

Kara A. Godwin*

The Counter Narrative: Critical Analysis of Liberal Education in Global Context

DOI 10.1515/ngs-2015-0033

Abstract: Scholars who study higher education describe globalization as an inevitable force in postsecondary systems and institutions worldwide. Resulting trends include massification, privatization, reduced public funding, competition, and unprecedented student and faculty mobility. In the last two decades, another small but important trend has developed: the emergence of liberal education (often called “liberal arts and science” or “general education”) in cultures where it has rarely existed before. Discourse about this phenomenon is overwhelmingly positive. Using critical theory to analyze this evolving global trend, however, provides a much-needed alternative perspective for policy and practice. In this article, I define liberal education and provide an overview of the current trend based on a 2013 empirical study. In reaction to a dominant economic framework that rationalizes the development of liberal education programs, I present several counter narratives related to history, students and faculty, learning and teaching, access and elitism, and cultural hegemony. This article emphasizes the importance of critically analyzing new international higher education developments to increase the propensity for creating socially just policies and programs. Finally, I illustrate the implications for the global emergence of liberal education by suggesting that liberal education as a higher education philosophy could both reinforce and resist neoliberal practices.

Keywords: liberal education, neoliberalism, globalization

Among researchers who study higher education, globalization is described as the conglomeration of broad scientific, technical, and economic trends that transcend national boundaries and are “largely inevitable” in contemporary society and postsecondary systems (Altbach 2006, 123). The movement responding to globalization within higher education is commonly referred to as internationalization, or the integration of global, international, or intercultural dimensions in the “purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight 2003, 2). Although a response to globalization, internationalization is

*Corresponding author: Kara A. Godwin, Boston College Center for International Higher Education, MA 02467, USA, E-mail: kara.godwin@gmail.com

increasingly recognized as a trend itself (Rumbley, Altbach, and Reisberg 2009). While the distinction might seem subtle – globalization as an unavoidable force pervasive in our economy and society, and internationalization as higher education's reaction to that force – it is a helpful framework. This is true for situating changes in curricula, pedagogy, and policies that emerge in new cultural contexts, and especially for orienting ourselves as actors with agency in those changes.

Cognizant of these definitions, student and faculty mobility often spring to mind as the primary manifestation of internationalization in the academy. Less familiar for the general public, as well as many members of the university community, however, is scholarly work that provides broader perspective about globalization's imperatives and implications in higher education. Social scientists in the closely related fields of *international higher education* and *comparative and international education* (spanning primary through postsecondary levels) leverage interdisciplinary methods and theoretical perspectives from sociology, economics, psychology, history, political science, and other areas to analyze global higher education phenomenon. Topics of inquiry are as varied as higher education finance and privatization, student/faculty intercultural competence, organizational development, information technology, access and equity, comparative public policy, industry-university relations, the academic profession, learning/teaching/curriculum, and many others.

A primary task for some of these researchers has been discerning worldwide changes in the higher education landscape over the last half century. In the wake of globalization, international and comparative education scholars have identified several revolutionary trends.¹ The most pervasive of these is massification, the worldwide expansion of postsecondary access from elite to mass, or at least significantly broader, sectors of the population (Trow 2006). Along with dramatic increases in participation, reduced public funding in many countries has put intense pressure on institutions to privatize, to be more entrepreneurial, to demonstrate quality and efficiency, and to compete in a global market for human, financial, and research resources. At the same time, widening student demographics, technological advances, and evolution of the twenty-first-century knowledge economy have spawned new forms of education delivery and content.

Given these trends, higher education has changed “profoundly” in the last few decades (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009, 106). One relative constant, however, has been postsecondary's focus on preparing students for distinct

¹ For a detailed discussion of global trends, see the report prepared for the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education by Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009).

careers in the labor market with a “specialized” or vocational approach to education (Godwin and Altbach forthcoming). Universities in most higher education systems are designed so that students study for a specific degree in preparation for a specific kind of work like accounting, law, medicine, engineering, teaching, etc. In this article, however, I focus on a recent phenomenon that contradicts this constant: the growing global interest in liberal education. The increasing number of tertiary programs that utilize a broad liberal education philosophy (also known as “liberal arts and science” or “general education”) is a small but important internationalization trend that disrupts traditional thinking about the purpose of undergraduate² higher education.

Rather than focusing on the characteristics of this trend,³ in this article I analyze the emergence of liberal education through a carefully constructed critical lens. Based on a 2013 empirical study and subsequent research, I will define liberal education and provide an overview of its growing global presence. In reaction to a dominant economic narrative that rationalizes the development of new liberal education programs, I will present several counter narratives related to history, students and faculty, learning and teaching, access and elitism, and culture in postsecondary organizations. Finally, in recommending critical analysis as an imperative framework for future research on this topic, I will illustrate the implications for the global emergence of liberal education and suggest the possibility that as an education philosophy, it could both reinforce and resist neoliberal practices.

There is significant impetus for higher education scholars to consider internationalization phenomena with a critical perspective. As Michael Crossley (1999) noted in his call to “reconceptualize” comparative and international education, this is *not* an area in which critical theory is traditionally applied. He asks the comparative and international scholarly community to reconsider the multidisciplinary connections between theory and practice in education. Especially compelling is Crossley’s statement that socio-cultural and interpretive lenses are particularly relevant in a global community where “rationalistic and economic imperatives” – neoliberal paradigms – dominate social science research. Critical theory and post-modern perspectives are essential to challenge and “highlight the (multi-)cultural forces and factors that underpin human progress” (250). Without employing critical analysis in international education, there is risk of perpetuating the injustices of cultural imperialism,

2 “Undergraduate” also being equivalent to first cycle degree.

