

**To: Humanities and Communications Faculty**

**From: Matthew Daude Laurents, Ph.D.**

**Re: 60x30TX and ACC Strategic goals  
(Or, Liberal Education and its Discontents)**

Guten Morgen, colleagues!

I'm emailing you to discuss a shared vision for the future of our division, mapped out in the context of the state's strategic plan for higher education, **60x30TX**, and ACC's institutional strategic plan, **Student Success Through Guided Pathways**. Let me begin with an overview of the strategic planning goals and the environment that forms the basis of our division's own strategic planning.

In 2015, the Texas Higher Education Strategic Planning Committee adopted these four major goals:

- **Overarching goal:** By 2030, 60% of Texans ages 25-34 will have a certificate or degree
- **Completion:** By 2030, at least 550,000 students in that year will complete a certificate, associate, bachelor's, or master's from an institution of higher education in Texas
- **Marketable Skills:** By 2030, all graduates from Texas public institutions of higher education will have completed programs with identified marketable skills.
- **Student Debt:** By 2030, undergraduate student loan debt will not exceed 60 percent of first-year wages for graduates of Texas public institutions.

As you probably know, ACC's institutional strategic plan includes these goals:

- improved access and enrollment
- increased persistence and engagement
- increased completion and transition to employment/transfer

Where and how do *we* — meaning, the disciplines that constitute our division of liberal arts — fit into these goals? How do we envision *our* future given these state and institutional priorities?

Reviewing these goals, we *might* be tempted to relax into the view that we are already doing what we need to do. After all, we offer low-cost access to higher ed. Sure, we could improve our persistence and completion rates, but that's mostly a matter of measuring up to an artificial criterion anyway, right?

I'd like to challenge you to take a different perspective on what we are doing here. Aristotle argued that you are **educated** when you have acquired sufficient knowledge in a sufficiently broad range of disciplines to be able to make connections that allow you to choose a life of flourishing in community with other rational agents. So let me ask you: **How do you equip your students for a life of flourishing in community?**

One of my proudest moments as a parent occurred quite recently. I asked my daughter — currently an ACC student — how her calculus homework was going, and she responded with several lines of poetry. I was quite pleased, and the fact that it was a quote in Russian from a very dark, very pessimistic Yevtushenko poem didn't hurt.

The quip about Russian isn't incidental. I didn't teach her Russian or introduce her to Yevtushenko, but one of **you** did. Her gesture may seem trivial or even affected, but in fact it reveals the *point* of what we are doing in liberal arts education: **We help students learn the skill and find the will to connect what they know with what they feel in experience — and we do this in the faith that these bits of knowledge distill something of guiding importance from the fund of shared human experience.**

When we think of more awards in less time with less debt, quoting poetry in Russian as a comment on calculus probably doesn't leap to mind. Maybe it should. If we reduce the scope of these strategic goals to the sorts of skills and awards that *merely* get you a job, then aren't we reducing education to its purely instrumental value?

One way to reveal the problem with an exclusively economic-instrumental approach to **60x30TX** is to ask: *What* certificates and degrees will these 60% of people 25-34 be earning?

The challenge for community colleges, and for liberal arts faculty in particular, is to re-contextualize education in that great fund of shared human experience. Let me take a stab at this challenge: **Big Business may save civilization.**

That's probably not what you expected, but think about it: What are the values that undergird our disciplines in the liberal arts? Empathy? Cross-cultural understanding? Sensitivity to interpretative frameworks? Communication, engagement, service, involvement? Don't those sound like the so-called "soft skills" that business leaders are asking for?

I am not saying that employability doesn't count or that technical skill training isn't a valuable asset. I am saying that, if we refuse to engage in discussion of the instrumental value of the skills and knowledge of our disciplines, if we refuse to articulate our relevance to the world our students must actually confront, then we are missing an opportunity to **shape education** going forward. Worse still, if educators do not lead education, someone else will.

This vocation of higher education, which is the *real* challenge of **60x30TX**, is not to equip students merely to compete economically with specific technical skills. On the contrary, our vocation is to equip students to *live well*, in community, through employability but also in terms of flourishing.

In the coming months, I will be hosting a series of discussions of the impact we would like to have on **60x30TX** and on ACC's strategic goals. These discussions will range across a number of issues that may challenge you to rethink what we are doing here and how we do it: course delivery methods, alternate avenues of degree and course progression, guiding pathways (yes, that's intentional), community engagement as a pedagogical method, entrepreneurship as a part of *our* curriculum, and of course, the challenges of persistence and completion. But the central question I want you to consider is this: **What can your discipline do for students in game design? In healthcare professions? How about sustainable agriculture?**

Let me put this challenge to you: If you can't say something meaningful, something grounded in your discipline, in response to this question, then it's time for some deep thinking about your mission and values — and it's time for us to learn what other disciplines are up to.

Stay tuned — and thanks for all you do!