to pedagogical styles and to what is thought to constitute essential knowledge at the secondary level. The CORE curriculum was tasked with creating a common pedagogical culture and intellectual dialogue among all of these students, and with introducing and fostering the global in NYUAD's curricular thinking -- the global connoting here both a broad reach and an innovative assemblage of materials for study and discussion.

CORE courses are conceived of as seminars, organized around big ideas, such as: Immortality, Labor, Race, or Childhood. They consist of no more than 16 students, each student expected to draft and redraft response papers and essays, amounting to at least 20 pages of good writing in English; to present orally on several occasions; and to participate actively in classroom discussions. This pedagogy is meant to empower the student to be able to speak his or her mind, based, of course, on a deep reading of the materials; to dethrone the professor as sole source of truth; and to

foster attentive listening to the positions of other students. In CORE courses students are asked to think critically, to challenge received ideas, and thus in many instances to break completely out of the learning habits that had marked their progression through high school.

What in many universities is called “meeting the distribution requirements” is also a central goal of the CORE. All students, including those in NYUAD’s engineering division, are expected to take eight courses covering all four academic divisions (arts and humanities, social sciences, engineering, and science and math.) Thus they take two courses in World Literature; two in Arts, Technology, and Invention; two in Structures of Thought and Society; and two in Ideas and Methods of Science, one of these having a laboratory component. In this way, each student is exposed to literature and texts broadly conceived, to arts and arts making, to philosophical and historical debates concerning the organization of social and religious systems, to the scientific method and to what that means in terms of the production of knowledge, and to ways in which science and technology impact everyday life. Individual courses cross over and integrate knowledge from all divisions, as I hope you will see in the following sketch of a few representative CORE courses. (All of these courses are still on the books, but may be re-integrated within specific disciplinary programs at some point when the new direction of the CORE becomes clearer. )

“Extinction:” This course counts as a CORE in the categories of Structures of Thought and Society and Ideas and Methods of Science. It looks at the question of extinction not only of species, but also of cultures. Students read scientific briefs but also novels; and they take a field trip to Uganda where they visit both a gorilla

sanctuary and a pygmy village. They are able to discuss the situation of the gorillas with local environmentalists and examine how the pygmies are attempting to maintain their way of life by speaking through interpreters to the pygmies themselves.

“Ideas of the Sacred:” This course counts for Structures of Thought and Society and examines through primary texts the major tenants of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Hinduism, particularly in terms of the meaning of God(s) and the sacred. The course asks what these religions have in common and grapples with the relation between faith and reason. It interrogates what a scientific worldview does to the concept of God(s)?

“Time”: A seminar within the Art, Invention, and Technology series, this course looks at technologies of timekeeping and at representations of time in works of art. It examines states of time consciousness from antiquity to the present. Students study the impact of the shift from local time to international standard time and ask whether the experience of time is common across cultures, or rather specific to each different culture.

“Where the City Meets the Sea: Studies in Coastal Urban Environments:” This experimental science CORE sends the students out into the Arabian Gulf to dive and examine sea life. They also read materials about eco-systems and the environmental hazards of development in coastal regions. The Abu Dhabi course is linked to courses in other NYU Global sites that examine similar environmental conundrums, notably in Sydney, Shanghai, and New York. Students work with each other across the sites to compare data and observations.

“Doubles and Masks:” This Pathways of World Literatures course looks at the use of doubles and masks in literature, film, and theatre across several cultures and time zones. It asks how insights from anthropology, psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and theology might help to understand why humans create doubles and masks. Each student does an individual research project on a mask or double in literature, society, or film that resonates with his or her own history; and students present their projects to the class.

The courses I have just described are some of the 40 or so CORE courses that have been offered each semester, with every standing faculty member meant to teach one CORE course in addition to two other courses in his or her discipline. (I emphasize “standing faculty,” as NYUAD also counts visiting and affiliate faculty from New York University in New York among its ranks.) This teaching commitment, however, leads us to what is chiefly responsible for the possible demise of the CORE as I have just presented it. For without the Provost or the Deans expecting it, over half of NYUAD’s students have elected and are electing to major in the Social Sciences, a division which has only three majors: Economics, Political Science, and Social Research and Public Policy, and which does not have sufficient faculty.

It appears that students are choosing these majors because they (and their parents) feel such majors are more “functional,” that is apt to lead to a job at the end of the students’ four years at NYU Abu Dhabi. (These are also the closest courses we have to anything resembling a business major.) The Social Sciences, like Engineering, seem a path, then, into economic globalization. We might conclude from this rush to the social sciences, seen as a form of professional trampoline, that the message of the

liberal arts has not really registered with our students -- that many are still thinking vocationally. We could and probably should, at least up to a point, attribute this orientation to the cultural backgrounds of the majority of our students, a background in which the liberal arts do not figure prominently as an educational paradigm. However, we shouldn't forget that a major in economics has also become the most sought after major in the United States; and that in general humanities courses are losing ground almost everywhere in the world – certainly in Europe as well as in North America.