3 See Godwin (2013, 2014) for a more complete analysis of the global emergence of liberal education.

neocolonialism, and marginalization of people and ideas outside dominate Western forces. Crossley is right and although some critical analysis has been done since his statement (with much credit to scholars like Ordorika and Lloyd (2015), Shahjahan (2011, 2014), Pusser and Marginson (2012), Mulcahy (2008, 2010), and Morrow (2006), as well as seminal theorists including Paulo Freire, Jane Roland Martin, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Michael Apple, and bell hooks) it has not been pervasive in international higher education. More critical perspective is needed as an essential methodology for deconstructing global higher education activity and research.

Using critical theory to guide both scholarship and practice is especially important where there are new developments in international higher education. Critically analyzing emerging global trends increases the propensity for developing socially just policies and programs from the onset. In the discussion below, I use critical theories from multiple traditions in order to ignite new conversations about the increasing presence of liberal education in postsecondary systems that have offered mostly specialized education throughout their contemporary history.

The purpose of this discussion is to stimulate critical discourse about the increasing global interest in liberal education. It is not a definitive declaration that cultural imperialism or marginalization unequivocally occurs as interest in liberal arts education grows internationally. Instead, it proposes critical theory in a number of forms as a scholarly and praxis-based strategy for avoiding such transgressions as more liberal education programs develop in new cultural settings.

Liberal Education: A Temporary Definition and Global Phenomenon

The term “liberal education” is an often confused and, in many cultures, contested concept (an idea addressed near the end of this discussion). For the purpose of this work, as well as the 2013 study that forms the basis for understanding related global trends, it is viewed as a philosophy of education more than a defined curriculum. Its central tenet is to empower learners with a mind and skill set that enables them to be critical members of society prepared to address complexity, diversity, and change American Association for Colleges & Universities (AAC&U, Godwin 2013). Despite many variations and debates about the definition of liberal education, its essence depends on three components. First, liberal education is multidisciplinary. It provides broad exposure to the

arts, humanities, social and natural sciences (ideally, interrelating disciplinary ways of knowing and questioning). Second, liberal education has a “general education” component. That is, within a given program, the broad curriculum approach is required of all or most students. Finally, it strives to engender elemental skills that include critical thinking, problem-solving, analysis, communication, global citizenship, and/or a sense of social responsibility.⁴

Despite its history in several cultural traditions, in modern higher education discourse liberal education is commonly viewed as a distinctly American construct (Becker 2013; Nussbaum 1997, 2004; Rothblatt 2003). The U.S. is regularly recognized as liberal education’s “home” not only because of its designated liberal arts colleges, but also because general education (requirements that all or most students must take courses from a variety of disciplines) is common practice across the majority of public and private institutions.

During the last two decades, however, liberal education has emerged with surprising prevalence in countries where it has rarely existed before. This includes places as diverse as Russia, India, Ghana, China, Israel, the Netherlands, Chile, Bangladesh, and Brazil in addition to others. Increased interest in this education philosophy is a small but growing trend. A 2013 study used the Global Liberal Education Inventory (GLEI) to collect and analyze basic data about liberal education programs outside the U.S. Results indicated that 183 (a number that has grown to approximately 200 since the study) liberal education programs can be found in 58 countries spanning every region (Godwin 2013, 2014). While this is a small number compared to higher education programs worldwide, it signals a revitalized shift in thinking about the purpose of undergraduate education.

It is important to note that the 2013 study was not about the “spread” of liberal education or U.S. liberal arts programs establishing initiatives in other countries. (In fact the 2013 analysis revealed that only one-third of the GLEI programs had a formal affiliation with a U.S. institution.) Instead, it was about objectively observing an international phenomenon, an internationalization trend in which some of the most intriguing developments are indigenous initiatives in higher education systems or institutions. The most compelling part of this work is understanding why so many places in the world have become interested in a postsecondary education philosophy that is remarkably different (to varying degrees) from the host country’s traditional approach to education and ultimately understanding whether these disruptions to common higher education curricula and pedagogy can have impact on the larger systems or societies in which they reside.

⁴ See Godwin (2013) for a deeper discussion of related terms like liberal education, general education, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary.

In addition to its geographic expanse, two things make this growing global interest in liberal education an internationalization phenomenon. First, the trend is contemporary. Fifty-nine percent of non-U.S. liberal education programs have begun since 1990. Even more remarkable, at least 44% of all liberal education initiatives outside the U.S. developed in just the last ten years (Godwin 2013). Second, this approach to undergraduate education, both a curriculum and an education philosophy, is a stark contrast to traditional postsecondary education in most of the world.

Driven predominately by an economic human capital imperative, university education has historically been organized around vocational and professional preparation. Although the U.S. is a notable exception with its liberal education offerings, even general education (broad curriculum requirements for all students) in other parts of the world is relatively rare.⁵ Most universities educate undergraduate students for a specific career. In contrast to liberal education, scholars, practitioners, and policy makers refer to this normative education philosophy as “specialized,” “career-focused,” or “vocational.” Students, frequently during or before secondary school, qualify for or select an occupational track on which they remain focused through university completion. If possible at all, changing occupational paths after entering postsecondary institutions is often difficult and costly in terms of the time it takes to complete a degree.

Liberal education programs in the GLEI vary significantly from one another in structure, curricula, size, philosophy, and cultural context. Their multiplicity requires caution when drawing conclusions and suggesting critical discourse about this trend. Generalizing programs across so many cultures can be detrimental to discussions guided by critical analysis. However, the fact that *all* liberal education programs outside the U.S. disrupt the common specialized, vocational approach to undergraduate curricula in their country is a ubiquitous characteristic that provides an initial commonality from which critical discourse should evolve.

