

A Liberal Education is Marketable

Education versus training is a phrase we've heard tossed around quite a lot recently. We've heard other faculty, deans, and top-level administrators cry about the single-minded, narrowly viewed pursuit of vocationalism among students. These faculty members and administrators claim that too many students come to college to be trained for jobs and as a result sacrifice the chance for real liberal learning, and these campus professionals may be right. While we are all too familiar with students' inquiries about how to get into majors that will bring in a lot of cash, we should probably find more disturbing the trend toward minimal competency—almost functional illiteracy. Many students simply can't think critically, logically, or in an orderly way. Nor do they want to. They only want to land a job and prefer to do it with minimal effort.

We've heard students ask why they should care about the difference between education and training, and we're not surprised. Look at the education they seem to be getting at college: In many instances, students are not encouraged to interact in their courses or with the faculty.

Students have been told that large universities are primarily research institutions, or they have seen good teachers at small liberal arts colleges get canned because they didn't publish enough to get tenure. As a result, students believe that the faculty must research first and teach, maybe, third. Their experiences often support their beliefs. As in high school, students are put into courses implicitly to be respondents, to absorb. They aren't asked too many times to use their heads in class or to work creatively with course content; such requests would require some effort from their teachers and such efforts would take them away from their primary tasks of research and publication.

If the administration gave anything more than lip service to its rhetoric about education and learning, substantive changes in teaching, advising, and other support services would be evident. However, as it is, students may be right to inquire about the purpose of their college educations.

One thing is sure: It's risky to look for a rewarding education that depends on accidental excellence. Everyone in college is out to get jobs. Even doctoral candidates in philosophy, comparative literature, and music history do not pursue education simply for the love of wisdom. They pursue the degree to become trained professionals in their fields, and all of the faculty members who float their credentials for offers of better positions or as bargaining chips for raises and promotions are doing it for the money, the new position, and upward mobility. If they weren't concerned with career advancement, the faculty and administrators, who also must climb the career ladder via position and promotion, would just have library cards, pursue their studies as recreation, and work wherever the weather was best and the scenery was loveliest.

All these seasoned academics are as vocationally oriented as the undergraduates who are pursuing accounting majors. However, the faculty's marketplace is not the commercial world: It's the academic world.

Some of us in the academy, many of us maybe, are bothered that students seem to be becoming as compartmentalized as their various general-education requirements and as isolated as their core curricula are isolated from other majors. The lack of interconnectedness bothers many students too. The panacea that is supposed to offset the effects of vocationalism and the narrowly specialized curricula is to encourage—or demand—that students pursue liberal education requirements. Some contend that by requiring a liberal education, educators will foster a sense of values and a sense of shared history among students, and as some have said, liberal learning will bind us together as a society.

The liberal education as the holy grail is a nice, fashionable idea, but no one should bet that if students take a few humanities courses or are exposed to a few classes outside of their known interests that they will somehow transform their perspective of or contribution to society. A liberal education is not the result of course content, nor is it manifested in one's ability to spit out a quotable sound byte; it is the acquisition of the intellectual skills and abilities to develop conceptual sophistication and critical judgment. Such skills can be quarried from any field of study.

Each domain has its established ways of inquiry, its ways of looking at the world and making sense of it. This functional similarity among fields of study should concern all educators because

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it means that nothing inherent in any program on campus makes it vocational, and nothing makes one program inherently better than another at churning out so-called “liberally educated” people. The key is how one pursues learning. Just because students know a few historical facts, can tell somebody that they’ve read Shakespeare, or have taken a foreign language class doesn’t mean they have a claim on a liberal education. More important, majoring in any of the traditional liberal arts majors does not give a student the claim of being critically insightful, aesthetically appreciative, or morally responsible. Enough has been said on this to question whether any liberal arts program can ensure that students will develop intellectual curiosity and powers of reason.

Just because students want to graduate and get good jobs does not mean that something is wrong with them. However, they need to understand that they can get a liberal education and also be marketable. Educators need to convey that both goals for an education and a job may make students more marketable and more satisfied with their lives than accomplishing either objective in isolation.

Students can’t do this by banking on a long list of courses or a major to accomplish this task; they have to do it by themselves. It’s how they approach school and put together general education requirements, electives, and majors so these courses hang together in some personal sense that allows students to grow professionally, grapple with the ethical complexities of living with people, and look at the significance of their own lives.

No doubt, students need to fill general education and elective hours. These can be “bothersome requirements” to get out of the way as quickly, easily, and vacantly as possible. Students must take the requirements anyway and they can make the courses work for them: They can build coherent and personally satisfying educations. What students might find out is that learning, especially learning how to learn, can be fun. And they can still be marketable!