

# The Paradox of “Practical Liberal Arts”.

## Lessons from the Wagner College Case for Liberal (Arts) Education in Eastern Europe

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**Abstract.** The article presents the case study of Wagner College curriculum as an example of paradoxical transformation within contemporary liberal education. The Wagner Plan for Practical Liberal Arts is an important example of overcoming the traditional liberal/vocational distinction in higher education, that has been increasingly challenged by both the economic condition of colleges and wider changes in skills required by the workforce of developed countries.

The Wagner College case is not widely acknowledged, yet it may be important for European liberal education institutions. Even though they are mostly public colleges/programs, they operate in a context that has become increasingly similar to that which Wagner College was facing in the early 1990s. Calls for more liberal education go against governmental expectations, study choices and disciplinary traditions of institutions. Wagner builds on the triple assumption that learning is really practical, that higher education can have a practical impact

on a local community and that broad interdisciplinary knowledge is even more useful preparation for a future career. Such claims, even though controversial, fit well with the pragmatic consensus in American “pragmatic consensus” that strengthened around liberal arts in last three decades.

For Eastern European liberal education, which is a growing field, Wagner provides an interesting example of holistic educational vision that was implemented with relatively limited resources. Apart from administrators, this study may also be of interest to teachers and students who consider the traditional academic setting due to be revamped, even in liberal education programs. Any strategy of development of liberal education in Eastern Europe requires scaling up and making it more relevant for major stakeholders (as happened in the Netherlands and is now taking place in the UK), as well as overcoming the neoliberal pressures and academic reluctance. The Wagner case example may spark much needed discussion on how to accomplish it without losing our soul.

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe, civic engagement, liberal education, liberal arts education, pragmatism, higher education, practical liberal arts.

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**Introduction** Liberal (arts) education<sup>1</sup> is becoming increasingly popular among universities worldwide. Just three decades ago, this educational concept was almost exclusively limited to American colleges—especially private, residential liberal arts colleges. Today, there are more than 183 programs, located on all continents in various organizational and curricular settings. About a third of these operate in Europe, and a further third of these are in former Soviet countries [Godwin, 2013]. Notable examples include Smolny College in St. Petersburg, MISH and Kolegium Artes Liberales in Warsaw, the European Humanities Institute in Vilnius and Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts; some younger institutions include the Liberal Arts College of RaNePa in Moscow<sup>2</sup>.

Defining liberal (arts) education is a perennial task and little agreement has been reached as to the essence, format and aims of higher education of this type<sup>3</sup>. Viewed from the perspective of higher education systems in continental Europe, liberal (arts) education can be considered an innovation: promoting small scale, intensive and interdisciplinary education introducing students to all major fields of knowledge and developing their academic skills. In Eastern Europe, much has been said about its role in providing for active and responsible citizenship and the ability to manoeuvre the realities of global and free-market economies.

The general trend in understanding liberal (arts) education was a kind of a negative definition: the enemy of liberal educators was a single-field, market-oriented education offered by mass scale higher education systems and expected by major stakeholders: the gov-

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<sup>2</sup> A description of liberal arts programs in Eastern Europe lies beyond the scope of this article. Those interested in particular examples may want to consult—apart from institutional websites Kontowski [2016]; Detweiler & Axer [2012] for Poland, Kudrin [2015]; Becker et al. [2012] for Russia, and van der Wende [2011]; Ivanova & Sokolov [2015]; Gillespie [2001]; Peterson [2012]; Godwin [2015a] for some critical approaches. It should be noted, that neither list of liberal arts institutions in Europe, nor explanation for their recent rise, are agreed by major scholars working in this new field.

<sup>3</sup> Some readers may be aware of an article by Jonathan Becker (2014), who proposes the definition of liberal education targeted for non-US audiences; Kara Godwin prepared a set of three criteria (Godwin 2015b), apart from the self-definition; the last approach was also employed in a milestone work by Bruce Kimball [1995a], who traces the history of the concept. Another recommendable work for readers interested in the diversity within liberal arts movement is [Rothblatt, 2003].

ernment, students and their parents and international organizations<sup>4</sup>. Such an unspoken consensus allowed for the most inclusive coalition of liberal educators to happen, especially from countries lacking any grassroots tradition of liberal arts. Studying liberal arts education even within Europe leads to a conclusion that very different things use the same label, but at least there was some kind of an understanding of what liberal arts is not—it is not vocational education.