The Critical Role of Critical Theory

Critical theory is a methodological and conceptual framework that disrupts dominant paradigms. It seeks to “de-center grand narratives of social and

⁵ See Godwin and Altbach (forthcoming) for a more nuanced discussion of other exceptions.

political subjugation,” particularly as they relate to colonialism, socio-economic status, power, geography, sexuality, race, and gender (Martínez-Alemán, Pusser, and Bensimon 2015, 8). While there are many frameworks that can be classified as critical theory, all of them dwell in the discernment of *master* and *counter narratives*, terminology used commonly in critical race theory. Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011) describe master narratives as the “overarching messages behind the conglomeration of concepts, stories, images, and narratives that serve as the basis for, and aid in the maintenance of, a culture, institution, or system’s claim to know what is (and what is not) truth and reality” (125). Rooted in historical and cultural contexts, counter narratives challenge normative structures with the objective of “emancipating” individuals and communities “from what has been socially regulated and thus assumed ‘natural’ or ‘normal’” (Martínez-Alemán et al. 2015, 8). Ultimately, critical theory is committed to social justice and elevating authentic experiential knowledge (Zamudio et al. 2011).

In their discussion of critical theory in the “globalization era,” Ordorika and Lloyd (2015) highlight deterioration of the public sphere in higher education and the rise of market competition, individual responsibility and benefit, accountability, quality assurance, reductions in government funding, university-industry partnerships, and demand for a work force aligned to the knowledge economy. This neoliberal “logic” (Shahjahan 2014, 221) is a familiar backdrop presented by critical theorists who call for alternative ways of knowing and transformative resistance to modern colonization, marginalization, and perpetuated inequality and oppression (see Giroux 2002 and 2010; Jeffress 2008; Lawrence 2015; Shahjahan 2014, among others). It is a narrative suited to the rationales for liberal education’s global emergence.

In the case of emerging global interest in liberal education, the master narrative is also predominately economic. With a focus on developing countries, the World Bank/UNESCO Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) argues that many of the public benefits higher education provides would not be possible without a society that had some liberally educated citizens. Benefits include a broadly trained population that can contribute to society’s advancement, identify problems and solutions, and create opportunities for studying and developing culture (83). “A general [liberal] education,” they say, “is an excellent form of preparation for the flexible, knowledge-based careers that increasingly dominate the upper tiers of the modern labor force” (83). This line of reasoning has been the impetus for new liberal education programs in places like China, Ghana, and Western Europe (Godwin 2013).

The Task Force’s reference to higher education as a public good suggests that “everyone” benefits from a society that offers at least some liberal education.

While this might (or might not) be true, extending the principles of critical theory as a method of analysis “challenge[s] the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center” and helps to reveal the “reality” of those at society’s margins (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 142). Expanding the principles of critical theory to a larger sociological context, this discussion asks: If the general public benefits from the injection of liberal education into systems otherwise dominated by specialized, career-focused curricula and philosophy, then are there individuals, groups, countries, or regions that are simultaneously marginalized by this movement? Are there other parts of society or cultures that are at risk of being compromised as liberal education emerges in new geographic contexts? If so, should the neoliberal economic narrative be the predominant framework by which decisions are made about liberal – or other – educational philosophies?

Rather than suggest a single critical theory to examine the global emergence of liberal education, in this article, I borrow an approach from Castagno and Lee (2007) who utilize “counter-storytelling methodology” rather than specific analytic principles that distinguish theoretical tenets of critical pedagogy, resistance, postcolonial, feminist, critical race, liberation, or postmodernist theories. Instead, the discussion that follows uses the central axiom of all critical theories. That is, a quest for “alternative logic” (Lawrence 2015, 246) that interrupts commonly held market-driven neoliberal rationalizations for education policies and practices on both local and global scales.

Most news and scholarship about liberal education, including information published by GLEI programs themselves, is positive. For countries like Hong Kong and China that are trying to implement system-wide reforms, or for new programs in India or anomalous initiatives like Ashesi University in Ghana and Shalem College in Israel, an enthusiastic profile is vital for “selling” liberal education to skeptical students, parents, policymakers and the public. Scholarly sources emphasize the advantages of liberal education for students who want to postpone selecting their career, for societies desiring a critically educated and politically active citizenry, and for developing economies needing more adaptable human capital with skills for the knowledge economy. Proponents of new liberal education programs lean on declarations of experienced U.S. educationalists that defend the philosophy in a country where it has a steadfast history.

In sum, the master narrative (Zamudio et al. 2011) for liberal education in a global context is not only predominately neoliberal, there is not enough interpretation of this or individual programs that challenges the policies and practices on which they are modeled. Problematically, more discussion is needed that contemplates liberal education’s challenges and considers potential adverse impacts given its evolving global presence. Below I suggest several

counter narratives as a starting place for discourse about the global emergence of liberal education through a more critical perspective.

