

# Interprofessional Education and the Liberal Arts

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## INTERPROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

One of the benefits of recent interest in inter-professional education (IPE) is an expanded definition of a successful health care practitioner, adding to the traditional characteristics of technical and diagnostic skill and scientific knowledge the abilities to communicate and collaborate with members of health professions different from one's own in order to improve the health outcomes of patients. Model practitioners will, for instance, reflect on and learn from their and others' experiences, combine their professional expertise with empathic understanding of others' perspectives in developing treatment options, articulate recommendations and opinions in a clear and well-supported manner, critically assess ongoing scholarly research, be open to creative and innovative means of problem-solving, and exercise leadership in their practices and communities.

Many of the competencies we expect from future practitioners have traditionally been nurtured through the liberal arts. At a time in which an institution's ability to generate revenue and the return on investment to the graduate take center stage, many liberal arts programs find themselves threatened and marginalized. Reframing IPE to be more inclusive by integrating the liberal arts in professional education can help healthcare graduates overcome the limits of specialized training, which results too often in knowledge without understanding, skills without character, individual achievement without community engagement, and career success without personal well-being. The liberal arts provide a foundation that underlies all professions (and careers in general), one built from critical thinking abilities, communication skills, intellectual curiosity, and a love of learning.

*REFRAMING IPE TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE BY INTEGRATING THE LIBERAL ARTS IN PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION CAN HELP HEALTHCARE GRADUATES OVERCOME THE LIMITS OF SPECIALIZED TRAINING.*

Inherent in the concept of a profession is a duty owed, a duty that is informed not only by the body of knowledge that defines the profession or discipline, but by moral character. Richard Freeland, former president of Northeastern University and current Commissioner of Higher Education for Massachusetts, states well how the liberal arts can complement professional education to shape character: "We should help [students] see how the work they do can promote personal growth, intellectual adventure, social purpose, and moral development. We should show them how the values of intellectual honesty, personal integrity, and tolerance can strengthen the institutions in which they will work. And we should help them build bridges between the intellectual concerns they encounter in philosophy, literature, and history courses and the decisions they will have to make as business leaders, lawyers, and government officials. Properly conceived, practice-oriented education can provide at least as powerful a moral education as any purely academic study of ethics."<sup>1</sup> Health care professionals can be comfortably added to Freeland's

list of professionals, just as health professions education fits within his category of "practice-oriented education."

National organizations are recognizing the important role played by the liberal arts in preparing graduates with 21st-century skills. In a 2013 report based on a survey of private sector and nonprofit organization employers in many fields, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) emphasized that graduates' ability to enter, and especially to advance, in today's economy depends on a skill set beyond technical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Nearly all those surveyed agreed that "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think crit-

ically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important” than field of study, and more than nine in ten said “it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning.” Furthermore, more than three in four employers surveyed “said they want colleges to place more emphasis on helping students develop five key learning outcomes . . . : critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.”

The liberal arts should have a fundamental role in shaping not just undergraduate education but health professions education to meet these employer expectations. The Interprofessional Education Collaborative (IPEC), with representation from nursing, medicine, public health, dentistry, and pharmacy, has identified core competencies that IPE should develop in health professions graduates.<sup>3</sup> The figure below shows IPEC’s four domains, each containing a number of competencies, in the context of patient

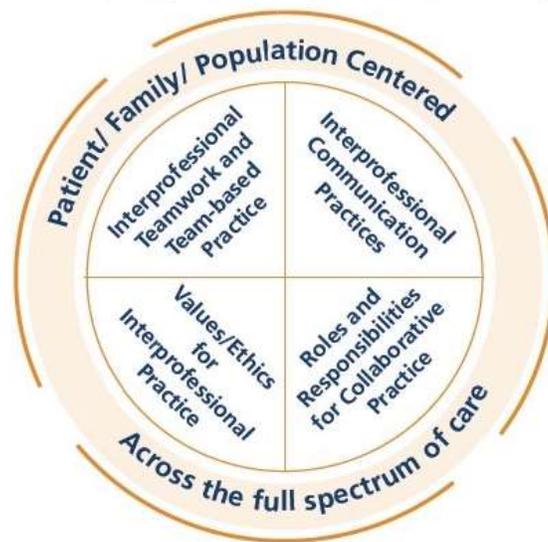
care. In this case, practice readiness means that employers in health care systems, hospitals, and private practices will expect IPE to develop graduates’ knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values vital to collaboration and teamwork.

Interestingly, most of the IPEC competencies transcend the health professions, entering the realm of humanities and the liberal arts.

Examples include the following:

- Respect the unique cultures, values, roles/responsibilities, and expertise of other health professions. (Domain: Values/Ethics)
- Forge interdependent relationships with other professions to improve care and advance learning. (Domain: Roles and Responsibilities)
- Choose effective communication tools and techniques, including information systems and communication technologies, to facilitate discussions and interactions that enhance team function. (Domain: Communication Practices)
- Integrate the knowledge and experience of other professions—appropriate to the specific care situation—to inform care decisions, while respecting patient and community values and priorities/preferences for care. (Domain: Teamwork and Team-based Practice)

### Interprofessional Collaborative Practice Core Competency Domains



The Learning Continuum

Aside from the gains for individual graduates, incorporating the liberal arts into IPE can offer benefits for institutions. It can, for example, demonstrate involvement in collaborative, inte-

grated partnerships and cutting-edge trends in higher education to their university/health science center leadership; expand potential for grants from a wider range of funding sources; provide efficiencies in instruction

and research as courses serve multiple audiences and faculty contribute across disciplines; increase collaborations with other institutions nationally and internationally utilizing distance learning technologies; and enrich faculty members' professional development and satisfaction.

An example of incorporating the liberal arts in health professions education appears in the way the University of Colorado Denver/Anschutz Medical Campus uses its Arts and Humanities in Healthcare Program in the Center for Bioethics and Humanities as part of students' IPE.<sup>4</sup> Students take required courses with titles like "Seeing with Pictures: Improving Observational Skills," "Illness, Disability, and the Individual: An Integrated and Longitudinal Humanities Seminar," and "Healing with Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Medicine," taught by faculty members with advanced degrees in literature, philosophy, law, and visual arts as well as health professions. Students may choose from such elective courses as "Art in Medicine, Medicine in Art," "The Doctor-Patient Relationship in Literature and the Arts," "Reel Psychiatry: Cinematic Representations of Mental Illness," and "Imagining the Other: A Seminar in Creativity." Students are also invited to participate in special lectures, arts exhibits, and discussion groups and to contribute to a literary and arts journal, *The Human Touch*. All these opportunities encourage students to take a humanistic approach to health care, understand cultural representations of health issues, and use reflection to find continued meaning in their careers and avoid burnout, guiding them to practice with increased appreciation of the multifaceted role they play as health care professionals. The Anschutz Medical Campus values a humanities focus for health professions education and practice that integrates the liberal arts into health care education and illustrates the rich potential that exists for reframing IPE in this way.

The liberal arts were once considered essential learning for a person to take his or

her place in society. For a variety of reasons, many schools and programs in the liberal arts have become as insular and specialized as professional education. Ironically, in many places the arts from which we learn to think and communicate, the dialogue in which we explore our humanity, are becoming irrelevant to professional education. IPE is a movement to build bridges across the professions for a greater good. Health professions schools and programs are taking the leadership responsibility to explore new opportunities for collaboration. With respect to the enormous difficulties of bridge building, there are compelling reasons to continue building beyond the academic health center.

## References

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