Yet, the developments within the advocacy movement for liberal arts, led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, are targeting exactly this assumption. The skills developed in the liberal arts education setting—like critical thinking, problem solving etc.—are what is needed by industries; therefore liberal education is the best preparation for a future job [Hersh, 1997a; 1997b]. This kind of inclusive, approach-based shift allows its supporters a belief in a neoliberal consensus between markets, democracies and student learning and knowledge advancement all requiring, in their different missions, liberal (arts) education [Nussbaum, 2012; Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012).

In the realities of Central and Eastern Europe, such an approach to liberal (arts) education can prove especially effective. Dismantling the ivy-covered wall of an ivory tower—one common accusation towards classical liberal arts—opens up the discussion of liberal education that can be for everybody (not just elites) and support the chances of students in the job market (rather than asking for lifelong sacrifices). It also creates a more supportive environment for cooperation between academia and businesses, more bargaining power towards most parents, and possibly a stronger foothold against governmental indicators. But obviously, it requires some compromises of the traditional role of academia, both in high-minded theory and at the shop-floor level. Still, without a strong liberal education tradition, lack of private and corporate philanthropy and shrinking resources, many institutions committed to liberal arts may be considering exactly this kind of turn<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> One may argue that this argument goes all the way down to Aristotle and Seneca the Younger, who distinguished *artes liberales* and *artes serviles*, with the latter being useful for economic survival.

<sup>5</sup> Even in the US, the number of 'purely' liberal arts colleges continues to fall; up to the mid-XIX century they constituted almost 100% of higher education institutions (being "distinctively American" [Hawkins, 2000]); later on the more market- and research-oriented institutions developed, and by early 1990s they started to close down for financial reasons; however, from almost 212 small liberal arts colleges in 1990 [Breneman, 1994], there are no more than 130 just two decades later [Baker et al., 2012]; the numbers do not include liberal arts colleges that are part of major research universities, but clearly suggest the anti-liberal tide across American Higher Education.

**The article design**

The following article provides a case study of a little-known internationally liberal arts college: Wagner College, located within the confines of New York City. Wagner has been selected for its original bend—and blend—of tradition of liberal arts somewhat closer to the more vocationally oriented and economically stable institutional mission. But in doing so, Wagner did not lose sight of liberal education ideals; it just wrapped them out differently and “updated” its curriculum—and wider operations—to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Its signature is the “Wagner Plan for Practical Liberal Arts”, which is both theoretically controversial and allowing for a survival.

The case study would focus on the idea of practical liberal arts, which can be easier translated for the realities of Central and Eastern Europe than organizational features of a private liberal arts institution. Wagner is also similar to them in being located within big cities, major attractors for economic development; and at the same time, dissimilar in trying to benefit from this location. Wagner is a well-documented, award-winning and complex institution, operating on a common premise of reuniting student learning, community engagement and work preparation in higher education under the common theme of practical liberal arts.

The following sections discuss the idea, history, organization and curriculum of Wagner college. The main part discusses the definition and the aim of practical liberal arts. In discussion the specific features, potential pitfalls and the relevance of Wagner example for Eastern and Central European liberal educators are identified.

**Part 1: Wagner and its practical liberal arts**  
**The Idea and the History**

Established in 1883, Wagner College was first a Lutheran Ministerium, in its first year serving just 6 students. After initial expansion, in 1918 it moved from its original location in Rochester, NY to its present premises in Grymes Hill on Staten Island, New York, NY. During the first massification phase, it opened its doors to women (1933), and then expanded its size owing to G. I. Bill funded veteran-students and then baby boomers. For the most part of its history it was fairly typical for the United States, a small scale<sup>6</sup>, private, residential liberal arts college, serving mostly the NY state population by offering a liberal arts curriculum.

In the 1970s’ the growth of this private liberal arts college had come to an end with the development of new branches of St. Johns University just across the street (1971), and City University of New York a mile away (1976). Soon enough the first institution with a Catholic character, and the latter with just a fraction of Wagner’s tuition fees have together undermined the position of the Wagner College (Smith 2010, p.xviii). In dire circumstances, the college acted defensively:

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<sup>6</sup> In the US context, it means 1000–2500 students spread across four years.

discounted tuition to the public college level, ceased to be selective, and auctioned some properties. In late 1980s it was practically bankrupt, there were less students applying than places offered and most of the faculty left.

Since the appointment of its new president in 1988, the defeatist attitude has disappeared and Wagner has experienced a tremendous turnaround. In little over a decade later it rose from (lowest) 4th grade to the top tier in the Carnegie Classification<sup>7</sup>. Over 75% of students came from outside the New York and New Jersey area [Guarasci, 2001. P. 106], and the budget was balanced.

