A liberal education is an enterprise whose purpose is the development of the wise person. Within the liberal arts core, policies and practice, course proposals and forms of assessment that properly serve this purpose are thereby justified, while policies and practices that do not properly serve this purpose are not justified. Since knowledge is essential to liberal education, the process of unrestricted criticism is also essential to it. The achievement of knowledge through the process of unrestricted criticism requires ideological diversity. Unless there are contrasting and contested opinion, received opinions will not be challenged, and unless received opinions are challenged, knowledge cannot be achieved. Ideological diversity and criticism can flourish best in an environment of academic freedom. An educational institution cannot genuinely encourage the criticism of ideas if it is itself already beholden to some principle exempt from scrutiny or committed to some partisan purpose, and therefore subservient to some ideal other than the development of liberally educated people. Academic freedom is not possible unless there is institutional neutrality and thus, institutional independence. A principle of relevance is needed that enables us to distinguish between activities that are essential, peripheral, or irrelevant, to the mission of the core curriculum. This principle can be clearly articulated. The intrinsic purpose and educational priority of assessment is to work toward the ideals of an independent liberal arts core curriculum. A liberal arts perspective addresses its subject matter to be of intrinsic and not merely of instrumental value, and is informed by a principle of institutional autonomy with regard to its pursuits.

What is not a liberal arts perspective?

A perspective which exempts a particular religious viewpoint from criticism

Often a church-related college’s commitment to a particular religious creed requires that this creed be exempted from criticism within the college’s educational program. In consequence, certain articles of faith must view taken as exempt from criticism. But for a college to institutionally adopt any dogma is ipso facto to reject unrestricted criticism within the college’s educational program, and therefore to renounce knowledge in favor of dogma. By this action the college abandons the ideal of liberal education. Thus, strictly speaking, the religious heritage of the university can deeply inform, but cannot constitute the liberal arts core curriculum. The University's Core Curriculum must be construed to be informed by, but ultimately autonomous from, the religious ideologies of the Brethren church or any other religious institution. The core might better be thought of as being in a constant dialogue with the Christian traditions at each of its levels.

A perspective which exempts a particular political viewpoint from criticism

Throughout its history, the “political university” has punished those who opposed its political agenda. The liberal and conservative political interests immune from criticism cannot serve as the ground for courses in the core curriculum for the same reasons. The “political university” is conceived as an institution to serve the purposes of the state or of overtly political interests. However, if the university is to serve the purposes of the political, then it must accept the purposes of the state or political as dogmas, and in so doing tacitly renounce the principle of unrestricted criticism. Consequently, if the university is to serve the purpose of the state or the political, it cannot at the same time serve the purpose of liberal education. An institution that serves as a means to advance the ends of the state or of some political interests, conservative or liberal, cannot at the same time serve as a means that makes it possible for people to rationally determine what ends the state or the political should serve. Thus the political can deeply inform, but never constitute, the core curriculum of the university.

A perspective which exempts a particular vocational or professional viewpoint from criticism

