



## **Liberal Arts and Sciences Education as a System**

Version 1.1  
August 7, 2023

### **Introduction**

The Liberal Arts and Sciences Collaborative (LAS Collab) was started in 2022 by seven members of the Open Society University Network to support establishing and strengthening liberal arts and sciences (LAS) institutions, particularly in regions that historically have had lower LAS representation. To this end, the LAS Collab is committed to spreading LAS education as a system of teaching and learning across the world. For LAS education to work as a system, there must be an enabling nexus of administration, curriculum, and pedagogy.

The LAS Collab adopts a definition of LAS education put forward by Becker (2014:4):

Modern liberal arts and sciences education is a system of higher education designed to foster in students the desire and capacity to learn, think critically, and communicate proficiently, and to prepare them to function as engaged citizens. It is distinguished by a flexible curriculum that demands breadth as well as depth of study, encourages interdisciplinarity, and enables student choice. It is realized through a student-centered pedagogy that is interactive and requires students to engage directly with texts within and outside of the classroom.

Reflecting research findings from Detweiler (2021), the LAS Collab recognizes the purpose of LAS education to further the common good. In other words, it should lead to life outcomes that benefit the individual, contribute to social progress, and further the well-being of humanity. LAS education prepares students for lives of consequence, inquiry, and accomplishment. To this end, LAS education is served by the content of what is taught and the context in which teaching and learning occur. For LAS education to succeed, its purpose, content, and context must align as much as possible.

The LAS Collab observes three core elements of the LAS education system: (i) administration, (ii) curriculum, and (iii) pedagogy. Each element has its own characteristics that contribute to the content and context of LAS education. These characteristics are normative. An LAS program need not necessarily have all of the characteristics, recognizing that LAS education exists on a spectrum. Different programs may incorporate different characteristics and consequently offer different degrees of an LAS educational experience. Administration, curriculum, and pedagogy should have an openness to iteration based on findings of impactful educational practices,

programs, and offices that enhance effective and engaging teaching approaches and showcase best learning practices. These elements are not self-actualizing; rather, they require constant attention and discussion in order to work as well as possible.

### **The three elements**

**Administration** refers to the policies, procedures, and structures that guide the operations of the institution. Administrative elements are influenced by the internal and external context of the institution, and they affect how employees and students engage with and navigate the university. Administration happens outside the classroom and between an institution's administrative department and academic department.

Administration within the LAS education system should allow for the cultivation of a community-based and personal learning environment that is both socially and emotionally engaging. Examples of administrative characteristics include:

- A limited class load, with students taking a maximum of four to five classes per semester.
- Mandatory class attendance.
- Small class size, or large classes that are regularly divided into smaller discussion sections (and thereby requiring more classrooms and faculty).
- The removal of 'non-tariff barriers' between departments and disciplines, which otherwise impede student choice, such as conflicting class schedules and academic calendars.
- An academic calendar, credit system, and class schedule that facilitates breadth and depth.
- Transparent, free, and fair university admissions that contribute to a diverse student body (of background, life experiences, and beliefs).
- Effective academic advising of students, such as through Moderation exercises.
- A reward system for evaluating staff and faculty (for promotion, salary increases, and recognition) based upon impactful practices as defined in the institution's mission statement.
- Public communication that highlights the (transformative) experiences and outcomes of LAS education.

**Curriculum** refers to the broader organization of the teaching and learning experience as established by programming/course structure. This includes, at the class and course/program level, the content that is taught and studied, the knowledge and skills students are expected to achieve, the assignments and projects given to students, the methods of evaluating student learning, and the resources employed during teaching and learning. The design and development of curriculum happens outside the classroom and by an institution's academic department.