Norman R. Smith has to be credited for saving the institution, which managed to overcome a typical conundrum of growing competition, rising costs of teaching and extensive extracurricular activities and services, falling liberal arts enrolments and resulting financial pressure to get rid of residential character, liberal education (including two-year general education protocol)—or even better, both. This wave has first challenged [Breneman, 1994; Neely, 2000], and then forced closure or transformation into vocationally and professionally oriented institutions [Ferrall, 2011; Baker et al., 2012]. To see a bigger picture, one may want to count these ‘distinctively American’, private, residential liberal arts colleges, offering liberal arts and sciences curriculum<sup>8</sup>—an original and major force in American higher education for the most part of its history<sup>9</sup>. From more than 700 institutions in 1955, there remained some 212 in 1990 and, according to a recent study, 130 in 2012. Wagner College was one of the unlikely survivors.

Richard Guarasci joined the institution in 1997 as a Professor of Political Science as well as its Provost and Vice President for Academ-

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<sup>7</sup> Carnegie used to have separate league tables for liberal education institutions (and serious troubles with defining liberal arts education at the same time). In the latest iteration a liberal arts institution is supposed to grant degrees primarily in liberal arts fields and be primarily undergraduate. Of these, 20% were selective [Ferrall, 2011. P. 10].

<sup>8</sup> By ‘liberal arts and sciences’ curriculum it is assumed awarding degrees in disciplines that have no direct vocational utility (like nursing, business, technology, education), and in many cases only leading to further graduate studies in the disciplines (law, theology, medicine etc.). In the American context, since the gradual abolition of traditional curricula and introduction of a choice-based, contemporary curriculum with the instruction in English, it has never been easy to come up with a positive definition of what is liberal arts education [Bérubé, 2006; Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012; Gaydos et al., 2007]. As this part explores a particular solution to liberal-vocational tension, this general issue will not be discussed in much detail.

<sup>9</sup> Aside from trade schools, until the rise of public land-grant colleges from the 1860s almost all four year colleges were private liberal arts institutions. After that period, they were challenged by the research university model, and vocational institutions opened to meet a skyrocketing demand for marketable skills, and later on non-selective, two-year, cheaper junior/community colleges [Cole, 2009; Rudolph, 1990; Geiger, 2011; Graham, 2005; Boyd, King 1975].

ic Affairs. He was a leading force behind the Wagner Plan for Practical Liberal Arts (1998) that focused on making a difference rather than just survival. The Plan encompasses learning communities and reflective tutorials in the curriculum, with civic engagement at the operational design, under an umbrella of integrated and experimental learning [Guarasci, 2003a]. Since 2002 he has served as the 18th President of Wagner College.

The plan was bold, controversial—and most importantly, it worked. By 2000 the U. S. News and World Report ranked Wagner College in its top tier of northeast colleges and universities. In 2000 the Association of American Colleges and Universities identified Wagner College as having one of the most innovative and promising undergraduate curricula in the United States. In an issue released on 9/11, Time Magazine named Wagner College as one of its colleges of the year for its first-year program [Guarasci, 2001. P. 106–107].

“Practical liberal arts” is a forward-looking approach, capitalizing on three main transformations of American liberal education: ‘from instrumental to developmental model of college experience, from consumerist to participatory understanding of learning and from individualist focus to social ecology of learning’ [Sullivan, 2012. P. 144]. Initially the Wagner Plan had a rather accidental relationship with the New York and Tri-State Area [Angelo, 2005]. Over time, the physical environment of the college became prominent in the distinct educational vision of Wagner College.

### Organization and the Curriculum

The Student body at Wagner is 1750 students<sup>10</sup>, mostly living in one of the most beautiful college campuses in the U.S. (according to the Princeton Review, 2005) in four residence halls. Its facilities, built mostly in the 1950s, overlook Downtown Manhattan and the Atlantic Ocean. The college has its varsity sports Wagner Seahawks team, comprised of 18 disciplines, as well as its own theatre. Of its undergraduate students, 25% take at least one semester abroad, and 45% are engaged in a community service or volunteer work.

There are 96 faculty members, mostly full-time, 35% of them tenured, forming five disciplinary and one interdisciplinary department. Twenty-seven undergraduate majors, as well as eleven minors of pre-professional programs are on offer.

