

MARK WILLIAM ROCHE

*Why Choose
the Liberal Arts?*

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roche, Mark William.

Why choose the liberal arts? / Mark William Roche.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-268-04032-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-268-04032-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Education, Humanistic. I. Title.

LC1011.R63 2010

378'.012—dc22

2010028741

With gratitude and thanks to

my mentors and colleagues at

Boston College High School,

Williams College,

the University of Tübingen,

Princeton University,

The Ohio State University,

and the University of Notre Dame.

∞ *The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council
on Library Resources.*

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Integrating the Values of the Liberal Arts

The idea of participation in a higher reality, a connection to the transcendent, is for the most part forgotten in contemporary culture, but it is common to both a liberal arts education's intrinsic value and its cultivation of a sense of vocation, of identity and purpose. Society has an interest in colleges and universities as institutions of formation because vocation and responsibility are not simply private matters; they involve an act of reaching out toward a larger whole. Investing in educating promising students at liberal arts colleges, or at other institutions that celebrate learning opportunities commonly associated with a liberal arts education, enables the development of young persons who are likely to have a leavening effect on the larger society, which needs talented, well-developed, and moral leaders. Students enrich both themselves and others when they subordinate their particular interests to a larger and more meaningful whole. For individual identity to be rich and meaningful, it must integrate an element of collective identity, and it must attend not only to the supertemporal but also to the specific challenges of the day. The liberal arts goal of helping students

understand holistically is an excellent context for this discernment process.

To make a difference in the world, to move from individual virtue to civic virtue, to transform our job or career or life into a vocation, we must recognize a set of overarching aspirations and normative ideals with which we are willing to align ourselves, and we must discern what issues in the contemporary world are most significant in light of their deviation from these higher values or in light of their pressing importance for humankind. Students must have a sense of normative goals and must understand the world sufficiently, both locally and globally, to grasp in what ways it is less than it should be. Further, they must have a sense of their own capacities. What formal skills have I developed? What moves and motivates me? We must then seek to align our talents and disposition with these recognized needs so as to serve a higher purpose. The articulation of a higher purpose, the discernment of contemporary problems, the awareness of our own capacities, and the integration of these realms are well-served by the breadth as well as the social and existential significance of a liberal arts education. What is of greatest value? What are the most pressing challenges of the age? Who am I? What ought I do with my life? These questions form the core of a liberal arts education.

The intrinsic value and first purpose of a liberal arts education, as I have tried to articulate it, can be associated with the value of the lost art of contemplation, with what the Greeks called *theoria*, which is independent of practical aims. The cultivation of critical thinking and of those formal virtues that allow us to impact the world, competencies that I have explicated as the second purpose of a liberal arts education, correlates with today's elevation of science, capitalism, and technology and so can be associated with the contemporary ascendancy of *poiesis* (production). The third purpose of the liberal arts, the call to

virtue and vocation, mirrors to some degree the third mode of relating to the world recognized by the Greeks, *praxis* (action); this connection is present even when one's vocation may involve *theoria* as with a faculty member, or *poiesis*, as with an engineer. All of us are engaged in *praxis*, but in its richest form, *praxis* involves not only an awareness of higher values and the development of formal capacities in our relations with others but also an existential commitment, a calling to serve others in addition to ourselves. The threefold value of a liberal arts education involves an experience of intrinsic value, the development of formal skills and capacities, and a recognition of greater purpose and service to others, including a modest overestimation of one's abilities, with the recognition that one must stretch to reach one's full potential. In this sense we can view the three purposes, in another light, as the combination of knowledge, action, and love.

The first purpose is associated with understanding the world and developing a longing for truth and a hunger for transcendent principles. The second involves intellectual discipline, the ability to think creatively, systematically, and fairly and the capacity to communicate with what Jacques Barzun calls "articulate precision" (17). The third is in many respects a synthesis of the first two, for it involves both contemplation of the world and the skills of intellectual discipline to pursue an endeavor that binds us to a higher purpose. We employ our intellectual capacities for a reason that is greater than ourselves. Contemplation, which derives from the Latin *contemplare*, is associated not simply with attentive consideration but with looking for meaning or purpose. The third purpose unites the first two in another way, for by linking our activity in the world to a higher objective, we sacrifice our own interests for others. This sacrifice, or gift of one's capacities in order to help others, is useful for humanity and of intrinsic value—insofar as the very act of serving others has no higher purpose than to link a person with what confers dignity on her actions.