Counter Narratives

Historical Counter Narratives

As an essential part of “political and moral practice” (Giroux 2010, para 9), critical theory attempts to “make evident the multiplicity and complexity of history” (Said 2002, 41). Liberal education’s history, especially when discussed from the U.S. vantage, commonly references a Western origin. With roots in Greco-Roman antiquity, the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) are regularly cited as the basis of modern arts and science disciplines. Further, the master historical narrative closely affiliated with that story anchors a debate about the definition of liberal education as well as the purpose of postsecondary undergraduate education. In the sixteenth century, for example, Francis Bacon propounded that learning and knowledge should have practical application and “not be as a courtesan, for pleasure” (quoted by Kerr 1995). Cardinal John Henry Newman ardently disputed this view 250 years later when he declared knowledge to be an end in itself and that education “aims at the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind” (as interpreted by Kerr 1995, 2–3). In contemporary U.S. higher education, this dichotomy manifests in the difference between curricula that require a broad, cross-disciplinary course program (often associated with liberal arts colleges, though also widely available in large research universities), and those that focus more on preparing students for specific work after graduation.

This may be an appropriate historical compass for liberal education in the U.S. context, but it is not the only origin for liberal education worldwide. Yet, according to the 2013 GLEI data and subsequent research, many non-Western programs also reference that same history. Projecting a more critical perspective would mean understanding a “present that is not a result of the past but a past that can only be understood in its sagittal relationship to the present” (Mazzocchi 2008, 94, referencing Foucault). More discussions about the history of liberal education could incorporate, for example, Chinese Confucian tradition, which was predicated on a broad approach to knowledge and incorporated ways of knowing from many “fields” (Godwin and Altbach forthcoming). Similarly, both Hindu and Buddhist traditions grounded in religious texts at India’s

Nalanda University also emphasized broad philosophical teaching as a means for “self-realization” until 1197 CE (Scharfe 2002; Singh 2010, 336). Further, while Islamic tradition anchored postsecondary education at the oldest continuously operating higher education institution, Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, other art and science perspectives were viewed as essential components of a comprehensive education.⁶ Highlighting these alternative views of liberal education’s history is an essential undertaking for developing culturally relevant policies and curricula. Further, aligning themselves with alternative non-Western histories could help programs better rationalize their missions – and attract the attention of local students, parents, and policymakers – in places like Afghanistan, Israel, Kenya, Bhutan, and Jordan⁷ where single liberal education programs are anomalies in their postsecondary systems.

Student Counter Narratives

The counter narrative for students participating in new liberal education initiatives relates to issues of access, workforce opportunity (a topic admittedly close to the neoliberal paradigms rationalizing liberal education), and learning (discussed in the next section below). Literature in the form of news stories as well as the academic discourse among scholars, administrators, and policymakers seldom focuses on students as primary stakeholders in new liberal education initiatives. A critical analysis of this topic therefore brings students to the forefront and questions ways in which they might benefit and be marginalized by liberal education reforms.

The possibility that liberal education can contribute to developing the “whole person” and graduates with well-rounded skills and interests is often overshadowed in liberal education’s dominant neoliberal defense. There are a few exemplary exceptions, but more rigorous critical analysis is needed. For example, referencing the liberal education program at Smolny College in Russia, Jonathan Becker (2013) claims that modern liberal education is “designed to foster in students the desire and capacity to learn, think critically, and communicate proficiently, and to prepare them to function as engaged citizens” (3). Similar notions resonate in Rothblatt’s (2003) discussion about students’ opportunities for character formation, leadership, and personality development. Scholarship only

⁶ See Godwin and Altbach (forthcoming) for a full discussion.

⁷ See the Global Liberal Education Inventory (Godwin 2013 and forthcoming website) for a full list of countries that have only one liberal education initiative.

occasionally notes that pursuing a liberal education in countries where students normally select their career as early as age 16, allows students to postpone specialization during formative years of development when they might experiment with the idea of many different careers (Hvistendahl 2010; Marginson, Weko, Channon, Luukkonen, and Oberg 2008). These student-centered stories are rare in the small body of scholarly literature on this topic. They are even less prevalent in the liberal education policy discourse and central arguments for program funding or government approval.

Despite the above-mentioned benefits of liberal education, more critical analysis might also highlight repercussions of its high cost (Mohrman 2006). Compared to traditional, specialized education, liberal education is expensive. To reach learning outcomes as they are defined by liberal education in this article, faculty must devote significant time to cross-discipline collegial dialogue and course design. Given liberal education's ideal pedagogy, programs require classrooms with fewer students and thus more courses and space, more faculty, more faculty hours, and more materials compared to their traditional, specialized-education counterparts (Levin 2010). Based on data collected in the GLEI, much of this cost is transferred to the student.

Student access to liberal education programs, as a result, is inadvertently reserved for those who can afford it. This is true for both developed and developing countries. Liberal education programs that are also private (approximately half of non-U.S. programs worldwide (Godwin 2013, 2014)) may prevent students from using government issued tuition subsidies to enroll. Further, several liberal education programs, like those in the Netherlands and Australia, have been critiqued because graduate⁸ programs looking for conventional specialized, career-oriented undergraduate applicants require liberal education degree finishers to take another year of university education in order to compensate for their unique bachelors training and qualify for graduate admission (Godwin 2013). The prospect of an extra year of undergraduate education is likely cost prohibitive for many students and further exacerbates aspects of liberal education that are perceived as impractical in the job market.

With the U.S. as an exception, Peterson (2012), and van der Wende (2011) correctly posit that liberal education initiatives continue to exist on the periphery of mainstream higher education around the world. This is a key puzzle for future critical analysis of this subject. Programs from Chile to Hong Kong, and even those gaining Western journalistic popularity in China, are "outliers"

⁸ "Graduate" also being equivalent to second and third cycle degrees.

