

Plenary Session
***Liberal Arts Colleges in the 21st Century:
Their Future and That of Asian Studies***
**Thomas Coburn, Marianna McJimsey,
Toby Volkman, Thomas Benson**

Framing the Issues
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Let me welcome you to the opening of the ASIANetwork Conference and to this first plenary session. The origins of this session lie at the confluence of two different streams. One is the rising public discussion and analysis of the private liberal arts college, seen, for instance, in increasing concern for the costs and outcomes of education. This topic received its most sustained treatment in the January 1999 issue of *Daedalus* (soon to be republished as a book), entitled *Distinctly American: The Residential Liberal Arts College*. The second stream is the growing attention being paid to teaching about Asian Studies in those colleges, for instance, in the establishment of ASIANetwork itself eight years ago and, more proximately, in the publication of a volume supported by the Luce Foundation, *Asia in the Undergraduate Curriculum: The Case For Asian Studies in Liberal Arts Education*. The editors and chapter authors of that book have been active in ASIANetwork, and the vision for this plenary session has been to invite others to join in thinking about the shared future of Asian Studies and liberal arts colleges. My fellow panelists are Marianna McJimsey of Colorado College, where she works in undergraduate education and teaching licensure, who is well known to many as the former Executive Director of ASIANetwork; Dr. Toby Volkman of the Ford Foundation, which has been a generous supporter of ASIANetwork, who is the project director of Ford's recent Crossing Borders initiative, and Dr. Tom Benson, President of Green Mountain College and, with David Vikner, the founding visionary of ASIANetwork.

First, some framing reflections on liberal arts colleges.¹ These institutions have had a unique place in the American scene since the seventeenth century and for many years they were the only kind of post-secondary education available, created to provide educated leaders and an informed citizenry. They were supplemented by the growth of land-grant colleges in the nineteenth century and by the emergence in the twentieth century of what Clark Kerr called "multiversities," both public and private, whose institutional mission was often research, with continuing—though sometimes grudging—attention to teaching undergraduates. Liberal arts colleges have persisted through all of this, while continuing to emphasize their teaching mission. (One college

president I know has put this bluntly to incoming students and their parents by declaring that his college has no independent research mission. The point is that, while the college is very supportive of faculty scholarship, which remains important at time of tenure, the institution's reputation does not depend on the research prowess of the faculty.) So our liberal arts colleges have persisted, albeit on a very small scale, whose very smallness is, I suspect, unknown to most college faculties as we get swept up in the particular excitements and daily demands of teaching and working at our particular institutions. The unvarnished fact is that there are about 2500 institutions of higher education in America today. Liberal arts colleges comprise a mere five percent of that total. We educate approximately two percent of the college-going population—all of whom would fit at the same time into the University of Michigan stadium.

But for all the near-microscopic size of our venture, we have a powerful and disproportionate influence on our students and on American society. For instance, of the thirty institutions with the highest ratio of doctoral to bachelor's degrees—that is, institutions whose alumni/ae go on to earn Ph.D.s—*sixteen* are private liberal arts colleges. ASIANetwork colleges are well represented on this list, which shows, for instance, that both Carleton and Kalamazoo produce more Ph.D.s per capita than does Harvard. Liberal arts colleges also produce Rhodes and Marshall Fellowship winners at double the per-capita rate of research institutions. Similarly, in 1990 ten percent of American's foreign service officers and more than ten percent of her ambassadors were graduates of liberal arts colleges.

Smallness also characterizes each of our institutions, as well as the aggregate niche we occupy in the American scene, so it might well be asked whether the massiveness of Asia—with four of the world's major civilizations and sixty percent of its population—does not preclude incorporating its study into our curricula. The very flourishing of ASIANetwork suggests a negative answer, and this year's conference program is rich with practical solutions to the challenge. But there is a larger theoretical and pedagogical issue here. We Asianists are not alone in having to cope with knowledge too vast to fit easily into our curricula. We are not alone in having to combat what Ainslee Embree so delightfully calls the "lust for coverage." Our colleagues in the natural sciences face a comparable dilemma, and there is cause for hope there in the findings of Project Kaleidoscope that

hands-on, lab-based, research-rich pedagogy leads to greater long-term learning than the “drink from the firehose,” raw-memorization-of-facts pedagogy. Recent advances in inquiry-based and problem-based learning, as well as the effectiveness of case-study methods, provide further reason not to be daunted by the massiveness of Asia and the challenge that lies before us.

