

*A talk delivered at  
the 2009 TED Conference by*

**Elizabeth Coleman**  
President of Bennington College

*in Long Beach, California  
February 7, 2009*

# ENGAGE

It has been an astounding week. I am thrilled and honored to be a part of it. I am also aware that college presidents are not the first people who come to mind when thinking about the uses of the creative imagination, so I thought I would start by telling you how I got here.

The story begins in the late 90s. I was invited to meet with leading academics from the newly free Eastern Europe and Russia. They were trying to figure out how to rebuild their universities because, under the soviet regime, the purpose of education was to serve the interests of a state ideology. They knew it would require wholesale transformations to provide an education appropriate for free men and women. Given this rare opportunity to start fresh, they chose liberal arts education as the most compelling model because of its historic commitment to developing a student's broadest intellectual and deepest ethical potential. They came to the United States, home of liberal arts education, to talk with those of us particularly identified with that enterprise.

They spoke with an urgency, a passion, an intellectual conviction that was for me a forgotten dream, a tone of voice I had not heard in decades. For in fact we had moved light years from the passions that animated them. Returning to business as usual was not going to be easy. But in my world, unlike theirs, the slate was not blank and what was written there was not encouraging.

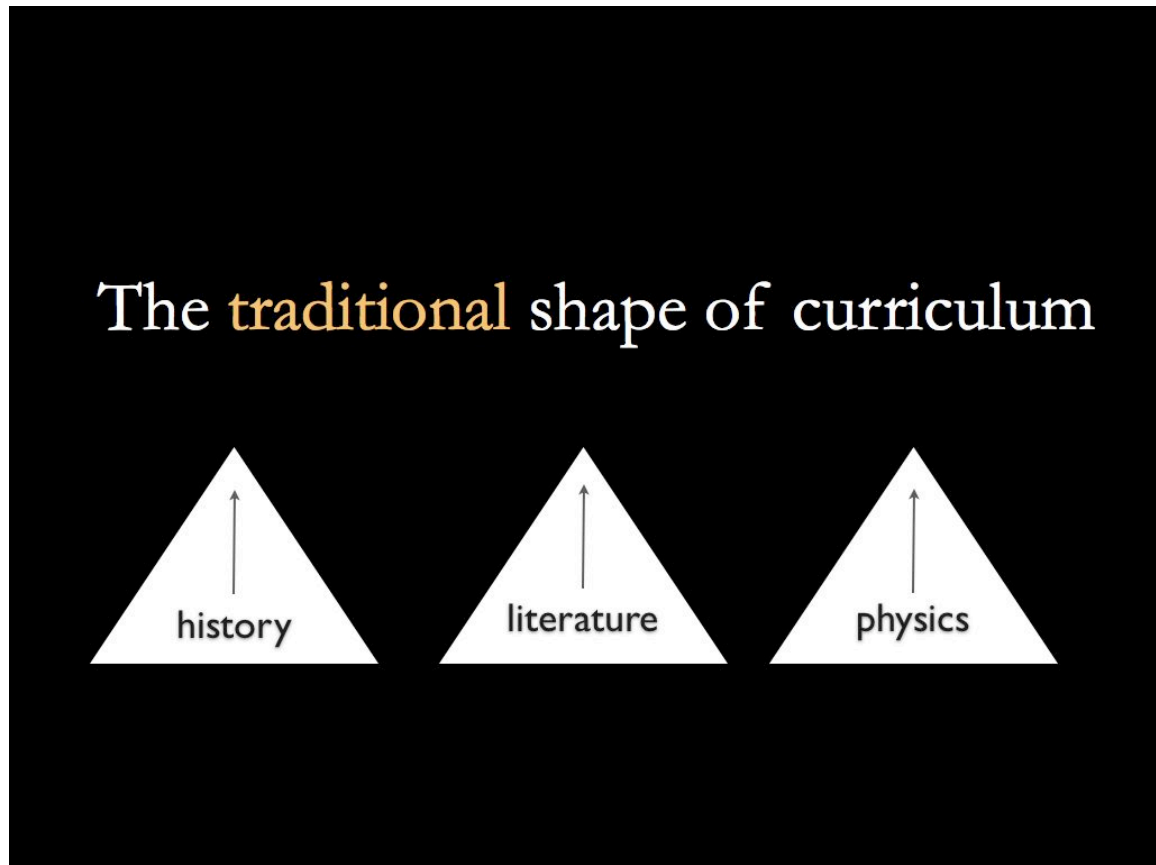
The truth is: genuine liberal arts education no longer exists in this country. We have professionalized liberal arts to the point where they no longer provide the breadth of application and heightened capacity for civic engagement that is their signature.

