College Should Be an

JONATHAN MALESIC

PROFESSIONAL TENNIS PLAYER Serena Williams trains like a hockey player (Crouse 2011). The University of Notre Dame's legendary football coach Knute Rockne made his team practice somersaults and cartwheels (Langmack 1926). Competitive swimmer Ryan Lochte hoists and flips over 650-pound truck tires (Salter 2012). Their training may seem unorthodox, but consider the results: sixteen Grand Slam singles titles, five undefeated seasons, eleven Olympic medals. They're doing something right.

Thinking about how athletes train for competition raises questions central to college and university curricula: How does someone become excellent at a complex activity? Is it by practicing only that one activity, or by practicing many different disciplines? The line that connects tire-flipping to the four-hundred-meter individual medley is crooked, at best. Would Lochte be a better, faster swimmer if he ignored the tires and spent more time swimming, practicing the one discipline that matters most to him?

Probably not. For one thing, he already spends several hours a day in the water. But more important, to swim excellently, he needs to engage many different abilities at once, both consciously and unconsciously. And he can strengthen these abilities on dry land—in fact, he can probably strengthen some of them, such as the power of an obscure back muscle, only in a gym or on a field. The cumulative effect of supplementing his swimming practice with other disciplines is that he is physically fit in ways that someone who only swam would not be.

MY VIEW

Liberal education promises an intellectual fitness that exceeds the sum of its parts

We take for granted that training in one physical discipline helps an athlete perform another discipline: martial artists run, runners lift weights, weightlifters practice martial arts. In the tight web of these disciplines, one competitor's end is another's means. If each discipline hones part of the body or develops a few discrete skills, then many different disciplines hone the body as a whole, making the athlete better not just at his primary sport but at any sport. Serena is a great tennis player, but I'd want her on my basketball team, too.

Intellectual fitness in curricula and professions

The physical fitness required to perform complex athletic feats has a parallel in the intellectual fitness it takes to perform complex mental tasks. At the heart of liberal education sits the idea that moderate training in several disciplines is better than intensive training in just one. Through exercising students' abilities in interpreting cultural artifacts; gathering and analyzing evidence; communicating; reasoning logically, historically, and morally; and so on, liberal education promises an intellectual fitness that exceeds the sum of its parts.

This model of education is faltering under heavy pressure, however, as colleges and universities adapt their undergraduate curricula to accommodate students being trained ever more intensively in ever-narrower degree programs in business, education, and health fields. Many universities continue to tout their comprehensive core curricula despite having a relatively small set of liberal education requirements for majors in business and other professional fields.

With accrediting agencies demanding that students in these fields learn a growing list of professional competencies, universities are responding by adding courses to those major programs. Space in the curriculum for these new requirements has to come from somewhere. As a glance through the catalogs of many comprehensive universities will reveal, the space usually comes from exempting professional program majors from some liberal arts requirement—natural science, language, fine arts. It's equivalent to

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Intellectual Workout

telling Serena to spend more time on the court and less in the gym.

In crafting a curriculum, the choice can come down to deciding whether finance students are better off taking a seventeenth business course or a second literature course. The law of diminishing returns seems relevant here. That extra business course will exercise parts of the student's mind that have already been bulked up. An extra literature course will develop other parts, giving the student better balance and flexibility as a thinker.

Paradoxically, promoting highly specialized professional training at the expense of overall intellectual fitness may even harm students' performance as professionals. Just as Lochte would be a weaker swimmer without his dry-land training, cutting back an accounting student's training in history could make her a weaker accountant—not to mention a weaker citizen. That is because in her career, she is likely to confront disparate documents and data, and she will have to deduce the connections among them. She may have to use these documents to develop a plausible narrative of what happened in the past. She might then need to write a report on how that narrative bears on what her client or company is doing now. An intellectually fit accountant will think like a historian, a scientist, or a sociologist tacitly, in a hundred small ways throughout her work day. Habits of mind she practiced in an otherwise forgotten anthropology course will guide her thinking as she deals with unpredictable situations.

What I'm describing resembles critical thinking, which typically entails an ability to decode hidden meanings and evaluate arguments. But I think that "intellectual fitness" is the better term; it more readily captures the way that good thinking is the indirect, cumulative result of training in multiple complementary disciplines. Every academic discipline develops students' intellectual fitness, but none does it alone. To acquire all the disciplinary

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modes of thinking that comprise intellectual fitness, modes traditionally associated with the liberal arts, students must learn from people who can perform each one excellently: the faculty in arts and sciences departments.

Implementing intellectual fitness

What does this model of liberal education as intellectual fitness mean in the most practical sense, in the meetings where curricula are designed and votes are taken?

First, when accreditors present new competencies for accredited programs to teach, curriculum committees, deans, and faculty should insist that reducing the number of required liberal arts courses in order to accommodate the new standards be an absolute last resort. The burden of fulfilling accreditors' demands must fall upon the accredited programs. If they cannot find a creative way to please accreditors while preserving the diversified intellectual fitness that universities must offer, then they should reconsider whether accreditation really benefits their students.

Second, faculty and deans across the university should be called upon to demonstrate student learning in common skill areas, with assessment

results widely shared. The whole assessment process should be inclusive, taking place not just within departments but across them, so that finance and theatre faculty can hold history faculty accountable for how they train students. Professional students and arts and sciences students should be assessed according to common rubrics. The Association of American Colleges and Universities' VALUE rubrics, for example, are highly portable across academic units (see www.aacu.org/value/rubrics). Programs hosting students whose learning gains lag should adjust their curricula accordingly, recognizing that the training their students need may have to come from a different department.

Third, faculty in the arts and sciences should argue strongly in favor of not only critical thinking but disciplinary thinking—thinking philosophically, historically, social scientifically, artistically, etc.—as a primary goal of liberal education. By emphasizing disciplinary thinking, we acknowledge the distinctive elements of intellectual fitness that our particular expertise imparts.

Fourth, faculty should make the case to students about why liberal education matters. Many of us do. But we must not think that the terms we use when addressing regional accrediting bodies will convince many students. We need to make our case in a way that students will find compelling—even viscerally so.

A gym for the mind

I tell new college students that their tuition buys them a gym membership for the mind. (As a bonus, the college throws in a regular gym membership, too.) Extending the metaphor, I say that it isn't enough just to pay the dues, to have the membership as a credential. That alone does not purchase intellectual fitness. Only hard work does. And after a tough mental workout, their brains might hurt, but that hurt just means that they are getting intellectually stronger. If they learn to do the exercises properly and work at them diligently, then they will begin to see improvement in their core intellectual fitness.

As a theology professor, I teach what amounts to tire-flipping, mostly to swimmers and runners. Years of graduate training taught me to flip tires well. My teachers were world champions. I've seen them flip half-ton tires uphill, one-handed. I learned from others, too: experts in jumping, in throwing, in disciplines that helped me to flip tires better. By the end of my training, I could flip tires in my own way, with my own techniques. I've never drawn a bow or run a steeplechase, but when it comes to tire-flipping, I know what I'm doing.

Before taking my class, some of my students never even imagined that tires could be flipped—and certainly not for fun or profit. I start them out on ordinary Goodyears, and we work up from there. I don't expect many students will decide that they were put on earth to flip tires. But that doesn't mean that learning how is a waste of their time. Ryan Lochte knows: you don't win the race only in the pool. □

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