A professional or vocational program is by its nature concerned with developing in students a capacity to employ the means to achieve certain practical or instrumental ends. In contrast, a program in liberal education is said to be primarily concerned with developing in students an understanding of intrinsic ends of human life. Thus liberal education and professional education have different ends and means, and require the cultivation of different virtues. Ashland University’s core curriculum is dedicated to providing a liberal education of its students, implying that strictly vocational or professional skills are the consequences, not the purposes, of a liberal education. Thus the use of the core for the training of a ‘professional’ is the use of the core for a purpose that is arguably extrinsic to its goal of providing a liberal education. It is sometimes argued that a core should provide vocational or professional training in addition to liberal education because being trained specifically for a professional career and being educated broadly in the liberal arts are not mutually exclusive undertakings. The problem with this reasoning is that it assumes that a liberal education is merely a form of education that provides students with some “broad” or “general” knowledge and skills, while vocational (or “professional or pre-professional”) training is a form of education that provides students with more “specialized” knowledge or
skills. There is thus no difference between liberal education and vocational training except for the level of
generality of the knowledge and skills developed. What is not understood in this conception is that liberal
education and vocational training differ from each other in qualitative, not quantitative, ways. The difference
between them is not in the level of knowledge and skills developed, but in the kind of knowledge and skills
developed. For vocational training, the knowledge and skills developed are subordinate to various vocational
goals, whereas for liberal education, the knowledge and skills developed are ends in themselves. The core
curriculum cannot have as its goal the development of people who are committed to the disinterested pursuit of
truth and intrinsically valuable action, and at the same time have as its goal the development of people who are
committed to the pursuit of knowledge that is limited by vocational-professional purposes and by the
assumptions that are implicit in these purposes. A curriculum that serves as a means to advance the ends of
commercial or professional interests cannot at the same time serve as a means that makes it possible for people
to rationally determine what ends they should serve. Thus the perspectives of the professional programs can
deply inform, but never constitute, the core curriculum of the university.

A perspective which exempts service or student interests from criticism

A contemporary commonplace is that since all educational institutions are the creations of a particular society,
they are ultimately responsible to this society. It follow that the university is responsible for servicing various
social needs. In the past these needs have included various kinds of community support programs. If the
university is held responsible for providing a service or a variety of services for a community, then the
university is likely to gain a vested interest in the services that are provided, and, if it is consistent, it is likely to
subscribe to the normative assumptions that justify these services. In this situation those members of the
academic community who object to these normative assumptions are not likely to find a tolerant environment.
As a result, unrestricted criticism will be impeded, and liberal education will become compromised. So too, the
growth in the idea of electives for some has provided justification for the belief that the liberal arts is
responsible for providing various courses and programs which cater to the interests of students. This is often
articulated as “judging the university according to its customer’s needs,” or postulating one of the essential goals
of the college is to serve the “individual preferences of each student”. The major problem with subordinating the
liberal arts to student interests is that once this done, these interests will have the status of dogma and will be
obstacles to the conduct of unrestricted criticism. This flaw will be amplified by the fact that the actual interests
of students are not always identical with what even they would reflectively admit to be their real interests. This
student deficiency is the sine qua non of all education. Without it education becomes pointless. Once again, the
perspectives of various service and student interests can deeply inform, but never constitute, the core
curriculum of the university.

A perspective which exempts faculty research interests from criticism

The conferring of some kind of legitimacy to education that caters to student interests has concomitantly given
some kind of legitimacy to an education oriented by faculty specialized interests. If it is appropriate to conceive
of the university as a kind of academic farmers’ market that benefits the consumers, so it is argue that it is also
appropriate to conceive of it as a market that benefits the producers. Faculty can “offer” whatever they can farm
from their disciplinary fields, and students can “take” whatever products they wish and can pay for. This
conception of the university as a kind of farmers’ market in which student and faculty interests are both satisfied
is rationalized on the ground that it provides social, political, and economic benefits for all. There are, however,
great problems with the view that education should be faculty-interest driven. Beyond the detrimental effects of
careerism the faculty interest driven education limits the options available to students to the micro-specialized
interests of faculty. This provides students with faculty-held norms not themselves subject to unrestricted
criticism, because universities that seek to satisfy faculty interests have no mandate to examine the legitimacy of
these interests. Thus the perspectives of faculty research interests, including liberal arts faculty research
interests, can deeply inform, but never constitute, the core curriculum of the university.

Thus the ideal of liberal education in the core curriculum begins from the general assumption that the ideal must
be un-dogmatic and intrinsically valuable; other competing ideals lack intrinsic value because they are either
based on assumptions or serve purposes that are excluded from criticism within the educational program that
they justify. For Ashland University to publicly identify itself as having a liberal arts core curriculum, and for it
to accept the rights and privileges of this identification, and then for it to sponsor programs that are
fundamentally inconsistent with the purpose of liberal education, constitutes a fundamental inconsistency with
our stated mission.