Over the past century the expert has dethroned the educated generalist to become the sole model of intellectual accomplishment. While expertise has had its moments, the price of its dominance is enormous. Subject matters of study are broken up into smaller and smaller pieces, with increasing emphasis on the technical and the obscure. We have even managed to turn the understanding of literature into something

arcane. You may think you know what is going on in a Jane Austen novel—that is until your first encounter with post-modern deconstruction.

The very possibility of the educated generalist has disappeared as education becomes synonymous with progressively abandoning the general as if it were the enemy of the deep. Once depth is disconnected from breadth, liberal education is fatally undermined.

The progression of today's college student is to jettison every interest except one and within that one to continually narrow the focus—learning more and more about less and less. This, despite the evidence all around us of the interconnectedness of things.



Lest you think I exaggerate, here are the beginnings of the ABCs of Anthropology.

## The ABCs of Anthropology

- Applied Anthropology
- Archaeological Anthropology
- Anthropology of Religion
- Biological or Physical Anthropology
- Cultural Anthropology
- Development Anthropology
- Dental Anthropology
- Economic Anthropology
- Educational Anthropology
- Ethnography
- Ethnohistory
- Ethnology
- Ethnomusicology
- Linguistic Anthropology
- Medical Anthropology
- Paleoanthropology
- Paleopathology
- Political Anthropology
- Social Anthropology
- Urban Anthropology

As one moves up the ladder values other than technical competence are viewed with increasing suspicion. Questions such as: *What kind of a world are we making?* *What kind should we be making?* and *What kind can we be making?* move off the table. Incredibly, neutrality about such concerns is seen as a condition of academic integrity.

In so doing, the guardians of secular democracy in effect cede the connection between education and values to fundamentalists, who you can be sure have no compunctions about using education to further their values—the absolutes of a theocracy. Meanwhile the values and voices of democracy—the very opposite of such certainties—are silent. Either we have lost touch with those values or, no better, believe they need not or can not be taught.

This aversion to social values may seem at odds with the explosion of community service programs. But despite the attention paid to service these efforts remain emphatically extracurricular and have had virtually no impact on the curriculum itself. In effect, civic-mindedness is seen as residing outside the realm of what purports to be serious thinking and adult purposes.

Simply put: when the impulse is to change the world, the academy is more likely to engender a learned helplessness than a sense of empowerment.

This brew—oversimplification of civic engagement, idealization of the expert, fragmentation of knowledge, emphasis on technical mastery, neutrality as a condition of academic integrity—is toxic when it comes to pursuing the vital connections between the public good and education, between intellectual integrity and human freedom, which were the heart of the challenge posed to and by my European colleagues just as they are the soul of a liberal education.

While the astronomical distance between the realities of the academy and the visionary intensity of this challenge was more than enough to give one pause before plunging in, what was happening outside of higher education made backing off unthinkable.

Whether it was threats to the **environment**, inequities in the **distribution of wealth**, lack of a sane **health policy** or a sustainable policy with respect corrupting to the uses of energy, we were in desperate straits. And that was only the beginning.

The corrupting of our **political life** had become a living nightmare. Nothing was exempt: the separation of powers, civil liberties, the rule of law, the relationship of church and state, accompanied by a squandering of the nation's material wealth that defied credulity.

A harrowing predilection for the **uses of force** had become commonplace with an equal distaste for alternative forms of influence. At the same time all of our fire power was impotent when it came to halting, or even stemming, the slaughter in Rwanda; Darfur; Myanmar.