(Peterson 2012, 11). Students with top national exam scores and superb qualifications elect to attend the most prestigious, world-class, national public institutions in their country, not liberal education programs (Altbach and Balán 2007). Despite claims that liberal education can provide students the kind of flexible skills needed in the current economy, it is possible that societies or institutions that foster liberal education programs – in places where specialized education is clearly the norm – also put students at risk of not finding employment because their degrees are so unconventional in their economic cultural context. While there is anecdotal evidence that prospering economies seek graduates with the critical thinking skills, learning agility, and general knowledge bestowed by a liberal education (Task Force on Higher Education and Society 2000; Peterson 2010; van der Wende 2011), to date, there is little scholarship that solidifies this speculation or clarifies how successful graduates are in the job market.

Considered from this perspective, the touted advantages of a liberal education can be viewed as elite and reserved for the upper class. Because liberal education prepares students for a variety of undefined future opportunities and not a specific career, it is further viewed as something that students from less-than-privileged backgrounds cannot afford. A critical view of affordability and access to liberal education programs reveals potential for socio-economic stratification and social reproduction of elites (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), an argument that has long been made against liberal education in the United States.

While proponents repeatedly cite the knowledge economy as a rationale for liberal education's evolution in new settings, there is risk that the same rationale will amplify elitism. Rapid technological changes, market globalization, and the increasingly blurred industry and discipline borders make the agility of post-secondary graduates a vocational necessity. Globally, members of the contemporary workforce may benefit from liberal education because they are nimble and able to quickly adapt their skills when new systems, knowledge, and innovation emerge. However, if opportunities to engender those skills are limited to students with social capital, financial stability, and geographic access to programs in the GLEI, then liberal education could exacerbate social and economic inequality.

Learning and Teaching Counter Narratives

Once a liberal education curriculum is established, institutions, faculty, administrators, and students may face challenges at the fundamental level of education: that of teaching and learning. Effective liberal education, as defined here, requires

pedagogy that is unconventional in most countries. Liberal education is intimately tied to teaching since it is often the instructor who is responsible for helping students think analytically, providing sound theoretical grounding from a variety of perspectives, engaging students in critical dialogue and creative problem solving, and sharpening learners' written and oral communication skills. The rote transmission approach to teaching that is prevalent in many specialized, career-centered programs – and increasingly scrutinized for its focus on declarative teaching rather than student learning (Entwistle 2005) – is not conducive to the core learning outcomes that distinguish a liberal education. Faculty support, pedagogical training, and instructors amenable to collaborative classroom cultures are imperative for effective and sustainable liberal education programs.

There are parallel dilemmas from the learner's perspective. In order to achieve the core learning outcomes that distinguish a liberal education, students are encouraged to engage critically with each other, with the text and data, and with their faculty (Levin 2010). With contemporary liberal education courses often, though not always, situated in a democratic curriculum, students are also given a great deal of flexibility in selecting their studies and, simultaneously, a good deal of responsibility for their own learning (Becker 2013; Gillespie 2003; Will 2006).⁹ Martha Nussbaum (2002) reports that a student is expected to “take charge of his or her own thinking... and become a reflective critic of traditional [social and political] practices” (90).

Students who are unfamiliar with these approaches to learning because it is an anomaly in their academic culture may face challenges in a liberal education program. Offering a comparative international perspective, Ghabra and Arnold (2007) highlight, for example, that students in the Arab region are not versed in “develop[ing] their knowledge through critical thought, hands-on experience, and the use of their senses in the way that Americans have been taught to do from childhood” (vii). They are accustomed, Ghabra and Arnold continue, to lectures, memorization, and authoritarian teaching. In liberal education, however, students are expected to be interactive, to be constructively critical of their peers and the professor, to challenge assumptions and cultivate inquiry for themselves, and to complete reading and a significant amount of learning on their own. If not cultivated, these skills could marginalize liberal education learning opportunities for students who were raised to respect instructor authority and approach the classroom as a place where they receive knowledge rather than create it.

⁹ In connection with the democratic curriculum, compare, for example, the choice-based model of Amsterdam University College and the prescribed curriculum at Shalem College in Israel.

Curriculum Counter Narratives

In addition to these (oversimplified) descriptions of teaching and learning in liberal education, making curriculum content relevant to the cultures in which programs operate is a persistent challenge. An interdisciplinary curriculum spanning social science, natural science, arts, and humanities is a pivotal component of liberal education's definition. While liberal education programs might consult examples of U.S. models for developing skill-based course outcomes like holistic student development, critical thinking, problem solving, and student-centered pedagogical methods, liberal education curriculum content (which varies considerably throughout the U.S. and now globally) is less transferable.

This conundrum is exacerbated by the ongoing association made between liberal education and the U.S. postsecondary system. Approximately one-third of all liberal education programs outside the U.S. have a relationship (beyond study abroad and student exchanges) with an American university or college (Godwin 2013). The format for these relationships and the types of liberal education programs that have emerged as a result vary greatly. For example, there are several dual degree programs similar to the one offered by Smolny College in Russia and Bard College in the U.S (Cohen 2000; Gillespie 2001). In contrast, despite its name, the American University of Paris is an independent liberal arts institution modeled after U.S. curricula. The American University of Kuwait, however, offers its own degree but is closely tied to and supported by Dartmouth College (Redden 2009). Even more indigenous programs like the Collegium Artes Liberales at the University of Warsaw and Amsterdam University College consult closely with U.S. academics and involve visiting or employ American faculty.

With liberal education's global development, content that reflects and, where appropriate, helps to reproduce understanding of the local and indigenous culture, is essential. While some liberal education programs have well-established locally-developed curricula (Shalem College in Israel and Asehi University in Ghana, for example), other programs and faculty report the ongoing necessity and challenges of designing appropriately relevant liberal education courses.