At NYUAD the Social Science division has had more difficulty recruiting faculty than the other three divisions. Furthermore, many social science colleagues are committed to quantitative analysis as their primary research lens. There are not, then, at present enough social science colleagues to teach the disciplinary courses required by the many majors and aspiring majors they have, let alone teach in the CORE. Moreover, there are not enough social science colleagues broadly enough trained, or not trained in the U.S. liberal arts tradition, to offer the kind of CORE courses that cut across disciplines and eschew quantitative analysis for qualitative considerations. In sum, the CORE seems to be knuckling under from the effects of the push towards vocational training, the paucity of good social scientists prepared to teach in an experimental university in the Middle East, and the particular inclination of the social science division at NYUAD, following the example of NYUNY, to favor quantitative analysis.

The recent effort to reform the CORE began with the sense that it would be preferable to substitute a required writing course for one of the CORE courses.

(English as a lingua franca comes with many problems, not the least one being that the students find themselves in a constant translation mode, aided and abetted, often incorrectly, by Google.) The faculty most involved in the push for better writing were humanities and arts people who had been monitoring student writing from freshmen year through their senior theses and who had recognized that NYUAD had not achieved the level of excellence in English composition expected from graduates of first-rate liberal arts schools. 60% of the students place into mandatory writing courses. Yet NYUAD writing faculty have estimated, after scoring their entrance exams, that at least another 30% should also be required to work on composition. The idea, then, was to reduce the number of required CORE courses by one or two and insist on a writing course. NYUAD students had also been pushing for some relief from required CORE courses, as they wanted more space to pursue electives.

However, when the discussion of the CORE finally picked up steam last fall, several other models were proposed, including a model militantly championed by the social scientists that did away with most CORE courses and replaced them with the more traditional distribution solution. The latter would mean that social science colleagues, to their relief, could simply offer their general introductory courses as courses that would meet a distribution model, without having to staff special CORE courses. They would consequently not suffer quite as much from the real student demographic pressure on their major courses.

This model is, in fact, the model that was eventually voted in by the faculty and that will go partially into effect next fall, with only two CORE Colloquia courses of the kind I have described to you in the required mix. It remains to be seen what the

impact of this will be on global thinking generally, as well as on the kind of learning community that had been created through small, interactive classes -- as there will probably be fewer seminars, especially in the social science division. Meanwhile, the issue of whether or not there should be a required writing course has still not been settled.

I don't want to conclude with this somewhat gloomy prognosis for the future of liberal arts -- as represented by the CORE -- at NYUAD. Some curricular strategies are proving more sustainable and successful in terms of the liberal arts vision. Chief among these is the requirement that every senior do a senior thesis or capstone project. Students work very closely with faculty advisors on independent and often multi-disciplinary projects. They share their research and their progress with colleagues in cross-disciplinary senior seminars. This has led, for example, to a project exposing the damages of excessive desalination on the coral reefs in the Gulf and to a complementary arts project involving the community in a knitting cooperative that created woolen models of coral formations. A student's internship in a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon resulted in a one-man theatre capstone attempting to capture both the refugees' experience and the student's experience of the refugees.

Another key education component at NYUAD is the Arab Crossroads Studies program. This program brings together humanists, artists, and social scientists to teach in a major that takes the Gulf area, the Middle East more generally, and North Africa as its focus. In the Arts and Humanities Division alone there are some sixteen courses cross-listed with this major, ranging from Music of the Middle East to The

History of the Crusades to Philosophy in the Arab World to Contemporary Arabic Literature. The Arab Crossroads Studies major has become one of the intellectual draws on campus, sponsoring visits by scholars from many parts of the world whose research ties into the region, including from Japan's Waseda University.

My final example of a thriving liberal arts initiative is the interdisciplinary Arts and Humanities minor program, Interactive Media. Students move easily from courses in Interactive Media to workshops in the Engineering Division's The Innovation Studio. In this nexus, where arts and technology intermingle, the creativity and out-of-the-box thinking promoted through study in the liberal arts come to bear on inventions that have included inexpensive lighting for villages in Africa to films in which viewers get to select the film's ending by punching numbers into their cell phones.

Let me conclude by saying that I am far from despairing about the fate of the liberal arts on our global campuses. I am sure they will live and transform as we develop our schools. But I am also sure that we must be watchful, so as not to allow market pressures, cultural misunderstandings, or excessive utilitarian considerations to eliminate or gum up the benefits of studying the liberal arts. A liberal arts education has always been a blend of the professional and the abstract. Perhaps our principle task now in our diverse institutions is to make sure the crassly professional does not get in the way of the more profound and long-lasting goal of learning how to learn within a community of learners.

