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Christian Liberal Arts: An Education That Goes Beyond

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V. James Mannoia; *Christian Liberal Arts: An Education That Goes Beyond* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc, 2000).

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone

Jim Mannoia, the current president of Greenville College, has chosen to wade into the discussion on the nature of a liberal arts education. These types of reflections have spanned many centuries, but have become increasingly focused in the last half-century.¹ Part of the current discussion has been a reaction to the rise of technical and professional specialization within traditionally liberal arts institutions. This response has been due to a perception [and some reality] that many places of higher education have been moving away from providing a broad education encompassing numerous disciplines. The concern is that institutions who are beginning to focus on professional programs are jeopardizing the foundational and traditional integrity of an education which is intended to prepare a young man or woman to be deep learners, as well as being actively engaged within their world. Mannoia has chosen not to enter the dialogue from a perspective of reaction but with an engaging affirmation. He has suggested that a Christian worldview is essential to the conversation about the significance of liberal arts. He explores the place of Christian liberal arts, in particular, within the world of American higher education. He goes so far as to suggest that a Christian worldview might be optimally positioned to provide one of the best educational foundations for a student pursuing a liberal arts education.

His discussion revolves around ways the fragmented and divided parts of a college and university can have a place in unifying and consolidating an institution's educational mission. This discourse is significant because for those in Student Life, it clarifies the impact they can have in the pedagogical goals of the curriculum. It articulates the different roles that Student Life can play in participating in that consolidation of the mission. The gems in this book are Mannoia's discussion, of what he calls "critical commitment." He defines it, declares its significance then demonstrates how the various constituencies on a campus are essential to the success of the academic mission.

Repeatedly in student development literature, there is an attempt to legitimize and articulate the pedagogical underpinnings and mission of the vocation. I will not pursue this concern other than to observe that student development personnel can rest assured that their significance has already been established. There is a vast number of empirical and anecdotal works that illustrate the importance of out of classroom experiences which Student Life facilitates. However, I must acknowledge the perceptions of many faculty, staff and students. Often Student Life staff are perceived as whiling away their

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days having coffee with students and planning the next social activity. When pressed many of these same professionals struggle to articulate the educational paradigms that propel their efforts to plan, program and participate in campus activities. These circumstances increase the confusion about the Student Life role in educating students.

While there are plenty of developmental models focused on students, there are few paradigms that are considered by Student life in planning, implementing and envisioning strategies. Even as he focuses on education in general, Mannoia provides a paradigm which allows student development staff to clearly and simply articulate their roles within the educational mission of a college or university. While *Christian Liberal Arts* is directed broadly to Christian educators, those in student development will find specific benefit in that it clearly identifies the role, significance and importance of student life particularly on a Christian campus. He provides a lens through which student development is able to focus its energy and vision.

In this volume, Mannoia emphasizes and articulates why linking the liberal arts with Christian thinking is not only possible, but also beneficial, natural and needed. As one who has spent many years as a faculty member and administrator in Christian higher education, he has had the opportunity to observe what has and has not worked. His goal is to encourage and develop “critical commitment” in the lives of college and university students. Critical commitment goes further than that which is referred to as “critical thinking,” for it challenges the individual to incorporate the implications of their education into their living. It also goes beyond dogmatism and cynicism to a place where students “recognize the limitations of human understanding and yet are prepared to take a stand and even stake their lives” (42-43).

Mannoia asserts that “critical commitment” should be the implicit and explicit goal of a liberal arts education (64). To accomplish this goal four variables are needed. He calls them: *dissonance*, *habituation*, *modeling* and *community*. Often they exist parallel to one another and all are necessary for creating a comprehensive learning experience. In his explanations and explorations of these variables it becomes abundantly clear that Student Life must play significant parts in an institution’s life for it to accomplish its educational mission.

First, Mannoia identifies that integral to the learning process in any one’s life is the sense of *dissonance* that is created by being exposed to a new experience, idea or relationship. It shakes and disturbs what the student is familiar with and exposes the individual to an alternative way of viewing or interacting with the world (77-80). However, for this dissonance to be translated into learning, the context of the experience is critical. The individual must have a *community* in which they have the safety and freedom to reflect and muse upon these new experiences (85-90). As well, it is essential that they are able to perceive responses to these or similar circumstances in those they witness, read or hear about (81-85). Students must have *models* that are demonstrating or have demonstrated new means by which they can respond to the dissonance-causing experiences. The community and adequate models provide the ways by which a student is able to experiment with responses and begin to develop new *habits* that transform their former ways of responding to similar circumstances [80-81]. The full scope of a transforming education is demonstrated when a student deeply incorporates these responses into her life so that the habits become a part of her way of living.





Faith Development on the Christian College Campus

When we begin to identify the impact of the different constituencies on a campus, we quickly realize that different spheres have different levels of influence on the make-up and genetic code of the community. Some are obvious chapel and ministry departments have a tremendous impact on the spiritual life of a campus; those focused on learning disabilities have an impact on academics. Looking at the campus through Mannoia's lens of dissonance, modeling, community and habituation, it broadens our view of the campus. The academic realm obviously impacts the creation of dissonance in a student's life. However, it also has a significant part in providing both living and historical models for students. Those in Student Life are able to facilitate all areas of developing critical commitment. But the most significant is the role that they can and must play in the development of models and the community on a campus. Many student development staff have been hired specifically to log time with students, to build trust, facilitate relationships, birth vision and broaden worldviews. These are all part of creating community and providing more examples for students. Student Life has a paramount role in building community and joins the rest of campus in creating dissonance, providing models and encouraging deep and wise habits in student lives.

Christian Liberal Arts describes the divided nature of many campuses, but it also provides a vision for the manner by which many of its disparate parts can be united in their goals. It defines the necessary elements of a whole education and the need for the whole campus to be involved in that enterprise. It brings together those focused on the social, cognitive and faith developments and demonstrates the need for their integrated and cooperative strategies. When student development embraces its tremendous skills in developing community and providing models, it will realize that it has a profound impact on the fostering of a learning environment and in the success of every institution's educational mission. Although possibly not intentional, Mannoia has succeeded in articulating a pedagogical paradigm that clearly demonstrates the strategic impact that Student Life has and can have upon the whole education of a student.

FOOTNOTES

¹A sampling of these are: Bruce A. Kimball; *Orator & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, expanded edition [New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995]; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense Of Reform in Liberal Education* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997]; Mark R. Schwehn; *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993].