Our public **education**—once a model to the world—has become most noteworthy for its failures. Mastery of basic skills and a bare minimum of cultural

literacy elude vast numbers of our students and that includes large numbers of our college graduates. Despite having a research establishment that is the envy of the world, more than half of the American public don't believe in evolution (and don't press your luck about how much those who do believe in it actually understand it).

Incredibly, this nation, with all its material, intellectual, spiritual resources, seems utterly helpless to reverse the free fall in any of these areas. It only accelerates.

Equally startling from my point of view was the fact that no one draws any connections between what is happening to the body politic and what is happening inside our leading educational institutions. We may be at the top of the list in the public's mind when it comes to influencing access to personal wealth; we aren't even on the list when it comes to responsibility for the health of this democracy.

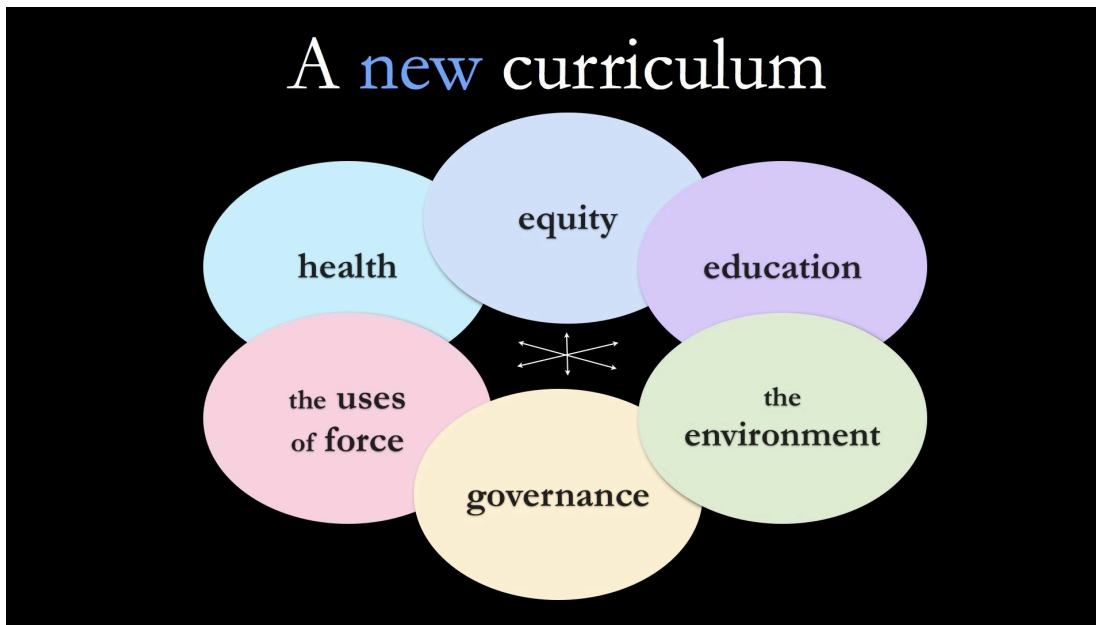
We are playing with fire. You can be sure Jefferson knew what he was talking about when he said: **"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."** On a more personal note, this betrayal of our principles, our decency, our hope made it impossible for me to avoid the question: What will I be able to say years from now when asked, where were you?

As president of a leading liberal arts college famous for its innovative history, there were no excuses. So the conversation began at Bennington, knowing that if we were serious about regaining the integrity of liberal education, basic assumptions needed to be radically rethought, starting with our priorities.

Enhancing the public good becomes a primary objective; the accomplishment of civic virtue is tied to the uses of intellect and imagination at their most challenging. Our ways of approaching agency and authority turn inside out to reflect the reality that no one has the answers to the challenges facing citizens in this century, and everyone has the responsibility to participate in finding them.

Bennington would continue to teach the arts and sciences as areas of immersion that acknowledge differences in temperament and in personal and professional objectives. But the balance is redressed: our shared purposes assume an equal if not greater importance.

When the design emerged it was surprisingly simple and straightforward. The idea is to make the political/social challenges themselves—from health and education to the uses of force—the organizers of the curriculum. They would assume the commanding role of traditional disciplines with structures that connect rather than divide; expand horizons rather than limit them. Mutually dependent circles instead of isolating triangles.



