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Vocationalism in Higher Education

Joshua Arnold

Abstract

In their recent book, *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness*, Donald Opitz and Derek Melleby (2007) note how “expectations have profound implications on what students actually find when they arrive at college” (p. 15). In recent decades, a paradigmatic shift has occurred among college students concerning their views of the purpose of a college education. Student expectations have grown increasingly pragmatic, utilitarian, and vocational in nature. This shift toward a vocational emphasis has had a profound impact on the landscape of higher education, changing the shape of many institutions and how higher education is both viewed and offered in the 21st century. The following paper shall examine the growth of vocationalism within higher education, its impact on the student, and the unique role that Christian higher education and student affairs professionals share in the preservation of the liberal arts tradition.

The Vocationalization of Higher Education

In 2002, Kevin Kline starred in the role of Professor Hundert, assistant headmaster of a prestigious preparatory school for boys named St. Benedict’s Academy. The opening scene of the movie depicts a freshman orientation of sorts. The headmaster of the academy is describing the mission of the school, founded upon the following principle: *finis origine pendet*, or literally, “the end depends upon the beginning” (Hoffman, 2002).

The film chronicles the relationship between Professor Hundert, assistant headmaster and teacher of the classics, and his unruly student, Sedgwick Bell. While at St. Benedict’s, Bell unsuccessfully attempts to win a noteworthy classics competition by dishonest means. Professor Hundert would later describe this attempt as evidence of his failing Bell as a teacher. Toward the end of the film, an adult Sedgwick Bell, successful CEO and candidate for the United States Senate, orchestrates a lavish rematch of this event in order to reclaim his “academic honor.” His efforts to cheat his way through the rematch are once again thwarted by the professor in a climactic conclusion (Hoffman, 2002).

At the end of the film, the professor exclaims that, “as a student of history, [he] should not have been shocked either by the audacity nor the success of Sedgwick Bell.” As the motto of the school foretold, the end was indeed dependent upon the beginning.

In their book, *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness* (2007), Donald Opitz and Derek Melleby make a very similar statement when they assert that “expectations have profound implications on what we actually find at college” (Opitz & Melleby, 2007, p. 15). If the end is indeed dependent upon the beginning, then the expectations a student brings to college will have a profound impact on the kind of person she might ultimately become upon finishing college.

Expectations have a way of shaping what a student might find at college in more ways than one would expect. They will certainly have an influence on how the student approaches her college experience, what she will seek, and how she will seek it. Additionally, expectations also have an interesting way of shaping what kind of experience the student will be offered. Student expectations have a powerful way of shaping the college curriculum, including what a higher education institution has to offer and how it chooses to deliver those offerings.

A paradigmatic shift has occurred among college students in recent decades concerning their views of the purpose of higher education. Perhaps at no other time in the history of higher education have students been more concerned with the economic advantages of a college education. Fewer students than ever before are able to identify reasons for attending college which are not ultimately career-related.

For as long as they can remember, this current generation of college students have been instructed by some of the most important figures in their lives to perform well in school in order to get accepted into a good college—a crucial prerequisite to any lucrative career. Thus the impetus for academic faithfulness became the future reward of gainful employment. This has radically shaped the college culture among incoming students, resulting in the most vocationally-oriented generation of college students in history.

The following sections shall examine the history of a phenomenon two centuries in the making, its impact on the student, and the unique role of those in Christian higher education and particularly student affairs.

A Brief History

While vocationalism among higher education institutions has reached unprecedented levels in recent decades, it is not an entirely new phenomenon. The institution of higher education has been combating the siren call of vocationalism for nearly two centuries. For example, in 1828 the faculty of Yale University issued a report citing their disdain and disapproval of efforts to vocationalize their curriculum. The faculty at Yale was under fire for failing to “adapt to the spirit and wants of the age” and major revisions were being proposed to the classical curriculum in order to “better accommodate the business character of the nation” (Yale University, 1828, p. 6). The faculty of Yale, in response to these charges, issued a report which has long been regarded as one of the best articulations of the purpose of the liberal arts college.

