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Liberal and Professional Studies in the Undergraduate Curriculum

The problem of how to strike a happy and reasonable balance between liberal and professional studies in the undergraduate curriculum is a particularly acute one for American academicians who must account to their various publics for the practical and immediate relevance of their programs as well as for their intellectual quality. The rapid expansion of undergraduate teacher programs over the last fifty years has been a major factor in keeping this problem alive and public. So important is teacher education as a symbol of the problem that some institutions, notably Yale University under A. Whitney Griswold, have tried to resolve the issue by severely curtailing teacher education programs. However, there are few for whom the question of professional studies in the undergraduate curriculum is an all-or-nothing issue. For most, the issue involves a consideration of *when* professional courses should be given, *how many* should be required, and *what kinds* are the proper concerns of colleges and universities.

In spite of the controversy, liberal arts colleges have been steadily adding more professional courses to their programs. Earl McGrath found in his studies of liberal arts colleges that they are

providing extensive pre-medical, pre-legal, pre-engineering, and other pre-professional courses of study as limited in range and subject matter as those offered in schools of medicine, law, and engineering. McGrath's findings indicate that nearly all liberal arts colleges offer programs composed of general studies and specialized instruction related to a particular occupation for all students regardless of their career objectives. And there are no signs at all that this trend will reverse itself.

Louis T. Benezet in his first *Annual Report to the Board of Trustees* as President of Colorado College describes three major types of American colleges that identify themselves as liberal arts colleges. They are (1) small universities with Master's degrees in strong specialties, (2) selective colleges emphasizing a few saleable fields, and (3) community colleges with more practical programs geared to community needs.² This wide range of colleges, identified by their sponsors at least as liberal arts colleges, strongly testifies to the fact that the uniform liberal arts college model that existed in the United States prior to the Civil War is now mostly a matter of history.

The expansion of professional studies in liberal arts colleges and of liberal arts courses in professional schools has not resulted in a noticeable reduction in the traditional conflict between liberal arts professors and professors in the professional fields. Instead of "bridging the gap" between academics, it has widened it to such an extent that the kind of dialogue which could result in truly integrated collegiate programs has not been achieved.

There are, of course, exceptions. Harold Rugg found significant cooperative rethinking and reconstruction of teacher education in a number of colleges where the facilities for the education of teachers are closely integrated with the liberal arts program. However, while occasional examples of significant promise can be found, the extent to which liberal arts and professional programs are actually integrated is extremely slight.³

There is a variety of possible explanations for this difficulty. One derives from the prestige attached to a liberal arts education. Along with barns rebuilt as homes, small foreign cars, and "name" universities, a liberal arts education is an "in" group status symbol for many. Professional studies, on the other hand, do not enjoy this

kind of status. The view that liberal studies are superior is so ingrained in our culture that anyone who proposes that professional studies are on an *equal* footing with liberal studies is more often ridiculed than engaged in serious debate.

With the progressive diversification of course offerings in liberal arts colleges, there has been a strong counter-movement to keep the liberal arts "pure," which is expressed in the condemnation of the changes and in the glorification of definitions of the liberal arts which have been borrowed from other ages.

Historical Perspectives

All of these earlier definitions assume that professional studies are less intellectual than the traditional humanities. This assumption can be traced to Ancient Greece where the practical arts were held in disdain and not considered to be fitting subjects for free men.

The Greeks did themselves a great disservice by supporting this viewpoint. Because they accepted it, it never occurred to them to apply their scientific findings to the production of goods and services in a way which might have produced an industrial revolution. As a result, their progress in technology never kept pace of their progress in more theoretical scientific endeavors. James Harvey Robinson in *The Mind in the Making* speaks to this point:

[In Greece] . . . there was no one to devise the practical apparatus by which alone profound and ever increasing knowledge of natural operations is possible. The mechanical inventiveness of the Greeks is slight and hence they never came upon the lens . . . microscope . . . telescope . . . a mechanical timepiece . . . a thermometer, or a barometer.⁴

A second assumption is that the more "literary," "linguistic," and "mathematical" a college course is, the purer it is. This assumption has roots in the Hellenistic Period, a period in which the concept of a fitting education for free men was extremely narrow. Earlier in the Archaic Period, a liberal education consisted of a

more balanced curriculum of athletics, language and literature, and music and drama. Each of these subject areas was considered to be of equal importance. In addition to studying in each of these areas, a youth was expected to serve as an apprentice to a public official. In time, less and less attention was given to music, gymnastics, and the period of apprenticeship. With the declining interest in the development of well-rounded individuals came an increased interest in education which consisted solely of abstract, literary, linguistic, and mathematical studies. When the Romans conquered the Greeks, they appropriated this view of education with its narrowed purposes, modified it, and passed it on to the European cultures, upon which America built its educational philosophy.

Both of these assumptions have led to the arbitrary limitation of the liberal arts curriculum to a handful of courses and books. The height of this tendency was reached in the Middle Ages when the liberal arts were defined in terms of seven subjects: logic, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. For centuries, educators refused to adapt academic programs to emergent social problems and scientific advances and smugly stood by the conviction that a "liberally" educated individual can be defined in terms of a few required books, sometimes rounded off at 100, or of a prescribed set of courses.

The Common Purposes

Now that the pattern of separating liberal and professional studies into different institutions has been reversed to the point where most undergraduate colleges are offering programs of both liberal and professional studies, it is time for academics to put aside their prejudices and to examine their traditional assumptions in a way that will result in a more satisfactory integration of these studies on every level of undergraduate education.

An excellent place to start in the quest for a fuller integration of liberal and professional studies is with an analysis of their purposes. Both areas of study can be profitably examined within the context of the development of competence, commitment, creativity, and character among students. These purposes constitute a common

ground where a meaningful integration of all undergraduate studies can begin.

