March 6, 2017
Table 8

Key Notes

- Education is becoming more of a marketable, measureable and capitalistic product.
  - There was concern that having educated citizens is not seen as valuable as having marketable skills. The goal of education is becoming moving away from critically thinking citizens and towards making more consumers and producers.

- Classes that develop interdisciplinary skills and critical thinking exist, but there are administrative barriers that prevent them from thriving.
  - The GCC classes were spoken highly of as they develop skills that the professors think that students should have. However, administrative barriers, often financial, deterred intercollege classes as they were expensive and difficult to set up.

- Circularizing intangible skills
  - Professors emphasized that employers are looking for the skills that liberal arts promotes, but students do not see the benefit. They recognized that these skills are seen as less marketable but it is the soft skills that enable students to succeed. Suggestions included making classes smaller, promoting more reflection and discussion and make students produce. Note that class size and funding dynamics were at odds with the idea of promoting smaller classes again.

- Reevaluating what is emphasized in the classroom
  - Professors wanted students to be able to think critically about life and their own fields. Each student should be able to reflect on the idea of race in all aspects of the field and acknowledge inequality when present. Students/faculty should me more willing to use a variety of sources from a variety of perspectives

- Absolutism
  - Professors want students to be able to recognize the legitimate differences around the world, and the different paradigms. The idea that modern education emphasizes absolutism, even when it is not true is not a good thing.

- Desired Traits:
  - Critical thinking, learn to learn (adaptability), soft skills (communication etc), teamwork, interdisciplinary, thinking critically of where knowledge comes from, being knowledgeable on race/immigration/current issues.

Summary of discussion:

Overall, the discussion that took place at Table 8 centralized on the idea of applying university learnings to a rapidly advancing world and quickly changing workplaces. The ideas of how liberal education courses at the U do, and need to continue to, develop critical thinking
skills in students, how critical thinking and adaptability relate to the students’ future careers, and intersectionality between liberal education courses and the students’ respective major courses were all discussed.

One person helped begin the discussion early on by discussing experiences with Poland’s education system, explaining that Poland’s system is moving in a direction where officials are worrying about how to sell the “product” of education and how results can be measured and demonstrated to students. They described how the humanities are struggling in education because as a subject it is less “applicable” and marketable nowadays. However, this person stressed the importance of liberal education at the U in maintaining a broader understanding of the world and by requiring classes in a wide variety of subjects.

An undergraduate education should serve as a way for students to explore topics and subjects that interest them, and should not just be preparation for their future careers. However, employers today are looking for critical thinking skills, self-starters, and overall a sense of drive from applicants, and it is important to continue to instill those skills as well as provide an education that students want to receive. The modern workplace is changing at an incredibly fast pace, thus “learning how to learn”, being able to teach yourself as you go, and being adaptable to changing situations or environments is critical for students if they want to thrive in their careers. If students are not able to adapt or quickly pick up and learn new skills that are necessary, it could be detrimental to their holistic career success.

Alongside the idea of adaptability in the workplace, the ability to see connections among different fields is important. Most careers or disciplines have socially constructed barriers to differentiate them, but it is important for students to be able to see how they are connected in order to potentially be fluid in a more unstable job market.

From an administrative standpoint, it was unanimously agreed that it is very difficult to say what exactly needs to be done about liberal education requirements. However, there was also agreement that many current policies at the U go against the ideals of the Grand Challenge courses and that overall there are too many barriers and steps that instructors and professors have to work through in order to bring benefits to the U. In order to improve the U, working on reducing or removing these barriers to push forward the teaching and learning of critical thinking skills is imperative. Also discussed was how everything that employers have said they want from applicants is what liberal education is all about, however most students fail to realize that they are gaining those soft skills that employers desire from these classes. Thus, another aspect for the administration to improve is the marketing of the benefits and value of the liberal education coursework, and how it benefits the student not only personally, but professionally as well.

As students, as professionals, and as people, critical thinking is an extremely important resource for realizing that assumptions exist and understanding what they are. Through these liberal education courses, students can learn to appreciate that the world is a place with definite differences. It is important to understand the perspectives of others and be able to speak across diversity and differences towards the greater good and social justice work. It is also important for liberal education courses not to shy away from those social issues, but instead press forward with
those topics so students can think critically about those issues. In the modern era, there exists a middle point between questioning everything and taking everything for granted. These liberal education courses are vital in letting students find that middle point themselves so that they can be well-informed in the social arena.