Big Questions?

Report on a Virtual Listening

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The Teagle Foundation has recently been probing into the big question of “Big Questions” in liberal education. We wanted to know whether a more direct engagement with the “Big Questions” would help invigorate students’ liberal education. One of our Listenings on the Blue Ridge, a Virtual Listening over the internet, and various conversations and other exchanges has brought some complicated issues to the fore. We haven’t tried to define those “Big Questions,” but we gave, as examples, such questions as “Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? What are my values? Is there such a thing as evil? What does it mean to be human? How can I understand suffering and death? What obligations do I have to others? What makes work, or a life, meaningful and satisfying?” We were also curious about shifting student attitudes (including their interest in religion and spirituality), about issues of value and meaning, and power and morality, and their place in undergraduate experience today—in the curriculum and beyond. We wanted to know if such questions might be in eclipse in liberal education today. The conversations have not led to firm answers; in fact our questions about the “Big Questions” seem to get bigger and bigger. The following comments are a personal reaction to this inquiry, but they point to some actions that would help—some requiring philanthropic help, others within reach of individual teachers, departments, or central administrators.

Do they care? There seems to be a consensus that students do still care about various “Big Questions”; in fact, some participants in our Listenings say “hunger” and “thirst” are not too strong to describe the motivations students bring to this kind of inquiry. To be sure, the evidence for this is often anecdotal, but more systematic studies have investigated one area—students’ religious engagement—and indicate that such concerns are surfacing more intensely on campuses today than they did a decade or more ago. The Teagle “religious work” Listening on the Blue Ridge put us in touch with excellent empirical work on the religious interests and involvements of today’s students. That knowledge needs to be drawn together, extended, and widely disseminated.

Certainly there’s little doubt that students are asking themselves with some anxiety “What shall I do with my life?” There is, however, no consensus about how such concerns are or should be addressed, or indeed, what the range of those questions really is. Has anyone carefully formulated a good set of questions about student concerns of this sort and then asked the students themselves, probing to get below the surface of their responses? As best I can tell, we proceed top down, assuming that the concerns faculty and administrators had at that age are the ones students have now.

How well are colleges dealing with the change? Almost certainly the form and intensity of these questions have changed over time. But how well are colleges dealing with them? One college president wrote to say that she thinks colleges are responding fairly well to the needs of “religiously oriented students” (I believe she had in mind settings for worship, meeting space, menu options, etc.), but added, “I don’t think colleges are dealing with…what I call the theological questions (the questions religion might answer) of our students. I don’t think these “big” questions can be answered in ways they were in the 1950’s or 1960’s or other eras.” That’s an important point since we are all in danger of teaching to the eighteen year-olds we once were. One dean suggested that student concerns on his campus might be less intense and differently focused than when he was in college, for a very simple reason: in the 1960s there was a draft. There’s nothing like greetings from your president to focus the mind on “Big Questions.”
again that suggests that a good starting point might be to involve students and faculty in a joint inquiry of some of these questions. Faculty are busy and sometimes distracted, but we should not assume that they are too harried to engage in such dialogue; many faculty members, it appears, would agree with one correspondent who wrote, “We want more intellectual activity, time to think, time to engage with our colleagues and students in discussing big questions.” Institutions that have developed structures to promote such engagement report encouraging results. (One institution reports they simply dedicated a vacant faculty line for a year to organizing a very successful faculty seminar along these lines.) I don’t mean to suggest that it’s easy to shift focus to the “Big Questions,” just that it’s worth trying. There are plenty of obstacles, not least the incessant increase in the amount of publication (and hence, almost inevitably, highly specialized publication) expected for promotion, tenure, and salary increases. Junior faculty also report their anxiety about student evaluations, especially if exploration of “Big Questions” steps on students’ ideological or religious toes.

But whatever the difficulty, the need is greater. Students entering college at the traditional age are, as we all know, not very well equipped to think about these questions. They lack perspective, experience (real and vicarious), the vocabulary, the metaphors, the exempla, the analytical and logical skills, an appreciation of the approaches in various philosophical and religious traditions, etc. In short, they are eighteen year-olds. They have a convenient set of clichés derived from popular culture, but not much else to work with. If they are not challenged and helped to find better ways of thinking, the clichés will carry the day, as they do right now.

What do they find in college, and what should they find in college? Here the road gets rougher. As I kept asking whether the “Big Questions” are in some eclipse, a colleague reminded me that some “Big Questions” are by no means in eclipse. There is plenty of work coming from evolutionary and socio-biologists, geneticists, and others that pose and provide powerful answers to questions about human behavior. How much of what I do is genetically determined? That question, and answers to it, are alive and well in many a science building today.