There are further reasons why the very massiveness of Asia actually argues *for* its inclusion in the Western academy, indeed makes it imperative. Taking the long view of liberal education, one sees that for several hundred years there has been an uneasy tension between two strands within the basic educational vision. One has its origins in the Middle Ages and is rooted in the aspiration to transmit the essential elements of Western civilization. The other has its origins in scientific, empirical inquiry into the natural world. What has been construed recently as a battle over Western and multicultural curricula is actually only a skirmish in the longer, larger battle over the goals of liberal education. As Carnochan has noted, “‘Ancients’ and ‘moderns’ take their names originally from the ‘battle of the books’ fought in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries between defenders of ancient literature and learning and defenders of, among other things, the new science.”² Asia, we should note, has figured only marginally in this battle until very recently, appearing either as a by-product of the West’s interest in itself or as part of the empirical data, chiefly in the social sciences, of which the inquiring mind is challenged to make sense. But it is now, at this point in history, transparently clear that Asia is too big and, as Wilfred Smith has observed, we simply know too much for Asian Studies to fit easily within either of the older visions of the liberal arts. To incorporate Asian Studies responsibly into liberal education therefore holds out the delicious and daunting prospect of pushing us to reform the entire educational enterprise, seeking a new, comprehensive synthesis that has eluded Western educators for centuries. Liberal arts colleges, of course, cannot effect such a transformation alone, and there will remain critical roles for research institutions dedicated to the understanding of Asia. But liberal arts colleges have a distinctive legacy of teaching and learning with extraordinary effectiveness, with consequences for both our students and the wider world. Is there any reason to think we should now fail, that this new challenge should cause us to leave off from what we have historically done so very well?

The answer, unfortunately, may be yes—for the ground has shifted under our feet, the context of higher education has changed. Much of this is a change in the external environment, exposing us to new and powerful forces, most with an economic bite to them. Foremost among these, no doubt, is technology, with its crushing costs, which fall especially hard on small institutions. Related to this is the challenge of distance learning, which can strike at the heart of our long-standing affirmation of the importance of face-to-face interaction between faculty and student, and of co-curricular, residential education. Then, too, there is the

vexing issue of financial aid and our efforts to ensure broad access to the education that our institutions provide. The challenge here is not just for us as individual institutions. It also raises large public policy questions. For instance, although roughly the same number of students are educated in private colleges and in public institutions in New York State, the average family income of students who attend public institutions is now *higher* than those attending private colleges. This trend is now well on its way to becoming a national one. Access to college by the very poor has actually declined over the past twenty years, abetted by the erosion of federal support. There are fewer liberal arts colleges today than there were twenty years ago. So it is by no means a foregone conclusion that liberal arts colleges will continue to flourish even in their current modest numbers. Our efforts to ensure that Asian Studies are part of the liberal arts college curriculum may therefore be moot. It may well be that the best we can hope for, those of us who work in these private liberal arts colleges, is to help these dinosaurs die a dignified death.

But we know more about dinosaurs, too, than we did twenty years ago, and it now appears that at least some of them, rather than becoming extinct, underwent an extraordinary evolutionary mutation into what we now know as birds. And so may our liberal arts colleges, with Asian Studies playing a critical role.

A single example may suffice. One way of characterizing what is happening in the academy today is that traditional boundaries and units of analysis are eroding, even collapsing. Departments will surely not disappear soon, but the pervasive rise of interdisciplinary work suggests they will be less monopolistic, as new, even transitory, project-driven lines of inquiry open up. The college itself is less of an ivory tower than in times past, and service learning and internships have provided powerful new epistemologies and reaffirmations of the civic vision of liberal education, drawing colleges in fresh ways into the world around them. What used to be the reflectiveness associated with the life of the mind has become ever more elusive, thanks to the pace of contemporary life and to the technology that has become so woven into the fabric of our daily lives.

We Asianists have grappled with these and similar issues for a long time and throughout our professional lives. We have known that all knowledge is constructed, that the categories of construction are transient, and that disciplines are blunt instruments for capturing what we know of Asia. We have known the importance of “area studies” as an antidote to disciplinary hegemony, but we have known that “areas,” too, have porous boundaries, long before the rise of “diaspora studies.” We are also familiar with the importance of getting students to Asia, of linking first-hand experience with book study, of getting beyond the ivory tower. And we have known the joys and frustrations of fieldwork, where data and its analysis interpenetrate and challenge us to find the still-point where understanding might descend on us.