And the point is not to treat these as topics of study but as frameworks of action—the challenge: to figure out what it will take to actually do something that makes a significant and sustainable difference. Throughout a central objective is to make thought and action reciprocal—thought driven by action; action informed by thought.

Contrary to widely held assumptions, an emphasis on action provides a special urgency to thinking. The importance of coming to grips with values like justice, equity, truth becomes increasingly evident as students discover that interests alone cannot tell them what they need to know when the issue is rethinking education, our approach to health, or strategies for achieving an economics of equity.

It provides a lot of company—you are not the first to try to figure this out, just as you are unlikely to be the last. Even more valuable: history provides a laboratory in which to see played out the actual as well as the intended consequences of ideas.

In the language of my students: “deep thought” matters when you are contemplating what to do about things that matter.

**A new liberal arts** that can support this action-oriented curriculum has begun to emerge. Rhetoric: the art of organizing the world of words to have maximum effect; design, the art of organizing the world of things. Mediation and improvisation also assume a special place in this new pantheon.

Quantitative reasoning attains its proper position at the heart of what it takes to manage change where measurement is crucial as is a capacity to discriminate systematically between what is at the core and what is peripheral.

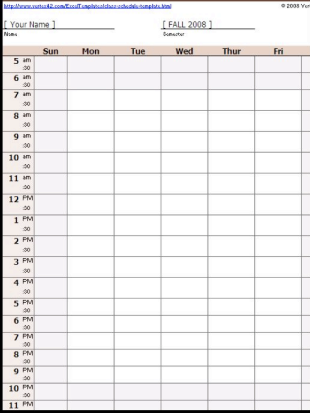

And when making connections is of the essence, the power of technology emerges with special intensity. But so does the importance of content. The more powerful our reach, the more important the question: “about what?”

When improvisation, resourcefulness, imagination are key, artists, at long last, take their place at the table when strategies of action are in the process of being designed rather than after the fact.

In this dramatically expanded ideal of a liberal arts education, knowledge honed outside the academy becomes essential to what is happening inside the classroom. Social activists, business leaders, journalists, politicians, professionals will join the regular faculty as active and ongoing participants in this wedding of liberal education to the advancement of the public good. Students in turn continuously move outside the classroom to engage the world directly.

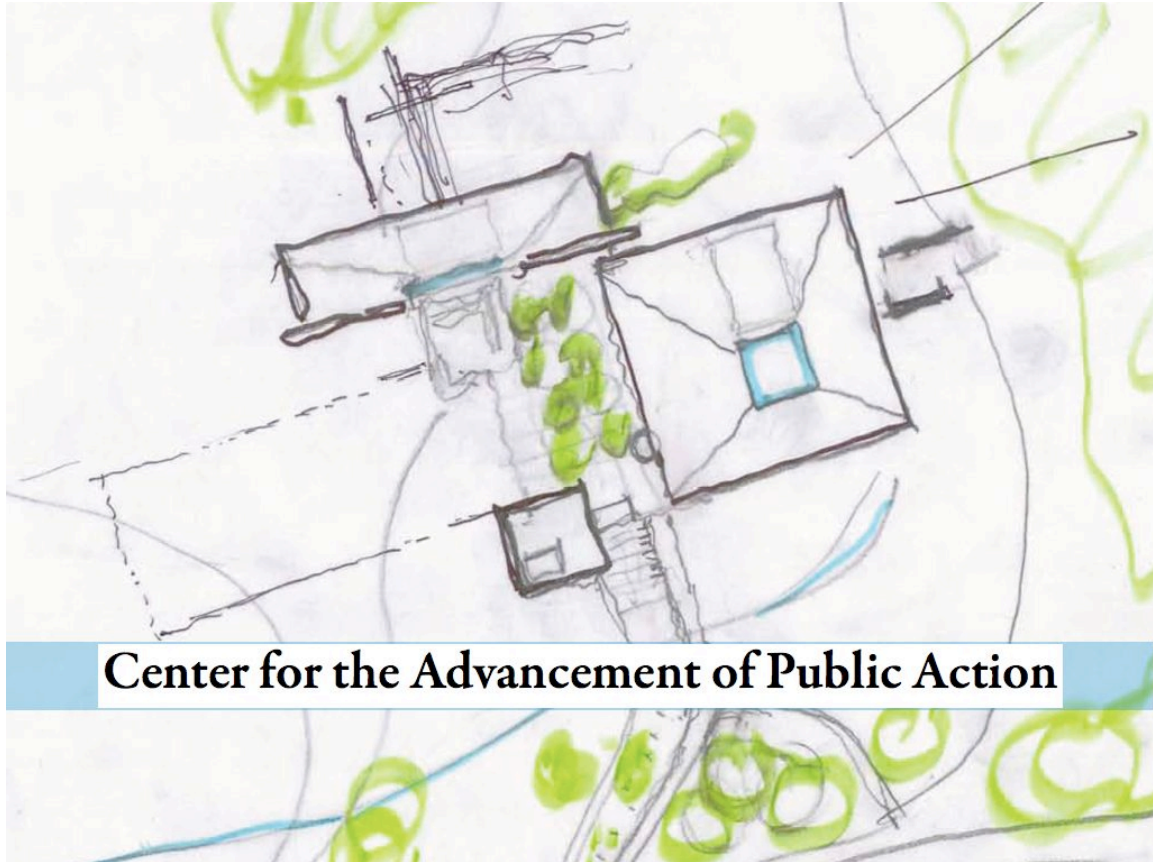
And most assuredly this new wine also needs new bottles if we are to capture the liveliness and dynamism of this idea.