The Yale Report described the object of a college education as preparatory, and thus designed to precede the study of a profession. A college education was never intended to provide an exhaustive body of knowledge on a particular subject, but rather the tools and resources necessary for a student to effectually be able to learn. It was considered an education in learning. This kind of liberal education was conceived to be the ideal preparation for professional training because it imparted the kinds of capacities and skills capable of “improving, elevating, and adorning any occupation” (Yale University, 1828, p. 29).

Furthermore, the exclusive study of a profession during the college years was not only considered counterproductive to the development of the student, but also detrimental to her future career ambitions as well. The Yale Report describes this phenomenon in the following statement:

We are aware that some operations may be performed by those who have little or no knowledge of the principles on which they depend. The mariner may set his sails to the wind without understanding the laws of the decomposition of forces; the carpenter may square his framework without knowledge of Euclid's Elements; the dyer may set his colors without being indoctrinated in the principles of chemistry. But the labors of such are confined to the narrow path marked out to him by others. He needs the constant superintendence of men of more enlarged and scientific information. If he ventures beyond his prescribed rule, he works at random, with no established principles to guide him (Yale University, 1828, p. 16).

Additionally, the faculty of Yale criticized the professional curriculum for attempting to teach everything, while effectually teaching nothing. They argued, "the pupil is hurried over the surface so rapidly that scarce a trace of his steps remains when he finishes his course. What he has learned, or thinks he has learned, is just sufficient to inflate his vanity, expose him to public observation, and to draw on him the ridicule of men of sound judgment and science (Yale University, 1828, p. 18).

While the efforts of the faculty at Yale were well intentioned and well articulated, the move toward vocationalizing higher education would only increase in the decades to come. By 1862, the United States Congress had passed the Morrill Act, which granted each state federal land for the purposes of establishing institutions that would "teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanical arts... in order to promote the practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life" (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 3). The land grant colleges and universities would be incredibly influential on the shape of higher education in the succeeding decades. By the turn of the century, Charles Van Hise, president of the University of Wisconsin, noted in his inaugural speech that the sons and daughters of the state each had the right to "choose the advanced intellectual life adapted to his or her own need," referring primarily to the practical arts (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 3).

The time between the 1880s and 1930s gave rise to explosive growth in the practical arts. Grubbs and Lazerson (2005) note that, during this time, American higher education was increasingly beginning to define itself "in terms of its direct application to specific occupations" (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 4). Nowhere was this more evident than among the various professional schools. Joseph Kent (as cited in Grubb & Lazerson, 2005) noted that during this time period, various professions began using higher education as a way to professionalize their occupation, creating a wealth of new professional and occupational degree programs (p. 4). The Great Depression of the 1930s in particular was a period distinctly marked by a rise in the prominence of the practical arts, in keeping with a wealth of data suggesting that periods of economic prosperity are typically associated with stronger preferences for the arts and sciences, while periods of economic decline are more often associated with preferences for the practical arts (Brint et. al., 2005, p. 156).

Following World War II, the G.I. bill of 1944 gave way to a vocational revolution as returning G.I.s began entering the higher education market. Fueled by enormous government subsidies, soldiers began looking to higher education as a means of gaining the necessary credentials to enhance their civilian careers. States began rushing to create

low-tuition public universities and community colleges to meet the new demand for higher education. By 1947, nearly half of all higher education institutions were public universities, with an increasingly vocational focus and emphasis on the practical arts (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 6).

The Current State of Vocationalism

Vocationalism in higher education continued to rise in prominence throughout the latter half of the 20th century, enjoying significant momentum during the last three decades. In that time the fastest growing fields have been in the practical arts in nearly every case. Business administration—the fastest growing major—now accounts for over one-fifth of all undergraduate degrees. One educational scholar, C. Adelman, described business as the “empirical core curriculum” (Brint, S., Riddle, M., Turk-Bicakci, L., & Levy, C., 2005, p. 157).

In a time of unprecedented expansion in higher education, Brint et al. (2005) note that nearly every liberal art major—except those closely related to the medical field—have not only declined proportionately but also in raw numbers (Brint et. al., p. 159). At the beginning of the 21st century it was estimated that at least two-thirds of all college undergraduates were studying the practical arts (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 7). By the 21st century, students’ expectations about the purpose of college had become almost completely vocationalized.