Two sets of “Big Questions”: In the humanities, course syllabi, new programs and departments, and college-wide curricula have changed markedly in recent years—often focusing on identity questions. They have thereby provided opportunities for students to explore questions of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity. Faculty members have been generous with their energies in developing this work and students have responded, for the most part, very positively. Curricular structures, professional patterns, etc. continue to be transformed by this set of questions. Faculty, as well as students, care about these identity questions, and as a result, write and teach with passion about them. (Surely there’s a lesson to be learned here about other “Big Questions” in the curriculum and in scholarship.)

At the same time, older structures have often failed, faded, or been dismantled, including core curricula, great books programs, surveys “from Plato to NATO,” and general education requirements of various sorts. Since the texts and problems in these courses often dealt with civic, moral, cosmic, and/or theological topics, it was hard to escape one set of “Big Questions” or some of the methods and approaches used to deal with them. I do not believe that colleges and universities can or should revert to these older patterns, but their demise may leave a certain vacuum, which—if not filled in constructive ways—may draw in simplistic or anti-intellectual responses.

A vacuum on campus? That is more than just a possibility where religion or spirituality is involved. In a survey by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, more than half of the college juniors surveyed reported that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning or purpose in life. And nearly two-thirds say that professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious
matters. The survey data do not prove that teaching practices have to change, but they do point to the need for a serious discussion of the matter. And if so, in what settings and by what means should they change?

“Underground Universities”—networks of religiously minded student organizations—exist on many campuses, it seems, often operating without official recognition from the institution, frequently supported with funds or staffing from outside, providing occasion for worship, bible or other study groups, and advising (“Avoid these courses that are the ‘faith-busters’”), and sometimes providing informal courses that parallel controversial ones in the regular curriculum. It is not easy to get a clear picture of these “underground universities”; they are most commonly associated with evangelical Christian groups, but there are certainly Roman Catholic and Jewish analogues. My hunch is that they vary greatly in intellectual quality and effectiveness—as they do in religious affiliation. I don’t believe they are all Bad Things, universally to be resisted. But they do make me wonder whether student concerns are being adequately addressed in the officially organized parts of college life, inside the curriculum and out.

Why is it so difficult to pose the “Big Questions”? That is difficult ground to explore, in part because even posing the question raises the fear that some doctrinal indoctrination is just around the corner. This fear seems to me unwarranted, at least in secular institutions. Nobody I know in academia wants to use his or her post as a teacher or administrator to proselytize, brain wash, or to impose a religious ideology. But while some colleagues affirm or encourage other kinds of belief systems or ideologies, religious advocacy, as best I can tell, has disappeared from courses in all secular institutions, and, I gather, many religiously affiliated ones as well. Yet believers and non-believers alike become very nervous when religion enters the conversation about student learning. Why the nervousness?

Comparable nervousness is not prominent, as best I can tell, when “Big Questions” are formulated in terms of race, class, and gender or sexual orientation. But something similar does happen when questions of moral choice, purpose, or good and evil come front and center. Here, too, aversion to “brainwashing” is often cited as a reason for avoiding such questions.

That suggests to me that the restraint on an honest and thoughtful discussion of these questions is not primarily insistence that everything associated with religion be excluded from the academy, or the patently false idea that religion is a “purely personal matter.” Since many of the questions we have in view have, over time, been approached both by many major religions and by secular thinkers, it is probably best to continue to formulate them in inclusive rather than specifically religious terms. The Foundation may then want to continue to use the “Big Question” terminology even if it is vague and fuzzy.

“No Trespassing”: But that will not eliminate faculty hesitations about treading on this ground. Several “No Trespassing” signs have to be taken seriously, and then taken down. A friend alludes to one of them when she writes that on her campus, “It tends to be that …those who talk about morality and the big questions come from such an entrenched far right position…that the rest of us… run for cover.” These issues are too important to be left to any political faction; certainly those from other parts of the political spectrum can see that, if they don’t run away from the matter. Then they have to ask themselves, “What are the consequences of abandoning this ground to people with whom we so deeply disagree?”

It’s more difficult, I believe, to deal with the widespread feeling that “I’m not an expert on such ‘Big Questions.’” College faculties often think of themselves, understandably, as clusters of “experts” in various fields of knowledge. But who is the expert when it comes to issues of meaning and ultimate value? Unless we are moral philosophers none of us in academia has formal training in such matters. In a culture that values professional expertise, forays beyond one’s field of competence are understandably
suspect. Raising the big value and meaning questions, then, is a hazardous business, the third rail of academic life.