<p>The <b>old</b> way:</p> <h2 style="text-align: center;">Student Course Schedule</h2> 	<p>The <b>new</b> way:</p> <h2 style="text-align: center;">A Medieval Fair</h2> 
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The most important discovery we made in our focus on public action was to appreciate that the hard choices are not between good and evil but between competing goods. This discovery is transforming; it undercuts self-righteousness, radically alters the tone and character of controversy, and enriches dramatically the possibilities for finding common ground. Ideology, zealotry, unsubstantiated opinion simply won't do. This is a political education for sure, but it is a politics of principle not of partisanship.

So the challenge for Bennington is to do it. On the cover of Bennington's 2008 holiday card is the architects' sketch of a building, opening in 2010, that is to be A Center for the Advancement of Public Action. This Center will embody and sustain this new educational commitment. Think of it as a kind of secular church.



The words on the card describe what will happen inside: **“We intend to turn the intellectual and imaginative power, passion, and boldness of our students, faculty, and staff on developing strategies for acting on the most critical challenges of our time.”** So we are doing our job.

While these past weeks have been a time of national exhilaration in this country it would be tragic if you thought this means your job is done.

The glacial silence we have experienced in the face of the shredding of the constitution, the unraveling of our public institutions, the deterioration of our infrastructure is not limited to the universities. We, the people, have become inured to our own irrelevance when it comes to doing anything significant about anything that matters concerning governance, beyond waiting another four years. We persist in being sidelined by the idea of the expert as the only one capable of coming up with answers despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The problem is: **There is no such thing as a viable democracy made up of experts, zealots, politicians, and spectators.**

People will continue and should continue to learn everything there is to know about something or other; we actually do it all the time. And there will be and should be those who spend a lifetime pursuing a very highly defined area of inquiry, but this single-mindedness will not yield the flexibilities of mind, the human resourcefulness and ingenuity, the multiplicities of perspectives, the capacities for collaboration and innovation this country needs. That is where you come in.

What is certain is that the individual talent exhibited in such abundance here needs to turn its attention to that collaborative, messy, frustrating, contentious, and impossible world of politics and public policy. President Obama and his team simply can not do it alone.

If the question of where to start feels overwhelming, you are at the beginning not the end of this adventure. Being overwhelmed is the first step if you are serious about trying to get at things that really matter on a scale that makes a difference. **So what do you do when you feel genuinely overwhelmed? Well there are two things you have: You have a mind and you have other people. Start with those and change the world.**