Curriculum within the LAS education system should prioritize non-vocational and multidisciplinary study that covers the full span of human knowledge, offers intellectual challenge, and explores diverse perspectives on issues that are of significance to humanity. Examples of curricular characteristics include:

- Flexibility of student choice in (i) the courses taken and (ii) the majors pursued.
- Mandatory but not overburdening breadth of study through (a) general education requirements, (b) core curriculum, or (c) distributional requirements.
- Depth of study facilitated through the pursuit of a major (a program concentration in a particular discipline or disciplines), which may include mandatory coursework, a specific sequence of coursework, and coursework in related disciplines, but is limited such that more-or-less half of the undergraduate coursework occurs in other disciplines.
- Selection of course content that values consideration of philosophical, ethical, and values-based issues facing humanity and consideration of how one discipline relates to others.
- Design of courses that feature an interdisciplinary nature.
- Curricular efficiency such that course content is appropriately non-redundant and curriculum is streamlined and delivered in a suitably efficient manner.

**Pedagogy** refers to the instructional methods employed by educators and through which the curriculum is enacted. Pedagogy happens inside the classroom and involves faculty and learners.

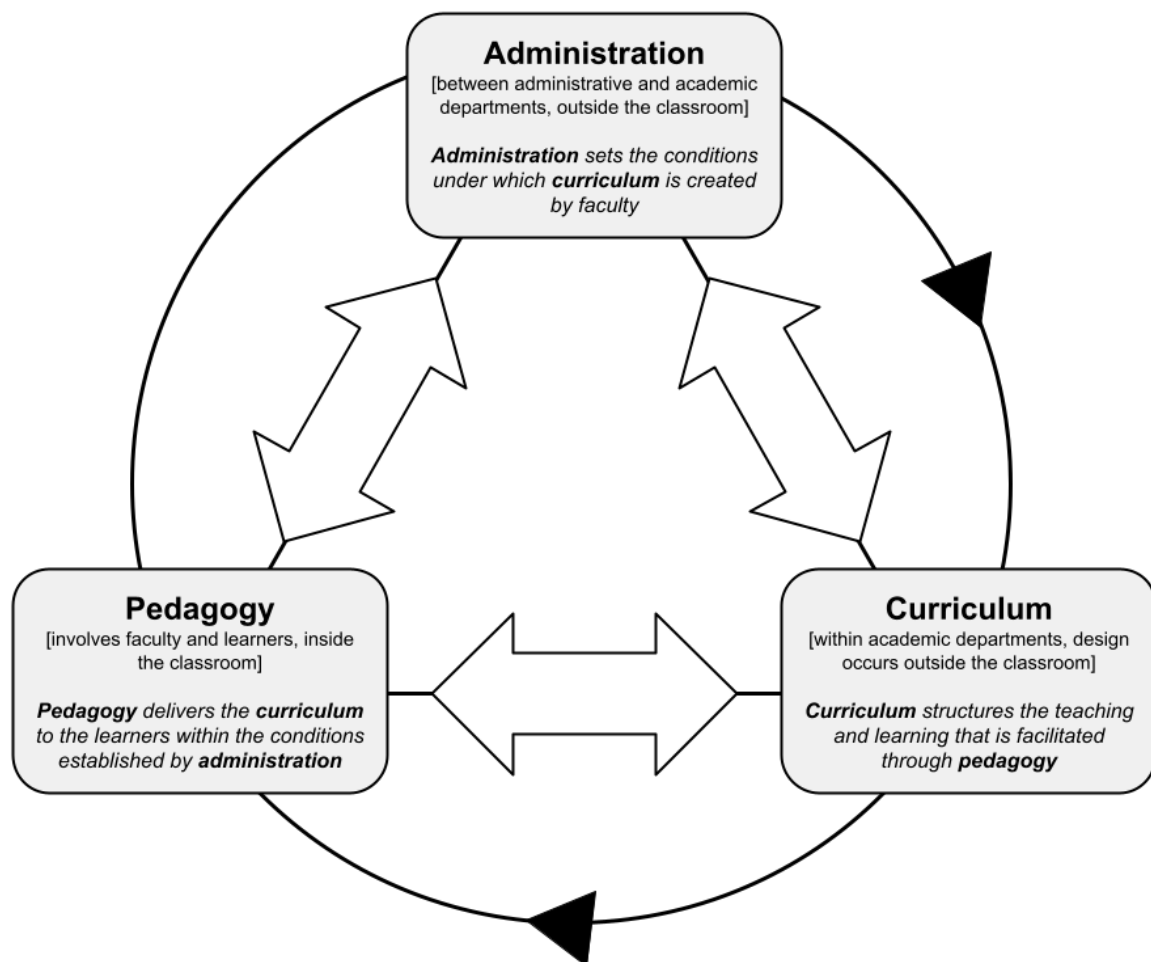
Pedagogy within the LAS system should leverage teaching methods that actively engage students and that develop broader perspectives by expanding understanding and challenging narrow thinking. Examples of pedagogical characteristics include:

