

## Liberal Arts, Diversity, and Our Times

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The past five years have seen world horizons shrink as a result of the pandemic—even as they have expanded artificially in its aftermath as a result of new technologies. This special issue of *Innovative Teaching and Learning*, “Liberal Arts, Diversity, and Our Times,” combines reflections on liberal arts and the associated educational and cultural mission when driven, but also challenged, by the complex social, historical, economic and technological developments of our times. With the global rise of joint ventures in liberal arts education crossing Western and non-Western divides, ventures that experienced an important surge in the late twentieth century, it is important to understand how diversity, in the sense of addressing the needs of the whole person but also the widest variety of individuals comprising a student body,

is reimagined in global contexts and at important intersections of learning traditions across spaces.

The influence of intersections of learning traditions such as John Dewey’s visit to China, the Humboldtian model of liberal arts in Chinese education and the broader East–West dialogues set in motion by academic cooperation, was evident in broader discussions at the Liberal Arts in Global Contexts symposium I organized at Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University [BNBU] (formerly United International College [UIC]), in May 2024. As a liberal arts institution operating at spatial crossroads and as a member of the Pacific Alliance for Liberal Arts Colleges, BNBU shares many of the alliance’s cross-cultural ideals for liberal arts education while facing the same dilemmas. Several of the

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essays submitted for this issue, beyond posing questions about the mission of liberal arts in our age, also address strategies for achieving and understanding diversity. Other essays focus specifically on institutional missions and the response to our times that the liberal arts have informed. When examining diversity and its current constraints, it is worth looking back at past strategies for internationalization in the context of liberal arts education in global contexts, and there is particular importance in understanding the current challenges that liberal arts education faces.

The 2001 essay “Assessing the Transformational Power of a Diversity Course” concluded that diversity-focused courses at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst effectively helped students open their minds and hearts to people from other cultural or racial groups (Disch & Palma, 2001, p. 18). The authors write that “a pedagogical model based on the contact hypothesis [of prejudice reduction] combined with on-going self-reflection seems effective in fostering [open minds and hearts].” The authors conclude that, rather than serving as “[tests] of prejudice,” “the more qualitative, self-reflective measures used seemed to them effective both for looking at students and for helping students to look at themselves” (Disch & Palma, 2001, p. 19). Based on the essay’s findings, it

appears that diversity is both a form of assessment of others and a method of critical introspection.

Studies have shown that, when embarking on classes where students learn about foreign cultures, many students hold views based on stereotypes, either negative or positive (Chavez, 2002). Several scholarly meetings have focused on understanding how stereotypes can be overcome while expanding the curriculum but also broadening student horizons in the key of “diversity” and foreign language education. For instance, an event held by the NeMLA (Northeast Modern Language Association) in March 2023, in Niagara Falls, NY, examined among other things a series of themes that included “the state of diversity,” decolonization, and the curriculum in the various modern languages and literatures. A roundtable centered on diversity invited participants to explore how students can be led to “connect with critical race, gender, sexuality, migration, Indigenous, and disability studies” and examined how such connections shape “curriculum design, pedagogy, and praxis so they are relevant to and transformational for [our] students.” That this roundtable occurred suggests that connecting foreign language instruction and curricula with achievements in fields such as migration and critical race studies has provided a positive interdisciplinary turn in