An important evidence of this phenomenon is the proportion of college freshman interested in developing a “meaningful philosophy of life” compared to those interested in becoming “financially secure.” Astin notes that nearly three quarters of enrolled freshman are now reporting that it is essential to be financially secure, whereas only three decades ago less than half rated financial security that high and over 80% described developing a meaningful philosophy of life as their most important goal (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 7). Astin’s survey truly marks the distinction between previous generations of college students, who viewed college as an education for life, and the current generation of students, who view college as an education for upward mobility.

Grubb and Lazerson note that student choice often drives what colleges and universities offer (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 7). As students increasingly began to favor the practical arts, liberal arts colleges began to adapt themselves to these changes. Breneman (as cited in Grubb, W. N. & Lazerson, M., 2005) in his study of the effects of vocationalism on liberal art colleges, noted that “we are indeed losing many of liberal art colleges, not through closures but through steady change into a different type of institution—driven by a combination of student choice and vocational pressure” (p. 8).

In Breneman’s studies (as cited in Grubb, W. N. & Lazerson, M. (2005), he concluded that one of the greatest transformations in higher education had been the “evolution of liberal art colleges into vocational institutions,” noting that only about 212 of the 540 colleges classified by the Carnegie Commission as liberal arts colleges truly deserved the distinction (p. 8). Grubb and Lazerson note that this vocational transformation actually created a new type of institution: the second-tier comprehensive college. Harris (2006), in his studies on market-driven institutions, notes that this type of “mission-creep” has a negative impact on the entire higher education system by decreasing student choice between institutions and effectively eliminating diversity within higher education (Harris, 2006, p. 187). Marsden (2001) lamented that liberal

education now represents “a specialized educational enterprise likely to have only limited appeal in a popular educational market” (Marsden, 2001, p. 3).

Effects of Vocationalism

The key concern facing those in higher education is the effect of this trend, both on the institution of higher education and the students it strives to produce. In the previous section, vocationalism was shown to diminish diversity within higher education and eliminate student choice. Additionally, another ill-effect of vocationalism is the devaluing effect it has on the worth of the college degree.

Collins (as cited in Grubb & Lazerson, 2005) noted that the expansion of higher education after World War II—especially among non-elite students—created a process known as “credential inflation.” Returning soldiers increasingly began looking to higher education as a means of increasing their marketability in the civilian sector, resulting in a steady decline of the occupational value of the college degree (p. 9). As the job market became saturated with a sudden influx of college degrees, the associated worth of the college degree significantly diminished.

In response to this phenomenon, various professions began requiring prospective candidates to pursue additional education and specialized training, such as graduate education. Consequently, today’s master’s degree became yesterday’s bachelor’s degree. Students must now acquire more education than ever before in order to achieve a comparable lifestyle as previous generations, and those without a college education are becoming more marginalized than ever before.

Another important consideration is how vocationalism impacts the growth and development of the student. Newman (as cited in Franco, 2004), in his beloved work entitled *The Idea of the University*, described the university as a place of education rather than instruction, noting that education “implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of character” (p. 55). He contended that the purpose of a liberal education was not to “convey information,” but rather to “make [the student] into something” (Franco, 2004, p. 54). Arthur Holmes echoed this sentiment when he stated that the value of a college education has less to do with what it can do for you and more to do with what it will do to you—what kind of person you shall become having attended college (Holmes, 1975, p. 24).

Franco (2004) noted that vocational training can sufficiently teach the “skills necessary to make good lawyers, doctors, and investment bankers” but fails to teach the “intellectual habits necessary to make mature human beings” (p. 55). His assessment is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s lament that such education does not produce “finished, ripe and harmonious personalities,” but only “common, maximally useful labor” (Franco, 2004, p. 55).

