HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN LEAD SOCIAL CHANGE

T H E C A S E F O R P R O B L E M - F O C U S E D P R O G R A M S

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Across the United States, universities are in a state of constant flux. Universities are eliminating academic programs due to budget deficits and declining enrollment, while simultaneously rushing to introduce new programs in emerging areas to meet shifting market demands. This reactive, trend-chasing approach is unsustainable. Instead of perpetually cutting and creating programs based on short-term popularity, higher education institutions should restructure their academic offerings around society’s most pressing challenges.

I first encountered the concept of problem- focused programs when I read the hotly debated 2009 New York Times op-ed titled [End the University as We Know It](https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/opinion/27taylor.html). The author, Mark C. Taylor, professor at Columbia University, argued that universities should abandon rigid, traditional disciplinary structures and instead design academic programs centered on real-world issues such as climate change, global health, and water. Focusing curricula on society’s most pressing problems positions students on the frontlines of meaningful societal change by breaking down the silos that exist between disciplines, but also has the potential to restore the fleeting public confidence in higher education.

The current model of higher education, however, remains anchored in an outdated framework. While history might not offer a narrowly defined solution to a contemporary problem, its analysis of past events, policies, and societal shifts is critical for understanding modern challenges. To effectively address issues like climate change, one must consider the evolution of environmental policies, the impact of industrialization, and long- standing cultural attitudes toward nature. Without this historical context, efforts to combat modern challenges risk repeating past mistakes or ignoring deep-seated political and social barriers. Rather than viewing traditional subjects like history as dispensable, we should integrate them into broader, problem-focused programs that provide a comprehensive and practical education.

Also, hastily launching new interdisciplinary programs often soon function as their own discipline with their own specialized frameworks, methodologies, jargon, and academic silos that mirror the very divisions they were meant to transcend.

The solution, then, is to ground academic programs in broad, integrated themes that

address the urgent challenges our society faces. This model does not devalue traditional disciplines; instead, it harnesses their collective, distinct insights and methodologies to tackle real-world issues.

Consider a program designed to combat climate change. Students would not just study climate science. They would explore history to understand past environmental shifts, political science to navigate climate policy, economics to assess financial impacts, finance to sustain their initiatives, management to lead teams toward a shared vision, marketing to amplify their impact, communication and media studies to shape public discourse, psychology to understand behavioral change, data science to analyze trends and model solutions, engineering to develop sustainable technologies, and language to engage diverse communities. Nearly every discipline would play a role, reflecting the interdisciplinary collaboration needed to address real-world challenges.

Several leading institutions are already embracing this innovative approach. The University of Iowa’s [“Big Ideas”](https://youtu.be/Z-pvFfARZw8?si=4xRqXHUI48JgqLy3) course, for example, centers on exploring critical questions across disciplines rather than confining students to narrow academic silos. Stanford University’s [“Design for Extreme](https://dschool.stanford.edu/classes/design-for-extreme-affordability) [Affordability”](https://dschool.stanford.edu/classes/design-for-extreme-affordability) program brings together students from engineering, business, and the social sciences to create practical solutions for poverty-related challenges. Likewise, Brown University’s [Open Curriculum](https://www.brown.edu/academics/undergraduate/open-curriculum) allows students to design personalized degree programs across disciplines, fostering

intellectual exploration. While not explicitly problem-focused, this flexibility enables students to integrate diverse fields of study in ways that align with real-world challenges.

Critics might argue that shifting away from traditional disciplines risks diluting the depth of specialized knowledge. However, problem-focused programs are designed to provide a broad foundational education at the undergraduate level while offering opportunities for focused, specialized study in graduate programs. For instance, a student passionate about combating climate change might begin in a problem- focused undergraduate program and later pursue a graduate degree in energy technology or environmental law. This combination of broad exposure followed by targeted specialization ensures that graduates are both versatile in their approach and deeply knowledgeable in their chosen fields.

Another concern is that framing education around specific problems could oversimplify complex issues or neglect the theoretical rigor of traditional academic disciplines. Yet, this need not be the case. Just imagine if frameworks, methodologies, and vocabulary were shared around pressing challenges. This common language would ensure that policymakers, scientists, grassroots activists, educators, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, local government officials, and media professionals, and the public are all aligned, dramatically enhancing communication, understanding,

collaboration, and coordinated action.

Beyond preparing students for the workforce, the benefits of problem-focused education extend to transforming the very nature of learning. When curricula are centered on real-world challenges, education becomes a dynamic catalyst for change. Students are engaged with issues that are immediately relevant to their communities and inspire them to contribute tangible solutions. This approach also highlights the practical value of a college degree and demonstrates how academic

universities should commit to building curricula that equip students to address the world’s most pressing challenges. With visionary leadership and a dedication to integrating diverse fields of knowledge, higher education can become both sustainable and truly transformative. Grounding academic programs in real- world challenges can cultivate a generation of graduates who are empowered to drive meaningful change in society. The stakes are high, but the potential rewards for students, institutions, and communities alike are even greater.

research can drive progress beyond the

confines of the classroom.

Transitioning to a problem-focused model is not without its challenges. Designing and staffing interdisciplinary curricula requires significant investment, careful coordination among departments, and a willingness to rethink traditional metrics of success. Universities will need to develop new methods of evaluation that go beyond conventional measures such as enrollment figures and graduation rates. For instance, assessing student portfolios that document concrete contributions to solving real-world challenges may provide a more accurate

picture of a program’s impact and be more valuable to employers, policymakers, and the public.

Ultimately, the shift toward problem- focused education represents a necessary evolution in how we prepare students for the future. Rather than chasing fleeting trends–cutting some programs one moment and launching new ones the next–

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