Wagner College publishes its Common Data Sheets, Factbooks,

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<sup>10</sup> Wagner was one of the few private LAS colleges that decided to shrink its undergraduate student body instead of further discounting its tuition, a common practice in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (and a driver of further growth in the sticker price). In 2011 there were still 1830 students [Woodhouse, 2015]. It has to be noted that Wagner offers some graduate programs for more than 300 students, in business administration, education, microbiology and health-related fields. The dropout after one year is about 15%, and six-year graduation rates are ca 60–70%.

Assessment resources and Annual reports for everybody interested in quantitative, operational data. As the aim of this report is to provide a description of the vision of liberal education there, those will not be analysed in more detail.

The Wagner College curriculum at present consists of a minimum of 36 units required for graduation<sup>11</sup>, which are divided into a major (12–18 units)<sup>12</sup>, electives from outside the major, and most notably a general education requirement (22–24 units) representing the philosophy of liberal arts education. The traditional liberal education is reflected in distribution requirements (under which students choose ten courses from humanities, social sciences, sciences and arts). Other elements that can be found on many other campuses are foundations courses (basic skills: writing, mathematics etc.), and intercultural understanding courses (American Diversity, International Perspectives).

The practical side of the Wagner curriculum is reflected by their nine courses divided into three learning communities (LC). Each LC is comprised of a common cohort of 28 students who attend three courses. The first LC is the first year program: students take two courses from different disciplines on a common theme; they need to take part in a community involvement activity (service learning, participatory learning, field trips, and community research); and finally they take a writing course in which they link practice with theory (a reflective tutorial). The intermediate LC, during 2nd or 3rd year, combines writing, research and an integrated project to be presented at the end of semester, based on two courses (or one co-taught interdisciplinary course)<sup>13</sup>. The senior LC, taken within the department of the student's major, includes a capstone course, a reflective tutorial and an experiential project—a 'practicum' (field-based internship or applied learning component, taking 100 hours, which includes a writing project and a presentation).

Taken together, this curriculum design combines hands-on learning with more traditional courses, and includes required college-level academic skills with a modern version of contemporary civilization courses [Allardyce, 1982]. In short, the Wagner Plan emphasizes experiential and community-based learning [Guarasci, 2001. P. 107], fully aware of the location of the college on economically and culturally divided Staten Island. It should be clear that this curriculum is "practical" in more than one sense: as practising academic work, as bring-

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<sup>11</sup> Compilation based on: [Wagner College, 2012; Guarasci, 2003b; Aldas et al., 2010].

<sup>12</sup> Some students may choose to do a double major—similar to two undergraduate degrees pursued by a portion of Eastern European students in the hope of better employability—or an optional minor.

<sup>13</sup> In some cases, this requirement may be completed by study abroad, Washington Centre internship or independent study



ing theory to practice, and as making oneself practical for the local community and business.

**What is Liberal Education for Wagner?**

The idea of practical liberal arts, as it has been most recently developing at Wagner<sup>14</sup>, connects the engaging classroom (small classes, critical thinking and hands-on learning) with off campus learning by doing community projects and internships.

The “practical” side of liberal education is best defined through our curriculum because of the specific linkages created by our learning communities, reflective tutorials and the commitment faculty make to connecting students with the world outside the classroom [Wagner College, 2011a. P. 136].

This understanding of liberal education was a result of being forced to redefine its positioning in higher education by introducing more engaging pedagogies, developing the civic dimension of undergraduate instruction and rethinking its options given the immediate as well as broader context of operation as a private urban liberal arts college. By overcoming the age-old distinction between *artes liberales* and *artes serviles*, its dedication to ‘practical liberal arts’ led to what one may call success, but not without paying the price for leaving the ivory tower and entering a potentially double-edged relationship to external forces.

Pedagogical benefits of the practical arts [Brint et al., 2005], or experiential learning, are supposed to safeguard the liberal education dimension—especially in learning communities. Much of the Wagner curriculum follows a typical liberal arts college protocol (60% of the modules), including four basic skills and two intercultural understanding classes, and a 10-class elective distribution requirement. Wagner is therefore far from professional or vocational training of its undergraduates, and may be called a liberal education institution.

However, one sign of Wagner’s dedication to the concept of ‘practical liberal arts’ is a lack of a definition of ‘liberal arts’ as such. The liberal arts profile is assumed as obvious, and efforts focus on providing a unique selling point<sup>15</sup>.

**A Note on the American Context**

Understanding the paradox of practical liberal arts requires an introduction to the distinctive features of American higher education. Its development was a dialectic blend of Western European tradition with the physical and social features of the new continent it was serving.