Holmes may be the most explicit in his challenge of vocationalism in higher education, stating that “if the human person was only a worker then vocational training alone would suffice, but because the human person is more than just a worker it follows that vocational training is not enough” (Holmes, 1975, p. 25). In his assessment of vocationalism in higher education, he identifies a key understanding—that there is more to life than work. If education is to be rightly viewed as training for all of life, then an education that is purely vocational is an inadequate preparation for this end and fails to address what it means to be fully human. This careful assessment of the purpose

of a college education echoes the sentiments of such classical thinkers as Isocrates, Quintilian, Aristotle, and most notably Cicero, who contended that the purpose of the liberal arts is to train men in “all that is most human” (Davis & Ryken, no date, p. 4). Holmes articulates this thought in the most beautiful of ways, describing the liberal arts as “an open invitation to join the human race and become more fully human” (Holmes, 1975, p. 96).

Christian Higher Education and the Liberal Arts

Throughout the centuries, Christians have articulated an all-encompassing vision for life. From Saint Irenaeus, who stated that “the glory of God is man fully alive,” to author Hans Rookmaaker (as cited in Staub, 2007), who wrote that “Jesus did not come to make us Christians; Jesus came to make us fully human” (p. xv), Christians have sought to live in such a way that takes full advantage of the depth and breadth of the human experience. It should come as no surprise that the first liberal art colleges were founded by Christians who desired to explore the rich depths of God’s creation and the fullness of the human experience. It is this compatibility of vision and purpose that have led most Christian colleges and universities to define themselves through a robust liberal arts education.

Numerous studies have indicated that faith-based institutions are best able to maintain a strong commitment to the liberal arts. Marsden notes that schools with a strong religious commitment are in a better position than others to provide the missing basis for coherence through their shared religious faith (Marsden, 2001, p. 4). Student affairs professionals make great contributions in this context. Recognizing that a liberal education is an education for life—rather than for upward mobility—the work of the student affairs professional provides the coherence that links together the formal curriculum with the human experience, providing it with sense and meaning. It is this seamless environment of learning that has always been a hallmark of the liberal arts institution.

Unfortunately, given their size, resources, and prestige, Christian colleges are also highly likely to be tempted by the alluring call of vocationalism. Winston (as cited in Brint et al., 2005) notes that, due to their smaller subsidy resources, faith-based institutions face the “largest incentives to reduce their overall cost structures or diversify their streams of revenue” by abandoning expensive liberal arts programs and replacing them with less expensive and more lucrative vocational programs (pp. 160-161).

While vocation and calling language are certainly prolific at Christian institutions of higher learning, it is important to note that the kind of vocationalism discussed in this paper is not that which recognizes the proper place of vocation within the Christian life, but rather that which views vocation as the totality of life and usurps other important elements of Christian faith. Vocation and calling are certainly important constructs of Christian life. Meaningful work has the capability of enriching our lives in many profound ways. Christian institutions of higher education should not shun the notion of vocation and calling, but rather should be vigilant in withstanding market pressures to become increasingly career-oriented or allowing vocation to eclipse other important ends of Christian faith and education.

Conclusion

While it would be inaccurate to assert that a liberal education is a Christian one, one can be reasonably convinced that a Christian education must be a liberal education. The compatibility of vision and purpose naturally lead one to another, and Christian places of learning have an important role in preserving the rich tradition of the liberal arts. Christian institutions have both the unique challenge and opportunity to re-orient a generation of college students to the true purpose of a college education.

Student affairs professionals in particular share a vested interest in the preservation of the liberal arts tradition. It is within the context of a liberal education that the role of the student affairs professional finds its meaning and purpose. As institutions move from a liberal to a vocational emphasis, placement rates and starting salaries increasingly become the benchmark for success. In this context, such hallmarks of a liberal education as the development of the whole student will only become increasingly marginalized and pushed to the peripheral.

It is imperative to the institution of higher education and the development of the student that vocation be viewed as one of many important components of a holistic education. While the topic of vocation will always have an important place in the landscape of Christian higher education and the liberal arts, it must not dominate the goals of our students or our attention as educators. Vocation has the propensity to significantly enrich or detract from the lives of our students. May we always hold it in proper perspective, that we might continue to inspire students to lead lives that can only be described as “fully alive.”

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