When I was asked to serve as a dean, my intention was not to become a career administrator, essentially giving up my first love of teaching and scholarship to help lead an institution. I accepted the role and stayed in it for more than a decade because I fell in love with Notre Dame's distinctive vision and ethos and with the University's community and aspirations. What motivated me was the identification with a higher purpose, helping an appealing but still striving institution reach a level of distinction, in the twofold sense of eminence and singularity, and taking joy in the success of others, whom I was privileged to serve. There is no pay that can compensate for the time one devotes to such a calling. One can only assume such a role and persevere in it because one identifies with the goal of fostering learning, scholarship, and formation and one recognizes the potential to impact the world more deeply in a position of leadership, even if at some level the impact is less embodied and more abstract than when working with many students and writing or researching full-time.

In my final semester as dean, the graduating seniors I had taught in their sophomore year asked for a capstone course, which I eventually agreed to offer under the title *Great Questions and the Liberal Arts*. It was an exploration of great questions that drew on their earlier College Seminar, coupled with meta-reflections on the value of the liberal arts, an exercise appropriate for students completing their liberal arts education. In one session, the two students leading the discussion organized a debate on the following statement, "A liberal arts education can be defended first and foremost as an end in itself." Because this discussion took place at a Catholic university, the students began to formulate their arguments with reference to God. One side argued that the ultimate end of education is to come closer to a vision of God. God, the students argued, is not found in the practical endeavor of ensuring, for example, that one can afford a larger house; God is instead an intellectual goal and is to be found in contemplation of the highest truths. The other side

conceded that, while the intrinsic value of a liberal arts education leads students toward God, the intellectual and practical virtues we develop during this quest allow us to see God not merely as knowledge but also as love. That is, although thought might be its own end, in a Christian context, we experience God most fully in community. Therefore, the kind of work that results when the virtues of the liberal arts are placed in service to the larger community, addressing the needs of the age, is also a fulfillment of the idea of God as the highest end, here understood in the framework of God is love.

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To obtain a position, to have enough money to satisfy basic needs for food and shelter, for health and safety, and for opportunities for one's children, is important, but to focus on getting a high-paying job over developing a life vision is to cut short one of the few opportunities that students have, beyond the home, to develop values and a worldview that will help them flourish as persons. Much as traditional wisdom on learning principles has now been substantiated by empirical research, so has empirical research verified the ancient wisdom that a focus on material goods and wealth beyond a basic level is harmful to the soul. Psychological research has shown that persons who are more materialistic, focusing their time and effort on accumulating wealth rather than on enacting social values, are less happy. That is, a reverse connection exists between materialistic priorities and progress toward materialistic goals, on the one hand, and emotional well being and psychological health, on the other hand. People "who strongly value the pursuit of wealth and possessions report lower psychological well-being than those who are less concerned with such aims" (Kasser 4). The focus on the spiral of ever more success, replete with praise, rewards, status, and continuing comparison with others, increases one's sense of insecurity, whereas a life focused on intrinsic value—on developing one's capacities and meeting meaningful challenges,

exploring ideas, deepening friendships, fostering community—tends to increase one's sense of contentment. Empirical research suggests that the "greatest happiness comes from absorbing yourself in some goal outside yourself" (Layard 74).

The claim that a liberal arts education should not be chosen because one might not be able to have a certain level of financial success can be challenged not only in terms of the financial success liberal arts graduates can obtain but also in terms of the question of whether financial success is an appropriate measure of well being. A student recently suggested to me that his parents wanted, as a whole, to have a better life, especially materially, than did their parents, both for their own sake and for the sake of their children. They succeeded, he said, but that is not his goal. The question of what we should do with our lives, he added, becomes both more engaging and more rewarding when one becomes disillusioned with the continuous desire to out-do the previous generation in material prosperity.

Even if my second chapter, on the practicality of a liberal arts education for future employment and leadership opportunities, may resonate the most with students and their parents, it is important to remember that it is not the only rationale for having such an education. If we reduce the purpose of education to that of getting a job, we have failed to adorn it with higher meaning. The market economy by itself does not give us the higher purpose or rationale, the clarity of vision or compelling narrative, that would warrant the level of dedication we provide, as students, faculty, and supporters, to the purpose of education. Students of course want to get a job and make a living, but they also want to be able to say why the life they have chosen makes sense, in what way it is connected to something higher, above and beyond simply earning money. One wants to find something that is absorbing and challenging and at the same time will make a difference for others. Work can become an opportunity to fulfill one's potential and develop one's talents by making a difference in the world. People who feel called

in this way as opposed to simply pursuing a career "score higher on job satisfaction, are more likely to say their work is meaningful, and are more likely to say it is important to them to do well in their jobs" (Wuthnow 73). Even more than awakening a deeper meaning in work, a liberal arts education gives graduates a direction for life.