So I, for one, take heart, for I think Asian Studies is

coming over the horizon for liberal arts colleges at the very moment when those colleges need us most. We are familiar with a world of which our colleagues are only recently becoming aware. It is not just the world of Asia, but a world in which we grapple hard, and often haltingly, with basic questions about the organization of knowledge, the relationship between knowledge and experience, and the way education shapes our views of self and others. I am therefore optimistic about the contributions we Asianists can make to the renewal of the liberal arts colleges in which we teach. And I look forward now to hearing what my fellow panelists make of the juncture at which we find ourselves.

¹ For elaboration on several points below, and references, see my contribution to *Asia in the Undergraduate Curriculum: The Case for Asian Studies in Liberal Arts Education*.

² W. B. Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and American Experience*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 22.

Opening a Window **Marianna McJimsey** **The Colorado College**

Our conversation this morning has the session title of *Liberal Arts Colleges in the 21st Century: Their Future and that of Asian Studies*. I suggest that one window on this topic is the AAS journal, *Education About Asia*, which has published ten issues since its inception in February 1996. I chose to open this window for a few minutes today for five reasons: first, because *Education About Asia* is a journal exclusively devoted to teaching about Asia and teaching is our mutual concern; secondly, because the Association for Asian Studies specifically commissioned *Education About Asia* to address the current teaching questions and interests of the profession; thirdly, because the journal builds bridges between K-12 schools and undergraduate institutions, and most ASIANetwork member institutions have teaching licensure programs which foster strong academic preparation for teaching; fourthly, because when one examines and compares the development of the ten issues of *Education About Asia*, one finds the changes in the content and organization over the last four years reflect the interests of pre-collegiate and undergraduate teachers; and finally, because the authors of the articles raise issues for the future of Asian Studies that we would be wise to examine and talk about.

The decade of the 1990s propelled conversations about teaching about Asia on all fronts. Among the engines of this propulsion were ten important developments:

1. In 1990, East-West Center president Victor Li warned that American education was not moving fast enough

to accommodate the growing importance of Asia. His challenge led to the establishment of the Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP), co-directed by the East-West Center and the University of Hawaii. ASDP focuses on improving undergraduate-level teaching about Asia, and is especially helpful for faculty members who are not Asia specialists.

2. In 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 voyage fostered a healthy and often even vitriolic reexamination of the global diaspora of seeds, germs, technology, science, and cultures that brought Asia into a picture that had often only included Europe and the New World. Old textbook accounts were re-written. K-12 teachers reviewed historiography and contributed important voices in the "seeds of change" curricula that grew out of the anniversary.

3. In 1993, our organization, the ASIANetwork, was founded to focus on teaching about Asia at undergraduate, liberal arts colleges.

4. In 1994, the National Geography Standards, "Geography for Life," spelled out the essential geographic subject matter, skills, and perspectives students should acquire logically and coherently during pre-collegiate and undergraduate education. Old geography paradigms changed; the study of continents no longer ruled.

5. In 1994, the cyberspace listserv, H-ASIA was launched by volunteer co-editors, Frank Conlon (U. WA) and Steven Leibo (State U. of NY at Albany). Subscribers from around the world signified the coming explosive use of the Internet. (A mere four years ago, in 1996, an issue of *Teaching About Asia* carefully defined for its readers, the Internet, the World Wide Web, servers, and browsers in terminology that today seems dated. The terms Internet, World Wide Web, server, and browser are now basic to our vocabulary. The speed of change has been extraordinary.)

6. The 6th engine to enhance the teaching of Asia is a focus on teaching and learning. In the middle of the decade, before and after 1995, colleges and universities established teaching and learning centers devoted to issues of how we and our students learn and how that information should help us decide how and what we teach. (e.g., the Crown-Tapper Teaching and Learning Center at Colorado College)

7. For many years before the 1990s, foundations such as the Henry Luce Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Japan Foundation fostered and supported Asian Studies initiatives at the college and university level. In the 1990s, pre-collegiate teaching about Asia was enormously enhanced by foundation support such as that of the CGP (Center for Global Partnership) and the Freeman Foundation. The U.S.-Japan Foundation had provided similar support in the late 1980s for pre-collegiate education. Seminars, study tours, and resource centers have been generously sponsored by these foundations.

8. In 1996, after debates that even reached the floor of the United States Senate, some agreement for the National Standards for World History was finally achieved. Large-