

I invite you to participate in a project whose purpose is to gain suggestions from instructors of IU COAS courses about what ideas and assertions might be useful for college students to gain experience critically confronting, for the benefit of society.

I hope that participants will find this project to be intellectually challenging.

Context of this project:

Given that two roles of liberal education seem to be 1) to help students to improve their critical thinking abilities and 2) to benefit society (e.g., to prepare students for citizenship), a question that presents itself is: What might be useful for college students to gain experience thinking critically \*about\*, toward the goal of benefiting society? For example, concerning what ideas and assertions might it be useful for students to gain experience critically analyzing and evaluating arguments and evidence?

I can imagine the following sorts of reactions to the above question:

There are probably too many such ideas and assertions to even try to list.

It does not matter much which specific ideas and assertions students gain experience thinking critically about in college; what is instead important is that students end up with general (context/content-independent?) critical thinking and inquiry skills. Students will have opportunities throughout their lives to critically inquire about issues that are important to them.

Many of us teach courses that do not really deal with issues concerning the common/greater good, so many of us do not have expertise in considering what might be useful for students to learn in college for the benefit of society.

Who is to say what counts as “benefiting society,” anyway? This is a subjective question for which there can be no correct answers.

To ask instructors to consider what ideas and assertions might be useful for students to critically analyze and evaluate for the benefit of society is to encourage instructors to bring too much of their personal values into education. Higher education ought to instead strive to be as value-neutral as possible and perhaps should steer away from controversial issues.

It is not clear that benefiting society even really is a significant role of liberal education in the first place. Most people do not spend money and time going to college with the intention of trying to become better citizens, after all. In any case, it is also not clear that simply helping students to gain experience thinking critically about any particular ideas and assertions would be of much benefit to society.

In spite of the above possible reactions, I would nevertheless like to gain a better sense of what might be useful for more college students to learn, for the benefit of society. I wonder: Are there really very many ideas and assertions that would be all that useful for more students to gain experience thinking critically about? What are the main questions that such ideas and assertions tend to deal with? Which ideas and assertions seem most likely to be especially influential and controversial in coming decades? What are the main, fundamental points of contention concerning arguments and evidence for and against those ideas and assertions? Which ideas and assertions tend to be especially difficult for students to confront? Why? Also, which ones tend to be so familiar that many people do not even think to confront them in the first place?

Of course I also wonder how much agreement there would be about which ideas and assertions are likely to be most useful for students to gain experience critically confronting. To explore that question, I may conduct a study in the future in which instructors are asked to indicate how useful they think that it would be for students to gain experience thinking critically about each of the ideas and assertions that are ‘nominated’ in the current project.

Although motivated mainly by intellectual curiosity, it is conceivable that this project could have some practical value, too. It might turn out, for example, that there actually are some ideas and assertions that instructors tend to agree would be useful for more students to gain experience critically analyzing and evaluating. Identifying such ideas and assertions might lead some instructors to consider creating more opportunities for more students to inquire about those particular ideas and assertions. Also, some students might simply be interested in hearing thoughts about what ideas and assertions might be important for more people to be able to think critically about.

#### Information about How to Participate:

To participate in this project, please send me any thoughts that you have about the following issue: Concerning what ideas and/or assertions (or perhaps even just what general \*sorts\* of ideas and/or assertions) might it be useful for more college students to gain experience critically analyzing and evaluating evidence and arguments, for the benefit of society?

Please send your suggestions either by e-mail to [adbender@indiana.edu](mailto:adbender@indiana.edu) or by campus mail to Alan Bender, Department of Biology, Jordan Hall.

Suggestions will be displayed anonymously, posted as they are received, on the following website:

**<http://www.bio.indiana.edu/~bender/resource/ideas.html>**

(Hopefully, seeing suggestions of other instructors will help stimulate additional thinking about possible ideas and assertions.)

I request that if you are willing to do so, you first send any suggestions that fairly quickly come to mind, without worrying about trying to come up with everything that you might eventually want to say. I request that you also then send any additional suggestions that you subsequently think of, as you come up with them. In any such additional response(s), feel free to modify or elaborate on any of your previous responses.

To try to help stimulate thinking about possible ideas and assertions, I have posted on the above website suggestions that were collected from IU undergraduates (from previous surveys) about what \*topics and issues\* might be useful for college graduates to be knowledgeable and able to think critically about, for the good of society and humanity. (Do not feel constrained to suggest ideas and assertions that deal with these particular topics and issues, though.)

#### Notes about Confidentiality:

All communications will be kept confidential, and I will not tell anyone who is or is not participating in this project. Responses will be displayed anonymously. However, if you provide identifying information in any response, others might be able to figure out who gave that response.

I welcome any questions and comments that you have about this project.

Thank you for your consideration.

Alan Bender  
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