The level of higher purpose in our work can be recognized in the ways in which we engage that work on a daily basis. If we have a deep sense of commitment to a cause, an objective purpose, we are unlikely to be oriented toward personal success, to desire to stand in the foreground, to concern ourselves more with external rewards and impressions than with just and responsible outcomes. We identify with the cause and are willing to sacrifice for that higher purpose. As Max Weber notes in "Politics as a Vocation," the combination of "devotion to a cause" and "distance towards one's self" provides a framework that lessens our tendency toward "vulgar vanity" and "personal self-intoxication" (116). Because we are fallible beings, we are always tempted by vanity, but the identification with a larger purpose can give us a framework that limits such expressions of insecurity. In this sense, developing a purpose or sense of vocation not only draws on intellectual and emotional elements of the self; to the extent that we are successful in identifying with a worthy cause instead of focusing on our own desire for recognition, this very attitude cultivates emotional virtues. Finally, such behavior is most likely to inspire and motivate others, subordinates and colleagues alike, as they, too, seek to pursue a vision that has intrinsic value.

The temptation to work for worldly recognition or reward, thereby reducing purpose to "eagerness of praise and desire of glory," to borrow a phrase from Augustine, is that we will do only what the consensus wants, whatever is defined by local opinion and the ruling ideology, instead of elevating the age or our surroundings (*City of God* V.12). If excellence is only revealed by praise, we are discouraged from ever challenging the

views of others. In this sense and in the midst of praise, complacency wins out over aspiration, higher purpose, and courage. This is yet another reason for a strong vision and sense of purpose, which are resistant to the temptation we share as human beings toward external approbation and toward adjusting to the status quo. In this sense purpose helps to form character.

What is fascinating about developing a sense of purpose is that while purpose must originate from some level of self-knowledge (what motivates me and what am I capable of contributing?) once we identify it and begin the challenge of meeting our ambitions, we tend to forget ourselves and to devote ourselves fully to that purpose. Our private identity becomes enriched by that higher purpose. William Damon writes,

People with purpose stop thinking about themselves, becoming fascinated instead by the work or problem at hand. As they muster their mental and physical capacities to reach a solution, they may discover powers that they never thought they had: untried talents, new skills, reservoirs of untapped energy. They feel a surge of excitement as they move toward their objective. They lose track of everyday cares and woes, of where they happen to be, of what time it is—in short, of all the mental boundaries usually posed by our physical and material worlds. (32)

We completely lose ourselves in the purpose of our vocation; this is uncannily similar to the loss of self I noted earlier when we are absorbed in reading a great work. Both are characterized by doing something as an end in itself instead of as a means to yet some other purpose.

While one hopes that liberal arts students will find not only employment, but purposeful employment after graduation, for those graduates who lack a deeper satisfaction in their

work, the question arises, what avenues exist to escape the disenchantment that results from an emptying out of the value of work? One can initially try to reconfigure one's position or firm. If necessary, one can leave and seek other employment. Alternative employment should be a possibility for a liberal arts graduate whose background includes versatility. But when, if for whatever reason, those avenues are closed, what can one do? Here, too, the liberal arts graduate has resources on which to draw, as the liberal arts seek to cultivate a love for the life of the mind that can flourish not only on the job but also beyond one's occupation. If work becomes simply a means to make a living, the liberal arts graduate should be able to find purpose in other realms, beyond work. Such a graduate has more resources at her disposal than someone whose education found its purpose in mastering the technical aspects of a given profession.

Not only those whose gainful employment is without higher meaning but also those whose work is not in the marketplace can draw on their liberal arts background to help them find higher meaning. For example, some liberal arts graduates will choose to stay home to raise their children while a spouse earns an income. Meaning can occur in the family and in the realm of thought and ideas. It can also be found in more public settings, by playing a participatory or leadership role in a local community organization, a social movement, or a political institution or by becoming an informal voice in public affairs by writing letters to political figures and newspapers or even by writing essays for newspapers and magazines. This is indeed a very American ideal, as it was Thomas Jefferson who argued that "liberal education" is "the most effectual means" for citizens who want to ensure that their government does not abuse power and that its leaders do not have ambitions for themselves at the expense of "the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens" (235–36). To identify with a higher purpose is to have a reservoir of emotional strength that could be said to match and enhance the reservoir of learning on which the liberal arts

graduate can draw; both are healthy for the self. William Damon notes, "Purpose endows a person with joy in good times and resilience in hard times, and this holds true all throughout life" (31).

