

Liberal Learning at Brown

The first recommendation made by the Task Force on Undergraduate Education was that the College Curriculum Council develop a revised set of principles and goals for liberal learning at Brown. The CCC acted on this recommendation in April 2008, when it produced this statement, which is conceived as a planning guide for students. "Liberal Learning at Brown" was included in two new guides created and distributed in the summer of 2008: one for the entering class, and another for sophomores.

A liberal education implies breadth and depth: basic knowledge in a range of disciplines, focused by more concentrated work in one. These goals are common to all liberal arts institutions, but at Brown they have a special context. Our open curriculum ensures you great freedom in directing the course of your education, but it also expects you to remain open—to people, ideas, and experiences that may be entirely new. By cultivating such openness, you will learn to make the most of the freedom you have, and to chart the broadest possible intellectual journey, not just during your first semesters but through your entire time at Brown.

What does it mean to be broadly educated? The first Western universities conceived of the liberal arts as seven distinct modes of thought, three based on language (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), and four on number (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). While this structure has changed over the centuries, the basic concept has endured. A modern liberal arts education is still defined in terms of a core curriculum comprised of several areas of knowledge. At Brown, rather than specifying these areas, we challenge you to develop your own core. Over four years you will sample courses in the humanities, the social sciences, the life sciences, and the physical sciences. But the real challenge is to make connections between those courses, using the perspective gained from one discipline as a window onto the next. The most significant social, political, and moral issues of our time require the ability to think from multiple vantage points, and Brown's curriculum affords you the opportunity to develop just this sort of nuanced perspective.

At the end of your sophomore year, you will choose an academic concentration, where you will develop that perspective in the context of one discipline or department. This is, in effect, what "concentration" means. Deepening your knowledge of a field implies understanding the range of ideas, and the methodological differences, that define it. All concentrations have requirements to ensure that students have covered the basics. But you will of course bring your own perspective to that field through your independent projects, and all the other work you will do both inside and outside the classroom. A human biology concentrator who has taken several courses in anthropology will see things differently from one who is entirely focused on medicine; a mathematics concentrator will have a different perspective depending on whether he or she has spent time studying an instrument or teaching in the local public schools. The challenge, once again, is for you to make the connections. And that means striving above all to develop the full range of your intellectual capacities during your four years at Brown.

How should you go about expanding those capacities? Below are a few goals to keep in mind as you plan your course of study.

Work on your speaking and writing

Writing, speaking, and thinking are interdependent. Developing a command of one of them means sharpening another. Seek out courses, both in and out of your concentration, that will help you to

improve your ability to communicate in English as well as in another language. Whether you concentrate in the sciences, the social sciences, or the humanities, your ability to speak and write clearly will help you succeed in your college coursework and in your life after Brown.

Understand differences among cultures

Your future success will also depend on your ability to live and work in a global context. And that means knowing as much about other cultures as you do about your own. Brown offers a wealth of courses and international experiences that will help you develop a more self-conscious and expansive sense of how different cultural groups define themselves through social, aesthetic, and political practices. Working with international students and teachers on the Brown campus can make you equally aware of the challenges of communicating across linguistic and cultural barriers. Fluency in a second language, coupled with time spent studying abroad, will sharpen your sensitivities, enlarge your sense of geography, and prepare you for leadership in an increasingly interconnected world.

Evaluate human behavior

Knowing how individuals are socialized and express their identities can lead to deeper insights about the nature of human organization, the sources of political power and authority, and the distribution of resources. The study of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion can help you think more deeply not only about yourself, but also about the social institutions that serve to define our very notions of self, together with the policies and institutions that maintain them.

Learn what it means to study the past

Understanding how people and institutions have changed over time is fundamental to a liberal education. Just as you should expand your cultural breadth, so should you also develop your historical depth. Coming to terms with history involves far more than learning names and dates and events. It means understanding the problematic nature of evidence, and of the distance that separates the present from the past. It also means thinking critically about how histories themselves are written and who has the power to write them.

Experience scientific inquiry

Evidence is also a central aspect of scientific inquiry. The interpretation of natural or material phenomena requires a unique combination of observation, creativity, and critical judgment that hones your inductive reasoning, sharpens your ability to ask questions, and encourages experimental thinking. Understanding the nature of scientific findings, along with their ethical, political, and social implications, is also critical to an informed citizenry. As you plan your course of study, look for opportunities to experience direct, hands-on research.

Develop a facility with symbolic languages

Symbolic languages make it possible to think abstractly across many disciplines. Linguistics, philosophy, computer science, mathematics, even music, are among the disciplines that have developed symbolic systems to make theoretical assertions about their objects of study, or to imagine alternative realities. Courses in these areas will teach you what it means to conceptualize systems and structures that have the potential to reframe our notions of time and space.

Expand your reading skills

Studying written texts, interpreting graphs, and evaluating systems and codes are all forms of analysis that belong to the more general category of “reading.” Learning how to read closely makes

you aware of the complex nature of expression itself, where the mode of expression is as important as what is expressed. Gaining experience with close reading—across many genres—may be one of the most important things you will learn to do in your four years at Brown.

Enhance your aesthetic sensibility

A liberal education implies developing not just new ways of reading but also of seeing, hearing, and feeling, based on exposure to a range of aesthetic experiences. Courses in the visual and performing arts, music, and literature will deepen your understanding of many kinds of expressive media, past and present, and the kinds of realities they aim to represent. Developing your own creative abilities in one or more art forms will deepen your self-understanding and enhance your ability to appreciate the work of others.

Embrace Diversity

Achieving excellence in liberal education requires a commitment to diversity in the broadest sense. This means embracing not only a range of intellectual perspectives, but also a diversity of people. Brown's diverse educational environment offers you the opportunity to think broadly about the nature of complexity itself, and to learn how to participate productively in a pluralistic society. The Brown curriculum features hundreds of courses that offer you a chance to enlarge your perspectives in just this way. Seek experiences inside and outside the classroom that will challenge your assumptions, and allow you to develop a more open and inclusive view of the world and your place in it.

Collaborate fully

Learning never happens in isolation, and the quality of your experience at Brown will depend on your ability to collaborate fully with others: with teachers, with fellow students, with advisors and mentors of all kinds. The Advising Partnership is thus a necessary complement to the Brown curriculum. Be as bold in seeking guidance as you are in pursuing your educational aspirations. Begin developing your network of collaborators early, and work to stay connected with those teachers, advisors, and peers who have meant the most to you. Visit office hours not just to expand your understanding of course material, but to get to know your teachers as people. Reach out to faculty at other events, or over lunch or coffee. Work on research projects or independent studies with professors whose interests match your own. And make use of the many offices and centers that can support you in reaching your academic goals. By taking charge of your education in this way, you will enrich your teachers' and mentors' understanding as much as you will expand your own capacity to learn, not just here at Brown, but in many other environments, and for many years to come.

Apply what you have learned

Your general education at Brown will be enriched by the many kinds of work you do beyond the classroom. Real-world experiences anchor intellectual pursuits in practical knowledge and help you develop a sense of social and global responsibility. Internships, public service, and other community activities both on campus and beyond Brown not only have the potential to strengthen your core programs; they also can strengthen your moral core, by showing you how and why your liberal studies matter. Looking beyond the horizon of your immediate interests and sharing your knowledge and talents with others can expand intellectual and ethical capacities that will make it possible for you to lead a full and engaged life, or, in the words of the Brown charter, "a life of usefulness and reputation."