Ideology Counter Narratives

Finally, a critical lens calls into question the underlying assumptions of U.S.-founded liberal education ideals – their viability and potential imperialism – when used as the basis for educational reforms elsewhere. This is because the history and

philosophy of liberal education in the United States are closely tied to notions of democracy and individualism. Amy Gutmann (1987) posits that the purpose of liberal education is for students to learn “how to think carefully and critically about political problems, to articulate one’s views and defend them before people with whom one disagrees” (173). Martha Nussbaum (1997) similarly explains that the unexamined life threatens democratic freedoms essential to the fabric of U.S. civic principles. Liberal education is “predicated” in this way on “pluralism, tolerance, secularism, and liberal capitalism” (Blanks 1998, 33); it is a philosophy buttressed by notions of individual self-awareness and “consciousness of choice” (Tomlinson 1991, 70).

In using critical inquiry grounded by lived experience (Martínez-Alemán et al. 2015), however, the translation of those U.S. liberal education ideals is not obvious in some cultures. In a statement that elevates both faculty and student experience, David Blanks (1998) noted while teaching at the American University of Cairo that expectations for students to critically interrogate texts, their peers, and their professors may not be sustainable in places where “submission to authority” is both respected and valued (32). Perhaps equally problematic, in most definitions of liberal education the “unspoken, unacknowledged emphasis [is] on the individual” (Mohrman 2006, 60). Liberal education assumes, as Blanks (1998) suggests “limitless self-development is culturally desirable and beneficial” (32). This is a concept, however, that contradicts some Arab and Asian cultures that value “tradition, solidarity, and continuity” (Blanks 1998, 32). As a result, Mohrman (2006) declares, liberal education’s individualistic orientation may be its biggest obstacle in collectivist Asian cultures.

Taking all of these narratives into consideration, the degree to which American influence and assistance (some would say hegemonic even if inadvertently so) define liberal education around the world is unclear. In a neoliberal, globalized environment driven by rankings and market demands, isomorphism in which universities emulate practices of world-class institutions (often those in the U.S.) in order to improve their reputation (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), is not surprising. A critical examination of this dilemma suggests that the cultural hegemony that might result from dominant Western influence could, if not consciously monitored, undermine the very principles of social diversity and broad intellectualism revered in liberal education.

Liberal education’s counter narratives related to history, student learning and development, access, job opportunity, teaching and faculty, curriculum content, and ideology are complex. The key point of offering these stories is not that they form a perfect dichotomy to the dominant master narrative, but that they de-center common neoliberal and widely held beliefs that liberal education is a wholly desirable internationalization strategy and development.

Liberal Education's Imperative Qualities and Potential

The counter narratives discussed above unearth some key questions: what are the imperative qualities of a liberal education? Specifically, given the problematic nature of its U.S.-centered ideology, are individualism and individual thinking necessary components in all academic cultures? Beyond those described above, what are the other potential benefits of liberal education? I would offer that in addition to the defining tenets outlined with the definition used in this article, it is critical thinking and latitude to develop sovereign ideology – whether as an individual or in a more collectivist orientation – that are paramount qualities in a liberal education. As Nussbaum (1997) explains, an education that is liberal “liberates the mind from bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world” (8). With this interpretation, liberal education might itself become a means for emancipating individuals and communities from cultural, social, political, and economic marginalization.

Herein lies the implication and the peril of liberal education, especially as it emerges in new cultural contexts. The very idea that it could incite social change makes it controversial as a disruptive approach to traditional education models in some cultures. Consider, for example, Kowalski's (2012) description of socialist Poland prior to the 1990 democratic movement. “Political authorities,” she said, regarded liberal education as “risky because of the emphasis it put on inquiry, questioning, and understanding,” intellectual pursuits that could disrupt the political and social conditions for which the pre-1990 Polish government was largely responsible (130).

It is for this reason that many liberal education proponents argue that academic freedom is mandatory for institutions to be “sanctuaries of nonrepression” (Gutmann 1987, 174) and spaces for critiquing political and social norms. For states where academic freedom is not protected, if a refuge for it can be secured (even if not for the whole postsecondary system, but for individual programs as has been done with at least two GLEI initiatives), the potential results can be consequential for modern societies. When students or groups of students are educated with a liberal education philosophy, they can become agents for change and questioning in their communities. Critical thinking and sovereign ideology allow liberal education graduates to critique or challenge norms and beliefs, rather than accept them on the basis of assumption, convention, or prescription. In social or political terms, this might positively disrupt (but could also reinforce) historical habits of behavior and systems that induce discriminating cultural frameworks and repressive authority.

Conclusions and Praxis

Reconciling the paradox presented by liberal education's counter narratives and its desirable potential outcomes requires a praxis-based approach. As actors in internationalization, program leaders, policymakers, faculty, and administrators can be agents for just policies and ongoing critical inquiry. In accordance with the tenets of critical theory, analysis must be realized in practice: critical theory calls for new ways of knowing, being, and doing (Shahjahan, 2014). Even though the historical presence of liberal education is evident when traditions like those mentioned above are examined closely, liberal education is a disruptive innovation in traditional (contemporary) higher education philosophy and curricula outside the U.S. On the one hand, in many countries, it is a new way of knowing, being and doing. However, isomorphic tendencies and global neoliberal frames of reference increase the risk of cultural hegemony and a kind of intellectual imperialism within internationalization. On the other hand, liberal education that is carefully designed, culturally relevant, which takes seriously learner-centered pedagogy, and which can operate in a designated refuge of academic freedom can be a means of producing more *critically minded citizens*. Bearing in mind the core purpose of critical theory, liberal education may be in itself a means for developing human potential for better resistance to neoliberalism and repeated cultural marginalization.

