Before we send students away to study abroad we work hard to prepare them for entering a new culture that may differ from anything they've known. Typically, our first and primary advice is to remember that the prevailing ideals and values they've grown up with, and are often only dimly aware of, may not operate in their new homes.

Having worked at a number of different kinds of institutions, I suggest that a similar kind of advice is reasonable for new faculty at liberal arts colleges. Indeed, I think it would be fair to say that recently hewn PhDs who are beginning their careers at a liberal arts college are in the process of leaving one small, culturally distinct slice of higher education to enter another. Some numbers might help. There are over 3,900 higher education institutions in the United States. Only 7% of those institutions grant doctoral degrees. An equally tiny slice of those institutions, about 6%, are liberal arts colleges. I’m not trying to diminish the importance of these two kinds of institutions, only to point out that you are moving from one very small, distinct slice of higher education to another.

If you are like me, after spending four, five, or more, years in graduate school immersing yourself in the craft of your discipline, it is hard to imagine that you were toiling in such a small, distinct segment of higher education. As you settle into your new "culture," you will find many odd and curious things. Give yourself time and remember that there is a different tempo and mode to liberal arts colleges. The rules, governance structures, and values are different than what you've experienced before. This is true even if you went to a liberal arts college as a student. You'll find being a faculty member brings a different perspective.

One distinctive value that lives in a different light at liberal arts colleges is what it means to be "intellectually alive." I realized this recently when I participated in a site visit to a small university with three faculty from major research universities. During and after the visit, my colleagues kept wrestling with whether the faculty at our host institution were "intellectually alive." They were particularly concerned with the intellectual life of the faculty who were teaching in the university’s core liberal arts program. When I asked them what they meant by being intellectually alive, their unanimous reply was it meant faculty were fully engaged in the work of their disciplines. They felt that the faculty who’d “lost their focus” by participating in the liberal arts core had suffered a premature intellectual death of sorts. I was immediately reminded that one of the joys of graduate school was its stimulating and focused intellectual life. People who are extraordinarily interested and invested in similar intellectual pursuits surround you, immersing you in a continuous, but channeled, conversation.

Unfortunately, my colleagues hadn't considered whether there might be intellectual vitality in a broader conversation, a conversation that extends beyond the subjects we feel in love with in graduate school. I don't want to suggest that faculty who teach at liberal arts colleges must disconnect from their disciplines or deny themselves the pleasure of scholarship. Rather, I suggest that one thing that differentiates the culture of liberal arts colleges is that they value a broader sense of what it means to be "intellectually alive."

One way of saying this is that for many faculty at liberal arts colleges intellectual life starts with the disciplines, but it doesn't end there. Faculty at liberal arts colleges pursue scholarly work in their disciplines, but they also understand that there are things worth knowing, thinking, and talking about outside of their disciplines.

My liberal arts education began at Wabash College. The only thing unusual about this is that I started my Wabash education as a 32 year old in my second faculty position. Shortly after I came to Wabash, I began teaching in our “core” freshman and sophomore courses and our senior colloquium. These non disciplinary courses are where the great, the good, and occasionally the not so good books live. My quick cultural read told me that teaching these courses would give me the liberal arts “bona fidas” that every new faculty member at Wabash should have.

Unfortunately, my research on the acoustic properties of bird calls gave me no idea of how I should lead a discussion about a philosophy text, a novel, or worse still, a poem. I was confidently bursting with strategies for how I might teach something as intricate and rarified as the use of Monte Carlo simulations to model the temporal overlap of calls in colonial species of birds, but I was intimidated by the prospect of spending 50 minutes discussing a section of Plato’s Republic. What’s even more ironic is that I considered statistical modeling of bird calls to be deep, rich, and inherently meaningful, and arguments about citizenship to be arcane, complex, and inaccessible. Obviously,
irony isn't my strongest quality.

Initially, I tried to calm my fears by working frantically before each class to gather information about the historical context of the reading or socio cultural background on the author. Like any good academic, I used the strategy, "when in doubt, develop expertise!" But my harried attempts to become a literary critic or historian in the half hour before class soon gave way to the traffic jam of the semester. So I fell back on a simple minded strategy: I sat down and talked about the book with my students.

Suddenly it was so easy. I'd prepare for class by reading the book and then, the critical step, thinking about it. I'd scratch down a couple of questions to get our discussion rolling. Once class started, my students and I worked together to figure out what the authors were saying. We argued about whether the authors were right or not. We talked about how the books touched us, upset us, or made us softly "hmmmm..." with a new insight. It was easy and hard at the same time. On the one hand, I didn't have to worry about creating class demonstrations, setting up technology, or creating handouts, but on the other, I really had to think carefully about what I'd read.

But then something else happened. I started thinking and talking about the ideas in these books outside of class. I thought about Wordsworth's poem "Tables Turned" while I watched my students sag under the weight of mid term exams. I thought about Plato's Philosopher Kings during a faculty debate about the College's mission statement. Most embarrassingly, I couldn't shake the discussion we had in class about Richard Wagner, romanticism, and country music.

Don't get me wrong. My knowledge of these things is an inch deep. I still watch "The Simpsons" and read truly stupid novels with heroes named "Dirk Pitt." But teaching these classes also got me to read Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, Colored People, On Liberty, House on Mango Street, Wild Swans, The Iliad, The Prince, Beloved and many more. Sure, it's an unruly and unthematic list, but my conversations with students about these books adds a texture to my life that I've joyfully sweated through ever since I've been at Wabash.

More importantly, working with students through these books has been my ticket to the broader intellectual life at Wabash. In a college filled with majors, minors, departments, divisions, and other structures that highlight the knowledge that distinguishes us from one another, these books create the commons which students and faculty from across the college use for discussion. We don't agree on which books are interesting or what they say. But they lead us to talk about ideas, and that's what's important.

Although my research area has changed, my passion for it is stronger than ever. But 13 years into my liberal arts education, I've also learned my intellectual life runs much wider than the banks of my discipline. I've lost my focus and I'm glad of it.