- An interactive and student-centered approach to teaching and learning that promotes regular dialogue and in-class discussion, the questioning of assumptions and conclusions, analysis of texts through close reading, and the provision of different interpretations and multiple perspectives.
- Democratized learning in which the educator does not have a monopoly on knowledge and students learn from one another.
- In-class discussions of philosophical and ethical perspectives on the human condition and engagement with pressing societal issues (local, national, regional, and/or global), through which students are challenged to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their own views.
- Intentionally designed syllabi that outline specific readings and tasks for specific class sessions.
- Regularly assigned and accessible readings, which promote engagement with texts, ensure a significant amount of learning occurs outside the classroom, and prepare students to engage in in-class discussion.

- Inclusion of supplementary content that responds to students' interests and needs and helps personalize the learning experience.
- Regular production of student written work, which enhances communication skills, allows for clarification, facilitates the development of ideas and arguments, and encourages analysis and the deployment of evidence.
- Transparent evaluation of student work involving continuous assessment and substantive and timely feedback.
- Engagement between faculty/staff and students inside and outside the classroom, on both academic and non-academic matters.

## LAS education as a system

The elements of administration, curriculum, and pedagogy are interrelated and exist in a nested subsystem (**Figure 1**). Administration sets the conditions under which curriculum is created. Curriculum structures the teaching and learning that is facilitated through pedagogy. Pedagogy delivers the curriculum to the learners within the conditions established by administration.