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<sup>14</sup> The Wagner Plan has been revamped since 2011.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed discussion on liberal-practical discussion in literature, consult Hines Jr. [2005]; Schwartz & Sharpe [2010]; Raelin [2007]; Carver & Harrison [2015].



While democratic and utilitarian values inevitably gave tone to the entire structure, other outlooks, such as those of pure research and liberal culture, continued to exist (in somewhat modified form) within the framework and were not totally assimilated to the dominant ethos [Brubacher, Rudy, 1997. P. 424].

From early on, higher education in America included more disciplines, offered to a larger number of students and a more diversified student body, considered the idea of service important for the institution, and had extensive extracurricula organized—and not merely accepted—by its colleges and universities. These factors are also important in the case of Wagner.

The history of American colleges is filled with tension between the intrinsic and extrinsic value of liberal education [Kimball, 1995a; Rudolph, 1990]—therefore dismantling the Senecian vision of learning just for learning's sake. Tocqueville has already noted, and the argument was well developed by Richard Hofstadter [1963], that Americans by and large had serious reservations against intellectuals, rooted in the democratic spirit (instead of hierarchy-loving aristocratic societies). This idea was responsible for a pragmatic trust within American higher education<sup>16</sup>, that over time became more and more influential in shaping curricula and institutional missions. From an external perspective, this was probably the most important reason why higher education was not merely imparting knowledge.

This “something more” could have taken many different forms, from concern over the souls of students [Kronman, 2007], establishing diversity within a college, service-learning and global/community engagement, sport and art-related extracurricular activities and last but not least the idea of including work placements as part of the curriculum. The rising cost of attending college brought increased attention to a value-for-money approach, both in financial cuts for public institutions (mostly by the republican politicians and excluding STEM and vocational fields) [Newfield, 2008], and some re-profiling of private institutions striving to offer towards more applicable knowledge, including liberal arts colleges. This was generally not met with any strong objection, as “student consumerism is a central part of the ethos of American higher education” [Altbach, 2011. P. 245].

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<sup>16</sup> In the now classical account: The function of education in inculcating usable skills and in broadening social opportunities was always clear. The value of developing the mind for intellectual or imaginative achievement or even contemplative enjoyment was considerably less clear and less subject to common agreement. Many Americans were troubled by the suspicion that an education of this kind was suitable only to the leisured classes, to aristocracies, to the European past; that its usefulness was less evident than its possible dangers; that an undue concern with the development of mind was a form of arrogance or narcissism which one would expect to find mainly in the morally corrupt [Hofstadter, 1963. P. 309].

**The aim of practical liberal arts**

Wagner declares that it is overcoming the vocational-liberal distinction by offering ‘practical liberal arts’ education. Since both economic [Slaughter, 1985] and ideological [Carnochan, 1993; Pratt, 1992] discussions within liberal education advocacy came to a sort of dead end in the 1980s, the new mainstream way to defend it focused on quantitative (measurable student experience) and qualitative descriptions (integrative, holistic approaches) of the benefits of this particular educational vision. It was assumed onwards, that the aim of the college was to shape both critical citizens and successful members of a modern economy (or idealist and realist at the same time [Adler, Mayer, 1958. P. 79–94]).

In fact, it is believed at Wagner that liberal arts have a useful, transferable, lasting value—especially through their ability of linking theory and practice beyond immediate applicability [Guarasci, 2003b; Roche, 2010. P. 156–157; Lieverman, Freedland, 2012]. The Wagner plan uses some elements of the ‘new practicality’ agenda [Scott, 1991. P. 24–26], but hopes to use it critically, challenging students’ vision of social structure and ‘useful’ education, and—although it does not say it directly—wants to put their students in situations that will shape their characters.

The main vehicle that is supposed to train students in exercising judgment rather than simply mastering facts [Schwartz, Sharpe 2010] is a learning community<sup>17</sup>. Wagner offers three of them, hoping that those new pedagogies—linking engaged classroom learning with off-campus activities—would improve student learning, but also equip them with qualities that together can be summarized as being an active, critical, cooperative citizen<sup>18</sup>.

The concept of learning communities has some pedagogical backing: they start with students rather than discipline, require out of class learning and diversify learning experiences [Bain, 2004. P. 110–120]. They are also a ‘high impact practice’ that has been empirically tested to improve student learning [Kuh, 2008; Pascarella, Terenzini, 2005], along with some other practices that are present at Wagner<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Wagner was not the first college to introduce Learning Communities, which received some scholarly attention and are becoming even more popular in organising learning environments for liberal education, both in four-year colleges [Lenning, Ebberts, 1999; Smith et al., 2004; Goodsell Love, 2012; Dammien McAuliffe, Buck Sutton 2014] and community colleges (Rosario et al. 2013).