**Tools, not answers:** Does it have to be? Not, I think, if one draws a clear distinction between questioning and answering. No one with whom I have been in touch thinks that a college’s or university’s job is to provide students with ready-made answers to these questions. The issue is how to formulate the questions in useful and provocative ways and provide students with the tools they need to think about them. We are not talking about dogmatic answers nor replicating the fabled late-night bull sessions of yesteryear. Asking the “Big Questions” in a constructive way takes pedagogical skill, and discussing them productively requires an alertness to how thoughtful people, past and present, in our culture and in others, have approached them. That means providing students with tools, not answers. That sort of skill, however, is not the same as the expertise of an academic specialist in ethics or moral philosopher.

**A word from Thucydides:** Some “Big Questions,” moreover, seem to bubble up through the floor boards when one is reading certain texts or studying certain problems. Oh sure, you can avoid them—but at what cost? Here’s an example from my own experience—others can say to what extent it can be generalized. When I was teaching Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I could see that the underlying structure of the text was to a large extent built around the tension between power and morality. In Thucydides you could see that tension in operation, and benefit from the perspective his narrative provides for thinking about this topic. One didn’t have to “make it relevant” by analogies to contemporary events. Students were smart enough to see them for themselves. But an authentic understanding of Thucydides’ work demanded, I felt, that one bring this tension to the surface, discuss it, and talk it through with students as something they might care about. That does not require, I believe, the expertise of a political philosopher. It just takes forthrightness about what one finds in the text. A teacher could, of course, avoid talking about such underlying issues in the text. There are enough other difficulties—textual, grammatical, and interpretive—to fill the hours. But to do so would be an evasion. It would, I felt, impoverish the understanding of the work and misrepresent the way scholarship about it had evolved in recent years. Being faithful to the text required, in my view, raising the “Big Questions” with which it was concerned, and understanding the vocabularies, metaphors, images, and analytical structures through which the author explored them. For me the engagement with some of the “Big Questions” in Thucydides’ work was a great help in my teaching and a stimulus to fresh scholarship in a heavily researched field.

How far can one extend that experience? I recognize that one of the educational values of Thucydides—and of Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, Lucretius, Virgil, Tacitus and many other classical writers—is that his work provides distance, and hence perspective, on questions of searing intensity. Big texts raise big questions. I believe that is true for many major works of literature from many periods and settings, and many historical episodes, some quite close to us and others more remote. I want to avoid sweeping generalizations, but surely the subjects that we cannot escape as human beings also have the capacity to sustain our scholarship and invigorate our teaching. When “Big Questions” arise, it is irresponsible to shrug them off or retreat to the comparative safety of one’s technical expertise in a field.

**Reward systems:** Institutions need to expect that from their faculty members; do they also need to reward it when they find it? One correspondent assures me that “most faculty in the humanities, God bless them, are notoriously impervious to monetary incentives.” Perhaps, but then it becomes all the more important to ask the hard questions about job satisfaction. What are the roots that can sustain a faculty member’s vitality over the long course of a career? Is that question sufficiently on the table right now in colleges and universities? Or is it simply assumed that lots of published research, leading to good pay and high professional recognition, will produce lasting satisfaction?
If that assumption is false, then it becomes urgent for institutions to deal with the question of faculty job satisfaction. My hunch is that one won’t get far with students’ “Big Questions” until this faculty Big Question is on the table. What will be most likely to sustain the intellectual vitality and creativity of faculty members over the long run? This is too big a question for discussion here. I notice, however, one linguistic point that may provide a starting point—a shift in some settings from talking of “research” to talking of “scholarship.” Synonyms? Not quite, for the second term raises the question of what it means to be a true “scholar,” a question currently being explored by the American Council of Learned Societies in a Teagle Working Group. Surely “scholarship” entails intellectual venturesomeness, in the study and in the classroom. If that’s right, institutions need to find ways to measure and reward this venturesomeness, just as they now have ways to measure “research productivity.”

Beyond expertise: The currently dominant culture of expertise also poses a problem for philanthropy. Any foundation interested in the “Big Questions” has to be careful to inadvertently avoid reinforcing that culture. More expertise is not what’s needed. A well-intended initiative, for example, aimed at adding new requirements in graduate education could be a mistake. It might be more productive to encourage faculty (and students) to find approaches to such questions that enrich students’ repertoire of ways of thinking about them.

Where do the “Big Questions” belong? Another question kept arising in our inquiries about the state of the “Big Questions”: Where do such questions belong—in the classroom, the adviser’s office, the residence hall, denominational groups, some of the above, all of the above, or somewhere else? Here it seems to me that a little humility, not always the most prevalent commodity among foundation officers, may be welcome. We may not know the answer to that question. Indeed there may be different answers in different settings. A philanthropic institution should not assume it knows the answer at the outset, but rather seek to elicit and share “local knowledge” about what enriches students’ learning on their campuses.