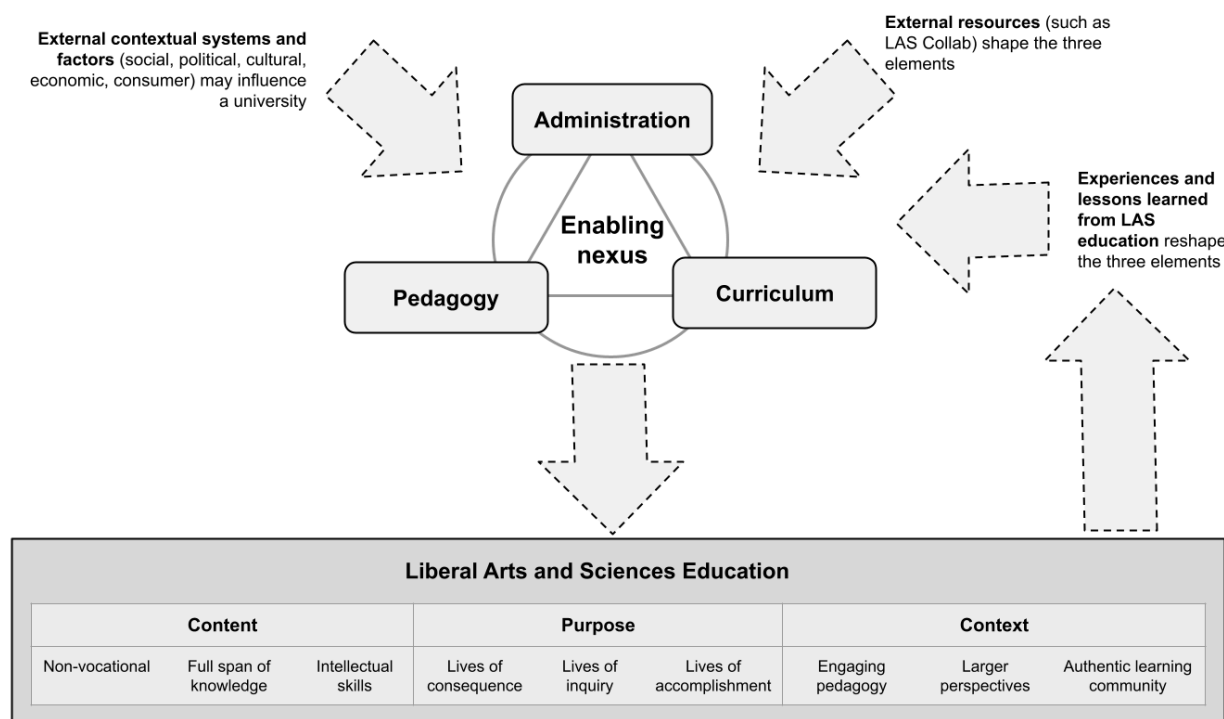


**Figure 1: A nested subsystem creates the nexus of administration, curriculum, and pedagogy**

Most typically, the path of influence is from administration to curriculum to pedagogy, as visualized by the circle moving clockwise. This linear influence works in a top-down approach, with administration affecting curriculum, which then affects pedagogy.

However, during times of reforms or serious disruptions, such a linear, top-down approach may be broken, and all three elements of the LAS system can influence one another without needing any middle element. Disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic offer an example. Faculty had to devise strategies inside classrooms, without having time to make any program-level curricular changes, which required administration to adopt certain policies, especially with regard to educational technology and e-learning modalities.

The administration-curriculum-pedagogy subsystem is nested within a larger, open LAS education system that stretches beyond the university (**Figure 2**). LAS education does not, therefore, operate in a bubble that is isolated from the needs, demands, and currents of broader society. A variety of external contextual factors may influence a university and the administration, curriculum, and pedagogy therein. However, universities may at times resist these factors, and at other times the university itself may influence them. Within this open system, LAS education is embedded in broader community systems.



**Figure 2: The Overall System of LAS Education with the Nested Enabling Nexus Subsystem**

If certain characteristics of each element manifest, an enabling nexus for LAS education is established in which the purpose, content and context of LAS education is realized (Becker, 2014).

With regards to purpose, this includes producing (Detweiler 2021):

- graduates who are leaders and/or altruists (*lives of consequence*);
- graduates who are continuous learners and/or culturally involved (*lives of inquiry*); and/or
- graduates who attain fulfilling lives and/or are personally successful (*lives of accomplishment*).

It is necessary to note that the purpose of LAS education will vary from program to program and a program's actual outcomes should reflect those intended outcomes found in a mission statement (or statement of purpose).

With regards to content, this includes (ibid.):

- study that is not designed for a specific job/profession (*non-vocational*);
- study that is both broad and understanding of the ways in which areas of knowledge are interrelated (*full span of knowledge*); and
- study that covers analytic and reasoning skills as well as creativity (*intellectual skills*).

With regards to context, this includes (ibid.):

- methods of teaching that actively involve learners (*engaging pedagogy*);
- learning experiences that broaden understanding and challenge narrow thinking (*larger perspectives*)
- spaces and opportunities for learners, faculty, and staff to interact with one another in meaningful ways, both formally and informally outside of class time (*authentic learning community*).

The experiences and lessons learned by LAS practitioners in turn reshape administration, curriculum, and pedagogy. There is, consequently, a feedback loop within the LAS system that allows for learning, iteration, and progression. Moreover, the enabling nexus of LAS education can be shaped by external resources, such as knowledgeable external persons, groups, and institutions who may advise and support the initial and/or continuing development of administration, curriculum, and pedagogy.

---

Becker, J. (2014) 'What a Liberal Arts and Sciences Education is...and is Not' Retrieved from <https://tools.bard.edu/wwwmedia/files/6366602/1/Jonathan%20Becker%20What%20a%20Liberal%20Arts%20Education%20is%20and%20is%20Not.pdf>

Detweiler, R. A. (2021) *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs: Lives of Consequence, Inquiry, and Accomplishment*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

**Questions? Comments? Interested in partnering?**  
Reach out to us at [lac@opensocietyuniversitynetwork.org](mailto:lac@opensocietyuniversitynetwork.org)  
Sign up for our bi-weekly newsletter: <http://eepurl.com/iuMEtw>