The nurturing of all of these characteristics on all levels of formal education is crucial. Max Lerner in "Why Do Civilizations Die?" said "... that whether or not a society is viable depends primarily upon will and intelligence." This viability is rooted in the skill individuals have in using their intelligence (competence) and in a disciplined will, which is necessary if ideals (commitment) are to be translated into action through the basic societal institutions.

Later in the essay, Lerner asserts that "One clue to the death of civilizations is rigidity . . . a hardening of the intellectual and moral arteries of a civilization so that it can no longer adapt itself to drastically changed situations."⁶ Here Lerner provides a rationale for including *creativity* among our educational goals. Schools tend toward rigidity. Traditionally, the school has been the institution where individuals are taught how to conserve existing societal structures. Few educational institutions encourage their students "to do their own thing." But schools must do this if society is to have sufficient numbers of people who can cope successfully with the demands of a world in which the pace of change is accelerating so rapidly that the world an individual learns about in primary school bears little similarity to the one he inhabits in the prime of his life.

In the face of all change, whether slow or rapid, man needs other men to meet physical, intellectual, and emotional needs. Increasingly, man makes contact with other men through large corporate superstructures and mechanical devices. None the less, all men continue to depend upon other men, whether they interact with them as individuals or in groups, or whether they interact with them directly or indirectly. It is at the point of these contacts where character becomes important. Individual and group survival require that men act toward one another with respect and with responsibility. These characteristics are not learned easily; they must be nurtured in men early and continuously in every phase of schooling.

By definition, these four purposes fit into what Carl Rogers calls "significant learning," that is pervasive learnings which affect every portion of the learner's behavior.⁷ Education when examined this way renders the traditional division between liberal and profes-

sional studies meaningless. At the very minimum, all education must be geared toward these purposes. Beyond this it may be directed toward more, but never less.

What will follow is a short discussion of how these purposes are intertwined in liberal and professional studies. What is discussed is not what typifies the liberal and the professional studies, but what, by definition, they should typify.

The most misunderstood of the purposes, especially in terms of its relevance to professional studies, is the development of intellectual competence. Contrary to the views of most academicians, professional courses can be more than mere "fix it" and "how to do it" courses. Professional courses properly taught do help students learn how to think. In these courses the emphasis goes beyond the acquisition of skill and deals with why these skills are important, how they developed, how they can be improved, and how they affect society. The student learns more than how to perform; he learns to raise questions about his performance.

Yes, the student learns technical skills in professional courses, but he learns technical skills in liberal arts courses as well. This is as it should be and is necessary. However, the acquisition of these skills must always be secondary to the development of an inquiring and a disciplined mind. The key learnings in any educational program are the abilities to recall, to classify, to infer, to deduce, to compare, to generalize, and to synthesize. These learnings are cultivated by allowing students to analyze systematically man's relationship to his physical environment and to other men.

Traditionally, these learnings have been developed through the liberal arts: the "pure" humanities, the "pure" social sciences, and the "pure" physical sciences. As a result, the full role of professional studies in humanizing man has yet to be adequately explored.

Too often, the liberal arts concentrate upon man's past and in doing so undervalue the importance of man's present. On the other hand, the professional studies frequently stress man's present and ignore his past. Both studies, liberal and professional, must attend to the past and the present if they are to succeed. For while a man is all the "wiser" for knowing the past, he does not begin on the road to wisdom until he understands his contemporary surroundings.

Courtney C. Smith in a Voice of America Forum Lecture raised the question as to whether the development of intellectual competence is the sole or principal function of a college. He answered his own question with a quotation from a speech Woodrow Wilson delivered at Swarthmore College in 1913:

I cannot admit that a man establishes his right to call himself a college graduate by showing me his diploma. The only way he can prove it is by showing that his eyes are lifted to some horizon which other men less instructed than he have not been privileged to see.⁸

What Wilson is talking about here are two additional common goals of liberal and professional studies, commitment and character. Commitment is expressed in any one of a number of highly developed personal goals. For example, there is the commitment to the creation of the beautiful which often leads to professional studies in architecture, sculpture, music, or the dance. There is the commitment to the search for truth which takes many into advanced research in the behavioral and the physical sciences. And, there is the commitment to help young people become their best selves, which takes many students into the fields of teaching, social work, and community health.

Commitment and character in terms of the role of a college have to do with helping students to learn that their fulfilment is best achieved by using their capacities to assist their fellow men. Professional studies have a particularly important role in this regard. At the very least, it is demonstrated in the efforts of professionals to establish codes of ethics. By definition, a professional is expected to have a strong sense of values and, of necessity, the nurturing of these values is an important part of professional training.

Finally, there is creativity. Competence, character, and commitment have little long term value unless they are accompanied by a creative spirit. This spirit is characterized by an adventurous mind, a dissatisfaction with things as they are, and a restlessness for new perspectives, theories, methods, and practices. It is evidenced in the ability to find fresh answers to old questions, and in the talent for asking entirely new questions.

The common purposes discussed here, competence, commitment,

creativity, and character, synthesize the mission of both liberal and professional studies. They provide a viable point of departure for a meaningful integration of all studies offered on the undergraduate level. Clearly, we can no longer continue in good faith to divide course offerings into "think" courses on the one hand and "fix-it" courses on the other. Pure "fix-it" courses unrelated to a larger societal framework, under no stretch of the imagination, represent "higher" education, and "think" courses abstracted from other considerations have little more than recreational value. We must return the discussion of higher education to an exploration of its purposes and how specific courses and programs fit these purposes. When we reach this point, we shall have a valuable basis for curbing the haphazard and *ad hoc* proliferation of collegiate courses; but, more importantly, we shall be ready to engage all members of the academic community in serious and productive dialogue.

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