None of the above? Some colleagues whom I greatly respect would go even further and answer “none of the above” to the question just posed. I understand their concerns and why they may think that the eclipse of some “Big Questions” may be a blessing in disguise. Here’s one forceful statement along these lines:

If professors represented themselves as indispensable agents of enlightenment, whose sphere of influence extended to a student’s most fundamental concerns (as opposed to the more limited concerns that lead them to sign up for particular courses), all sorts of pathologies would be invited into the teaching relationship. Might it not be the case that the failure of professors to address big questions represents a form of generosity and respect for the student’s ability to sort things out on their own? If professors were to intrude themselves into the domain that used to be reserved for the legendary “late-night bull sessions,” the student’s zone of freedom would be invaded. They might be helped in a more limited or immediate sense, but hindered in precisely that deeper more indeterminate sense we seem, in this forum, to be so concerned about. Perhaps the disciplines are best conceived as providing not spiritual or pseudo-spiritual guidance but sectoral knowledge that, in its very inadequacy to confront the universe, acknowledges the limitations of human cognition, and thereby leaves the big questions provocatively open. Which is the point of education, is it not?

That is, of course, the core question. Is the point of education indeed helping students realize “the limitations of human cognition”? (Will some post-modernist Pheidippides now tell his daddy Strepsiades, “Please pay my tuition at the phrontisterion so I can learn all about epistemological contingency”?)
Liberal education might benefit from renewed debate on “the point of education,” but while it is going on students will, whether we like it or not and whether we influence it or not, be forming habits of heart and mind that shape their subsequent lives and the decisions they will make in their families and professions, and as citizens. Anyone who has worked with late adolescents knows that they often have only impoverished ways of thinking about such matters. To answer “none of the above” to our question about where the “Big Questions” belong, or to relegate them to a course or two, or to “late night bull sessions,” or the “underground university,” is to leave these students at the mercy of the media, consumer culture, ideological manipulation, greed, and social climbing—in short, to an unexamined life. The results in the corporate and civic spheres do not have to be imagined. They are right out there in front of us.

Where to begin? Let me end by returning to the beginning. Throughout our inquiries about the “Big Questions” I have often wondered: Do we really know what’s going on in the heads of today’s students? What “Big Questions” do they bring with them to college, or find opening up during their undergraduate years, or later, as alumni, wish they had explored during those years? So much of what we do is top down. What about the students themselves? Why not ask them? One participant in our electronic Listening on the “Big Questions” took a useful first step in that direction: he wrote an op-ed piece for a college paper putting these questions to students. He reports: “I’ve received only a few email responses from students, but I’ve heard from a good number of students (before, after, and even during class as well as in the hallways and walking across campus) that the article has been a topic of conversation in the dining hall, residence halls…and several students have gone out of their way to express appreciation in person. So the desire to consider ‘big questions’ is alive and well.”

Higher education needs, I am convinced, to respond to that desire, understand it better, and find better ways to link it to student learning in the liberal arts. Administrative and faculty leaders, chaplains, and students themselves will find a strong interest, I believe, if they simply raise the topic in appropriate settings. One college president who attended our Listening on the Blue Ridge suggested that it would be good to support projects that “bring together faculty members and campus life professionals to do [an] interpretive analysis of this generation from the perspective of what you call ‘big questions’…Wouldn’t it be interesting to have a social psychologist, a theologian, and an anthropologist work with a staff psychologist, a residential life professional, and a campus minister to identify the ‘big questions’ of college students about self, world, and ultimate value?” Interesting indeed, and many parallel projects come swiftly to mind. Most of these are compatible with the idea just mentioned, of bringing students in as genuine partners in any such process.

Such projects need not be expensive. There’s often no need to wait for outside funding. Foundations, however, have a special opportunity in this area. We need to encourage more ambitious processes, especially those that bring “Big Questions” into the curriculum. Then we need to help capture and assess the know-how that is generated in this way. What really works in various settings?

No foundation officer, however lofty the perch, can match the knowledge available from the ground-up on individual campuses. But after encouraging the development of that knowledge, foundations can achieve even greater results by seeing that it is made broadly available, put into action in other settings, and that its effects are fully recognized. As I have explored these topics in recent months, I have found myself hypothesizing that bringing the “Big Questions” to the center of campus intellectual life is the best way of invigorating liberal education. I would dearly like to know if this is the case. Testing that hypothesis will take rigorous thinking and imaginative program design in many settings, but the benefits, I believe, could be very great.

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