For faculty who create courses or teach in liberal education programs, for policymakers and administrators who develop them, and for scholars who study the phenomenon of liberal education's global emergence, the value of critical theory is that it reframes points of reference and definitions in practice. New programs, and particularly those involving partnerships, should be "carefully constructed" and "embrace all the key constituencies and components of the academic enterprise" (Gillespie 2003; Zeleza 2002, 10). This includes stakeholders as well as services like teaching, research, publishing, and knowledge dissemination. Further, Peterson (2011) emphasizes that societies engaged in liberal education reform must prioritize students and their "personal and intellectual development" above capitalistic and philosophical aspirations (11).

Cultural challenges surrounding the emergence of liberal education globally underscore the need not only for cultural sensitivity from all parties involved, but also for the necessary flexibility and creativity to recognize that liberal education will and needs to evolve in different ways for different societies. Xin (2004) ends his critical analysis emphasizing the importance of remolding, rather than isomorphic adoption of liberal education. In the case of China, he says, "hopefully," education reforms "will create a Chinese-style liberal education solidly rooted in

the Chinese social, economic, and cultural context” rather than a pattern of the U. S. tradition (10). New definitions of liberal education need to mature as the education philosophy evolves in new places.

Thinking about liberal education, the tensions between specialized, career-focused and broader, interdisciplinary curricula perpetuate the age-old debate about the purpose of education. But results of a critical analysis and the growth of liberal education globally also magnify the neoliberal and geopolitical proclivity of postsecondary institutions. Rationales for liberal education programs echo international market pressures, changes to national labor forces and human capital, technological and scientific advancement, and economic institutional sustainability (Godwin 2013). Emerging global interest in liberal education, even with its potential to create a society of critical thinkers, simultaneously underlines the intimate relationship between higher education and the economy. While liberal education may develop graduates with intercultural competencies, critical agency for challenging cultural norms and social behaviors, and a broad agility to be successful in a variety of fields, its contemporary evolution – especially in new cultural contexts – is difficult to separate from global economic imperatives without critical analysis.

As countries and institutions continue to internationalize and experiment with liberal education in new cultural contexts, there is much to be learned about the success of this philosophical shift and its impact on students, faculty, societies, and cultures. The purpose of this discussion was to begin a critical dialogue. It did not specify a single theoretical lens for disrupting the predominately neoliberal rationalization for the global emergence of liberal education. Instead, it is a call for further analysis in which a (or any) specific theoretical construct is juxtaposed with further empirical evidence for liberal education programs and policies. Without careful critical analysis, the perpetual affirmation of Western values and curricula content in new liberal education initiatives could “undermine” local cultures and educational philosophical autonomy (Blanks 1998, 31). A critical theoretical lens accentuates the vigilance required by both local and U.S. participants if gravitation toward cultural imperialism is to be avoided. If liberal education is to develop and sustain itself in a truly global context, then academic practices and curricula need to reflect the local and indigenous culture, economy, and society in which programs reside.

References

- Altbach, P. G. 2006. *Comparative Higher Education: Knowledge, the University and Development*. Chestnut Hill: Center for International Higher Education.
- Altbach, P. G., and J. Balán. 2007. *World Class Worldwide: Transforming Research Universities in Asia and Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Altbach, P. G., L. Reisberg, and L. E. Rumbley. 2009. *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution*. Boston, MA: Center for International Higher Education. American Association of Colleges & Universities. (n.d.). "What is Liberal Education?" http://www.aacu.org/leap/What_is_liberal_education.cfm
- Becker, J. 2013 "What a Liberal Arts Education is ... and is Not." Bard College Institute for International Liberal Education. Accessed April 25, 2011. <http://iile.bard.edu/liberalarts/>
- Blanks, D. R. 1998. "Cultural Diversity or Cultural Imperialism: Liberal Education in Egypt." *Liberal Education* 84:30–5.
- Bourdieu, P., and J. C. Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Castagno, A. E., and S. J. Lee. 2007. "Native Mascots and Ethnic Fraud in Higher Education: Using Tribal Critical Race Theory and the Interest Convergence Principle as an Analytic Tool." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 40:3–13.
- Cohen, R. 2000. The Liberating Arts. *The New York Times*, April 9.
- Crossley, M. 1999. "Reconceptualising Comparative and International Education." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education* 29:249–67.
- Dimaggio, P. J., and W. W. Powell. 1983. "Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48:147–60.
- Entwistle, N. J. 2005. "Contrasting Perspectives on Learning." In *The Experience of Learning: Implications for Teaching and Studying in Higher Education* edited by F. Marton, D. Hounsell, and Noel James Entwistle, 3rd edn. 3–22. Edinburgh, Scotland: University of Edinburgh, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment.
- Ghabra, S., and M. Arnold. 2007. *Studying the American Way: An Assessment of American-Style Higher Education in Arab Countries*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Gillespie, S. H. 2001. "Opening Minds: The International Liberal Education Movement." *World Policy Journal* 18:79–89.
- Gillespie, S. H. 2003. "Toward 'Genuine Reciprocity'." *Liberal Education* 89:6–15.
- Giroux, H. A. 2002. "Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere." *Harvard Educational Review* 72:425–63.
- Giroux, H. A. 2010. "Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the Promise of Critical Pedagogy." *truthout*. Accessed September 8, 2015. <http://www.truthout.org/archive/item/87456:rethinking-education-as-the-practice-of-freedom-paulo-freire-and-the-promise-of-critical-pedagogy>
- Godwin, K. A. 2013. "The Global Emergence of Liberal Education: A Comparative and Exploratory Study." Ph.D Diss., Boston College Center for International Higher Education.
- Godwin, K. A. 2014. "The Worldwide Emergence of Liberal Education." *International Higher Education* 79:2–4.
- Godwin, K. A., and P. G. Altbach. forthcoming. "A Historical and Global Perspective on Liberal Arts Education: What Was, What Is, and What Will Be." *International Journal of Chinese Education*.
- Gutmann, A. 1987. *Democratic Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hvistendahl, M. 2010. "Less Politics, More Poetry: China's Colleges Eye the Liberal Arts." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Accessed January 3. <http://chronicle.com/article/Less-Politics-More-Poetry-/63356/>