<sup>18</sup> This civic dimension is not incidental in Wagner’s case: “Joining civic engagement and liberal education opens lines of inquiry that promise new pedagogies, ones that place the student and learner as an agent and author of learning and knowledge” [Checkoway et al., 2012. P. 111].

<sup>19</sup> See: first year seminars, common intellectual experiences (in the form of big themes), writing intensive courses (reflective tutorials), diversity/global learning, service/community based learning and capstone courses/projects. Most Wagner students also do internships.

One last note about the democratic [Guarasci, 2003a. P. 29] or practical arts approach is their coincidence with what Kimball calls the “pragmatic consensus” [Kimball, 1995b. P. 89–97]. After many decades of struggling with more idealistic approaches, American liberal education is currently embracing seven pragmatic themes: multiculturalism, values and service, community and citizenship, general education, integration with K-12, pedagogical attention to learning and inquiry rather than just an act of teaching, and assessment. All of them have their place at Wagner, which is part of many civically-oriented initiatives in American higher education<sup>20</sup>.

Matters of learning and thinking are inseparable from a social ethic, from matters of social action where knowing and practice in the social context are inseparable. They are the very core of civic responsibility (...) a commitment to community (to other) beyond the self [Harward, 2012. P. 14].

Dedication to its community of students, but also the surrounding community of Staten Island, led Wagner to opening of its Port Richmond Partnership in 2008 [Guarasci, 2014; Wagner College, 2013]. “Designed to extend Wagner’s commitment to learning by doing and to rejuvenate an economically distressed community”, it hopes to alleviate the critical situation in terms of health care, education, housing, and employment. Recent, largely undocumented migrants are targeted with various interventions that allow students to apply their knowledge in practice, propose solutions to social problems (e. g. obesity) and open the pathways for promising high school seniors to attend classes at Wagner College over the summer, community advocacy projects, internships and civic learning field trips.

One may be interested in what other habits of the heart can cultivate such closeness to New York, with the multiple business opportunities that Wagner embraces as well. But Wagner’s approach seems consistent and realist: it may well be that not all of the students share the civic approach of the institution, but one cannot at the same time claim to develop strong, independent learners, and expect them to come in just one shape. Practicality, a three-dimensional matrix of engaging pedagogies, service learning and internship opportunities lies at the heart of what Wagner believes to be a feasible modern update for liberal arts education. The overall attitude is therefore practical, both at the mission, promotion and curriculum level, and at the floor level of real actions that Wagner College undertakes to prove its dedication to the ideal.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Campus Compact, Bringing Theory to Practice, as well as learning communities oriented Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.

**Part 2: Discussion**  
**Turnaround, fame**  
**and price**

The turnaround story of Wagner College ranges from the point where it was ‘completely out of money’, (with senior administrators leaving, faculty demoralized, reputation tragic and to make things worse: under-admission [Smith, 2010. P. 8]) to the point where its prizewinning engaging curriculum is used as an example of putting effective educational practices into practice two decades later [Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007. P. 35].

At Wagner College the change was deep and quick. Trust and innovation became soul mates. Involvement has a way of converting problems from external constraints into personal challenges [Guarasci, 2001. P. 108].

The resurrection of Wagner College came from within, and the essential ingredients were remarkable vision, commitment, and leadership shared by faculty and administrators alike [Guarasci, 2006. P. 2].

The transformation undergone by Wagner College is in many respects a counter-example to the situation faced by liberal education institutions in Eastern Europe. It provides one of the possible ways to avoid stagnation in educational vision and understanding of a social role. The Wagner College case comprises both of the big questions of contemporary liberal education advocacy but also in strategic model of institutional change. Both elements would prove essential for the further development of liberal education institutions in Eastern Europe. As Wagner is placed on the nexus of multiple paradoxes plaguing contemporary liberal education, it is also experiencing the challenges many institutions in less developed countries would eventually face. Those paradoxes can also be contextualized and serve as a benchmark for the positioning of liberal education institutions on the matrix of the academic, professional and civic dimensions of higher education.

