Great schools are continuously creative in how they connect to the wider communities of which they are part. They are not isolated ghettos; they are hubs of learning for the whole community. For example, we are used to thinking of education in separate stages: elementary school, high school, community college, college, and adult and lifelong learning. But learning can often happen best across age groups and between as well as within institutions. Although elementary school, high school, and college are usually separate stages in education, some students are now working together to dissolve the barriers that often separate them. Take Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

“What David Angel is doing at Clark is a particularly refined version of what every head of a school should be aiming to do.”
— Ken Robinson

David Angel, the president of Clark, has been working with faculty and students to build bridges between the campus and the city, and to the lives that the students may live after college. During a recent conversation, he said to me, “We asked ourselves the question, ‘If we want to be intentional at Clark at graduating students who are both strong on the traditional liberal arts criteria and can carry their education out into the world and be impactful, how do you cultivate the resilience of a young person when they hit a road bump?’ How do they develop three-way creative solutions to problems? If you want to build those skills intentionally, you’re much more effective if you do it in an authentic context. If a student is put on a project team and has a real problem to overcome, you see far more development.”
LEEP (Liberal Education and Effective Practice) is a program that combines interdisciplinary studies with out-of-class, real-world challenges of the kind that students are going to face once their college days are through. Clark alumnae and a range of other professionals host students on project themes. This goes far beyond the traditional internship, where students get only a taste of a career path. The objective is to put students on project teams where there’s a real problem to solve or outcome to accomplish.

“One Clark student group, All Kinds of Girls, works with teenage kids from the neighboring community around issues of identity and bullying. The group addressed this task from the ground up by creating a program for more than fifty teenage girls on campus every Saturday. “This isn’t about getting a grade,” David said. “This is about helping a particular thirteen-year-old girl. It reaches into their hearts and their heads. Almost inevitably, you see someone become passionate about what they do and when the work they’re doing is authentic.”

They also get involved in Clark initiatives like University Park Campus School. Clark helped found University Park as a way to address the difficult conditions for high school students in the impoverished area that surrounds the university. Three-quarters of the students qualify for free lunch, and students tend to come into the school several years behind academically. Yet, through personalized attention to each of its two hundred-plus students, which begins at a camp kids attend prior to seventh grade, nearly all University Park graduates go on to college, with nearly all of them being first-generation college students. Clark students play an active role at University Park as part of the college’s overall effort to incorporate them into real-world scenarios where they can serve a vital function at the undergraduate level.

The reimagining of the ideal Clark graduate led David to a dramatic new approach to the curriculum. Traditionally, colleges think in terms of freshman year, sophomore year, and so on. Clark decided instead to establish three developmental phases around which to organize the curriculum at the university: transition (establishing yourself as a part of the academic university community), growth and exploration (“breaking frame” and discovering your deepest passions and interests), and synthesis and demonstration (pulling together what you’ve learned in your major and non-major courses and putting that to work in a practical way). Students are encouraged to go through these phases on their own timeline.

What David Angel is doing at Clark is a particularly refined version of what every head of a school should be aiming to do: honing and reshaping the school as necessary to fit the evolving needs of students and society. David sees our time as a watershed moment for such an approach to school leadership.

“In my view, education is at a transition point where an increasing focus on learning outcomes is becoming the basis for assessing the educational experiences available to students. That can be a very powerful tool for engaging in greater reflection on the future of education in this country. We’re asking the questions, ‘What kinds of outcomes and what kinds of educational practices matter in this regard?’”

---

**What is LEEP?**

Liberal Education and Effective Practice (LEEP) is Clark’s bold effort to advance liberal education. It intentionally links a deep and integrated undergraduate curriculum with opportunities to put knowledge into practice in order to prepare our students for remarkable careers and purposeful, accomplished lives.

**Liberal Education (LE)** prepares students to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides them with broad knowledge as well as in-depth study in an area of interest.

**Effective Practice (EP)** is the ability to put knowledge and skills to use in order to thrive in today’s complex and ever-changing world.

LEEP+ = LEEP

Liberal Education & Effective Practice (LEEP) systematically links liberal learning to the world of practice at every stage and in every dimension of the student experience.