- Jeffress, D. 2008. *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation and Transformation*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Kerr, C. 1995. *The Uses of the University*, 5th edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Knight, J. 2003. "Updating the Definition of Internationalization." *International Higher Education*, 33:2–3.
- Kowalski, E. 2012. "Poland: The Place of Liberal Education in Post-Soviet Higher Education." In *Confronting Challenge to the Liberal Arts Curriculum: Perspectives of Developing and Transitional Countries*, edited by P. McGill Peterson, 122–50. New York: Routledge.
- Lawrence, M. 2015. "Beyond the Neoliberal Imaginary: Investigating the Role of Critical Pedagogy in Higher Education." *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 13:246–86.
- Levin, R. C. 2010. "Top of the Class: The Rise of Asia's Universities." *Foreign Affairs* 89:63–75.
- Marginson, S., T. Weko, N. Channon, T. Luukkonen, and J. Oberg. 2008. "Reviews of Tertiary Education – The Netherlands." Paris: OECD. Accessed November 23, 2011. <http://www.oecd.org/netherlands/38469224.pdf>.
- Martínez-Alemán, A. M., B. Pusser, and E. M. Bensimon. 2015. *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education: A Practical Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mazzocchi, P. 2008. "Foucault, Benjamin, and the Burden of History." *Critical Studies in History* 1:91–109.
- Mohrman, K. 2006. "Liberal Education in an Asian Context." *International Educator* 58–61 April.
- Morrow, R. A. 2006. "Foreword – Critical Theory, Globalization, and Higher Education: Political Economy and the Cul-De-Sac of the Postmodern Cultural Turn." In *The University, State and Market: The Political Economy of Globalization in the Americas*, edited by R. A. Rhoads and C. A. Torres, xvii–xxxiii. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mulcahy, D. G. 2008. *The Educated Person: Toward a New Paradigm for Liberal Education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Nussbaum, M. C. 2002. "Education for Citizenship in an Era of Global Connection." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21:289–303.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 2004. "Liberal Education & Global Community." *Liberal Education* 90:42–7.
- Ordorika, I., and M. Lloyd. 2015. "The State and Contest in Higher Education in the Globalized Era." In *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education: A Practical Introduction*, edited by A. M. Martínez-Alemán, B. Pusser, and E. M. Bensimon, 130–52. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Peterson, P. McGill. 2012. *Confronting Challenges to the Liberal Arts Curriculum Perspectives of Developing and Transitional Countries*. London: Routledge.
- Pusser, B., and S. Marginson. 2012. "The Elephant in the Room: Power, Global Rankings and the Study of Higher Education Organizations." In *The Organization of Higher Education*, edited by M. Bastedo, 86–117. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Redden, E. 2009. "The Liberal Arts, Abroad." *Inside Higher Education*, February 16. Accessed February 16 2009. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/02/16/liberalarts>
- Rothblatt, S. 2003. *The Living Arts: Comparative and Historical Reflections on Liberal Education. The Academy in Transition*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Said, E. W. 2002. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Scharfe, H. 2002. *Education in Ancient India*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Singh, G. 2010. "Influence of Religion on Indian Education." *International Journal of Educational Administration* 2:335–43.
- Shahjahan, R. A. 2014. "From 'No' to 'Yes': Postcolonial Perspectives on Resistance to Neoliberal Higher Education." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35:219–32.
- Shahjahan, R. A. 2011. "Decolonizing the Evidence-Based Education and Policy Movement: Revealing the Colonial Vestiges in Educational Policy, Research, and Neoliberal Reform." *Journal of Education Policy* 26:181–206.
- Solórzano, D. G., and T. J. Yosso. 2002. "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 8:23–44.
- Task Force on Higher Education and Society. 2000. *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Trow, M. 2006. "Reflections on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access: Forms and Phrases of Higher Education in Modern Societies since WWII." In *International Handbook of Higher Education*, edited by J. Forest, and P. G. Altbach, 243–80. Amsterdam: Springer.
- Tomlinson, J. 1991. *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- van der Wende, M. 2011. "The Emergence of Liberal Arts and Sciences Education in Europe: A Comparative Perspective." *Higher Education Policy* 24:233–53.
- Will, K. H. 2006. *The Liberal Arts in America and the Globe: This Old World Just Keeps Spinning Around*. Presented at the Liberal Arts Education in America and the World Conference, George Washington University, Washington, DC. Accessed April 25, 2011. <http://collegenews.org/editorials/2006/the-liberal-arts-in-america-and-the-globe-this-old-world-just-keeps-spinning-around.html>
- Zamudio, M., C. Russell, F. Rios, and J. L. Bridgeman. 2010. *Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology*. London: Routledge.
- Zelega, P. T. 2002. *Rethinking Africa's Globalization. Vol.1: The Intellectual Challenges*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.