But this transformation came at a price that not all of the colleges are ready to pay. Wagner offers graduate and pre-professional programs, even though the pressure to break undergraduate liberal education havens is by many considered detrimental [Scott, 1991. P. 24–26]. Wagner also plays with the internship options and the closeness to downtown New York, especially in enrollment brochures, which is not an obvious way to market liberal education. Finally, Wagner seems to “have it all”, being a model example of many separate threads of education: it offers the most high-impact education practices, civic engagement initiatives, campus athletics, residentiality requirement, honors program, Greek associations (fraternities and sororities), a small community and proximity to the metropolis. Indeed the Wagner Plan aimed at overcoming the typical dilemmas: ‘community and classroom; liberal arts and professional education; and, the

college and its urban setting' [Guarasci, 2003c. P. 36]—and obviously not everybody would buy into it.

### The paradox of practical liberal arts

Wagner College has been singled out for this study for its paradoxical stance as a practical liberal arts college<sup>21</sup>. It is not one of the big research universities that are known worldwide, and that indeed play in a league of their own. It is also not a rank-and-file institution that has only a historical or accidental relation to contemporary discussions on American liberal education. Its signature curriculum is not completely detached from the experiences of other institutions, which is the case of laudable St. Johns' College. Therefore, it makes sense to include Wagner in a comparative study.

But Wagner is not “representative” of American liberal education much more than any other institution. If it may serve as a proxy to anything, it would be to the trends affecting the current situation and future prospects of private liberal arts colleges that are not one of the happy few, better recognized as Williams, Amherst or Oberlin.

The idea of liberal arts that Wagner subscribes to (and at the same time shapes and promotes) is that of practical liberal arts. This means that its signature curriculum, as well as its broader college setting and operations, are all set to make a connection between knowledge and action, learning and doing, the academic with the professional and civic. Wagner consciously crosses boundaries that some others [Fish, 2008] would hope to reinstate<sup>22</sup>: “community and classroom; liberal arts and professional education; and, the college and its urban setting” [Guarasci, 2003b. P. 36].

Wagner is not a 'liberal arts +' institution, one that retains all the characteristics of a liberal arts college (if there ever was an uncontended list of those), but puts some small service learning component on top of it. Quite the contrary. It has given up on some dimensions that were long deemed essential—undergraduate-only character, or lack of professional and pre-professional majors—at the same time keeping some others (residential character, extensive general education curriculum, collegiate athletics). Those elements have been fur-

<sup>21</sup> Among the paradoxes of Wagner is its location: Wagner claims to be ‘the only true small, private, traditionally residential Liberal Arts College within the five boroughs of New York City’ [Wagner College, 2011b].

<sup>22</sup> One of those is the very pedagogical dimension of the role of the practical in learning, which used to be contested in the tradition of liberal arts education: Experiential learning as a pedagogy was long held suspect by passionate advocates of liberal education on the grounds that it reduced learning to vocationalism, provincialism, or both. Some advocates also caution against community service and service learning, as if to suggest that alternative approaches as these do not measure up to ones that are traditional in the academy. Experience for its own sake could easily lead to false impressions born from the limitations of personal observation, they argue [Checkoway et al., 2012. P. 111].

ther bound by an overarching educational philosophy, in a clear attempt to rethink and remake a liberal arts college [Chopp et al., 2013; Lieverman, Freedland, 2012].

Solving the jigsaw of running the college is a hard task, because at the end of the day survival of an institution—a vehicle for the ideal of liberal education—relies on balancing its budget. “While making meaningful educational reform may require little or no new funding, sustaining change requires new and robust resources” [Guarasci, 2006. P. 9]. At this point, no liberal arts college—public or private—can finance itself fully from tuition revenue. Breaking through the campus wall is not only a pedagogical and civic imperative; it is also a matter of sustainability of educational business. Showcasing integrity in the curriculum, campus culture and civic engagement help colleges make the case to external constituencies as well as individual donors. Having almost faced closure 25 years ago, Wagner is now also successful in this dimension.

This integration between the most important dimensions of the college is probably the most striking feature of the liberal education offered at Wagner. It is an independent institution run by a common vision of what liberal education should be in the 21st century.

This ideal is, undoubtedly, extremely controversial, as it challenges the hegemonic narration of liberal arts—sustained by its opponents as well as many proponents, especially in Europe. One may wonder to what extent the ideal is lived up to, but one cannot deny its existence. One clear direction of a further research on “practical liberal arts” is exactly the relation between the theory and practice.

#### Lessons for Eastern Europe

The rise of liberal education outside of the US is a playground of various forces: national and institutional frameworks shape liberal education initiatives, whatever the sources of their vision. In Wagner’s example what is especially interesting is the boldness of the task to rethink this particular college [Chopp et al., 2013] and the eagerness to embrace ‘contemporary urban liberal education’ [Guarasci 2003c. P. 36]. Although not every educational institution may successfully promise “practical liberal arts”, some of them do, and probably some of those even have to in order to survive. Wagner provides an example of how these unwelcoming circumstances can be overcome by a holistic approach.

The Wagner College example can be especially instructive in terms of the educational vision and organizational transformation that followed<sup>23</sup>. Both in EU countries as well as in Russia (where liberal ed-

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<sup>23</sup> In the case of Eastern European institutions, the very introduction of a liberal education program within a disciplinary, research-oriented public university was a significant change that can be compared with the turnaround of the Wagner College. However, the impact of those changes for the big institutions is definitely incomparably smaller. It is nevertheless possible to com-

education institutions were established during the 1990s and 2000s) universities face growing pressure to create more market-oriented study programs, support them and even align other programs closer to them. This can be especially dangerous for liberal education that may be forced to abandon their goals of preparing “well-rounded”<sup>24</sup>, multi-talented citizens rather than one-dimensional effective elements of a future workforce. Wagner continues to claim that it offers practical liberal arts: so it still holds true to the idea of liberal education, but does so in a more effective way [Neely, 2000; Ferrall, 2011].

The organizational change, and here is another interesting feature, happened almost without new resources. In times of shrinking budgets, this should be a heartening lesson. Just as the introduction of MISH in Warsaw or the “general social sciences” program in Utrecht, Wagner allowed for a different student experience without much new funding. However, sustaining change can prove costly [Guarasci, 2006. P. 9], as is scaling up. Private institutions have more flexibility in both changing and asking for funding; but they also cannot rely on stable income sources. Public liberal education, as it is developing in Eastern Europe, may be more sustainable, and equitable. In addition, evidencing integrity in the curriculum, campus culture and civic engagement help colleges make the case to external constituencies as well as individual donors, both corporate and private.

Finally, practical liberal arts should not be seen as a ready-made solution that would work in Eastern Europe, if merely implemented. Rather, the take home message is that a successful strategy for a higher education institution should be, well, educational. Besieged by neoliberal policies, market expectations, administrative overload and underpaid staff, many leaders of liberal (arts) education institutions may try to avoid the crisis through a strategic alignment with non-educational aims. A name and mission statement does not make any institution immune to that. However, dressing up as a different person does not always guarantee success. Wagner decided to go against the trend of vocationalizing liberal education institutions, made a different theory based on the principal benefits of experiential learning, and today is a stable, growing institution that made its own brand. And if an educational institution may collect the data on student learning, it can survive a couple more days of neoliberal siege, armed with counter-evidence to imposed expectations, claiming that it is still “useful”, but in another sense of the word<sup>25</sup>.

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pare the challenges (in theory and practice) that those institutions face today with the Wagner College ca. 1987–1998, especially as they are well past the initial enthusiasm and now look for new sources of growth (at best).

<sup>24</sup> A term used recently instead of „liberal education” [Hersh et al., 2009], to avoid the all-popular political bias [Bérubé, 2006].

<sup>25</sup> According to Mark William Roche, liberal arts education is useful in three non-standard ways: it addresses what is useful as an aim, not a mean; it



There is an obvious parallel to Eastern European liberal education, which is currently, by and large, estranged from national academia as something “external”, fancy and impractical. Russian, as with many Slavic languages, does not have separate words for teaching and learning, and accordingly, education is considered mainly what a teacher does. To understand that mechanisms for learning may be unrelated to some common teaching practices was paramount to Anglo-Saxon pedagogy in the last half century, and can serve as a springboard for meaningful discussion on liberal education across cultures. The call for practical liberal arts may finally be interpreted as an invitation to consider non-academic, i. e. non-lecture based teaching; to engage the students [Kidd, 2005. P. 206], to assign them practical tasks even if they are not in a vocational course<sup>26</sup>. Wagner does exactly that. And although one can easily imagine opposition to that, this is a discussion about the heart of our business: making students better understand the world around them—and themselves. There are no educators too liberal to admit just that.

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helps understand useful beyond immediate applicability; it develops character (2010, pp. 156–157).

<sup>26</sup> “Experiential learning as a pedagogy was long held suspect by passionate advocates of liberal education on the grounds that it reduced learning to vocationalism, provincialism, or both. Some advocates also caution against community service and service learning, as if to suggest that alternative approaches such as these do not measure up to ones that are traditional in the academy. Experience for its own sake could easily lead to false impressions born from the limitations of personal observation, they argue” (Checkoway et al. 2012, p. 111).

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