While every liberal arts graduate will have experienced all three dimensions of a liberal education—the intrinsic, the practical, and the idealistic—graduates may be especially drawn by internal inclination or external opportunity to one dimension or another. A certain percentage of them will pursue the life of the mind, becoming artists, scientists, scholars, or teachers. Many will draw on their formal capacities and enter mainstream professions in business, law, medicine, and public service. And some will take an unusual path, pursuing distinctive opportunities as diverse as foreign correspondent, social activist, forest ranger, or minister. Many will combine all three dimensions, in some cases over time and in other instances simultaneously, be it in their professional lives or in a combination of their personal and professional lives. One of the great aspects of the liberal arts is that one never leaves that world behind, and so all three dimensions are in some manner ever present, even if in submerged ways. Another way of understanding this point is by recognizing that the life-long desire for learning that is cultivated as a formal skill helps graduates as they discern, over time, that their vocation and sense of purpose may well develop in unexpected directions.

In the end, a liberal arts education is useful in all three respects discussed here. First, it addresses our highest ends, what is of value for its own sake, useless for other purposes but useful in itself. The concept of what is an end in itself shatters a narrow concept of the useful as simply the means to an end. The useful is not one and the same with the good. Second, a liberal arts education undermines a false concept of the useful as what is only immediately applicable. Such an education helps students develop formal skills that will allow them to flourish, whatever

career paths they might choose or life choices they might make over time; indeed, many of the skills they develop will reveal their significance only later in life. Third, a liberal arts education helps develop character. As Thomas Jefferson notes, "everything is useful which contributes to fix in the principles and practices of virtue" (233). Such an education encourages reflection on the highest possible ends to which students might put their formal capacities and so helps them discover how their learning might be most meaningfully and usefully employed. A liberal arts education does not simply give students a capacity for clear and persuasive speech; it helps them discover the purposes to which such speech should be used. The notion of the useful as that which involves a short-term goal, that is, getting a career, is here superseded by the higher concept of reflecting on a worthy purpose, what students are called to do in their lives. Liberal thinking, with the goal of criticizing inadequate positions in the status quo and developing ideas for change, is intimately related to the ideal of forming "a better world" (Shapiro 71).

Just as the time outside the classroom also represents the joy of discovering oneself and the world as well as the development of one's capacities for interpersonal relations and for listening and speaking, so, too, is one's sense of higher purpose cultivated beyond the classroom. Student conversations in residential halls represent a further opportunity to ask life's greater questions, and while these will in most cases emerge on their own, educators can seek ways to cultivate discussions by fostering student-faculty contact and fora on enduring questions, the central issues of the age, and the challenges of discerning a vocation. These topics often transcend the focused disciplinary discourse that guides much of the learning and scholarship at the nation's leading universities.

To develop a vocation, an ultimate concern or animating purpose, is to ask the question, how does the world as it is differ from how it should be. This requires, on the one hand, a

capacity to articulate an ideal and a command of transcendental categories, and, on the other hand, an ability to discern reality in its complexity, a sensibility for what is. To ask such far-reaching questions is to escape simple patterns of thought and to push our thinking into creative and entirely new territory. It requires engagement with great questions and so affords students the opportunity to transcend the frequent cultural focus on short-term, trivial, and materialistic goals and to develop a nobler sense of vocation that will answer their innate idealistic tendencies. This knowledge of the transcendent and of the world must be combined with self-knowledge, knowledge of what one can do and what generates one's enthusiasm and interest. Identification of a role or purpose is to unite what *should* be with what we *want* to do. In this sense, forming character and discerning a vocation, the topics of chapters three and four, integrate chapter one (engaging such great questions as, how does the world differ from how it should be?) and chapter two (developing formal capacities in students that will allow them eventually to play a role in bridging that difference).

Self-awareness is essential both to discovering what motivates us, wherein we experience pleasure, and to recognizing what kinds of roles we can fulfill. Also, as individuals, we need to comprehend our unique constellation of capacities and interests. What do I care most about in the world today? What can I bring to an issue that no one else can? What role can I contribute within a much larger context? Because self-knowledge has both intellectual and emotional dimensions, we ask not only what capacities have we developed, but also what capacities do we enjoy exercising. For a student, these formative questions transcend one's academic major and ask, Do I prefer to employ analytical, quantitative, interpersonal, language, or creative skills? Do I want to create a business, address social problems, provide a service to the community, or do something else altogether? Increasingly, in our complex world graduates will choose across their career life both a variety of capacities and an array of career paths.

In seeking to make a positive difference in the world, students must find a part to play that is neither too ambitious (and which they cannot fulfill) nor too modest (and which could lead to boredom for them and untapped potential, which could have made a difference for themselves and others). Of course, as with tough grading that encourages students to extend themselves, so in the discernment of our life goals, we need to stretch to some degree. Challenges and opportunities bring out virtues of which we were previously unaware. Thus, Weber proposes "that the human being would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had not reached out for the impossible" ("Politics" 128, translation modified). Discerning and realizing a vocation involves more than posing questions and exploring intellectual and existential puzzles. To bridge the gap between one's learning and the world, indeed, to further one's learning and make a positive difference in the world, one must work with others to help lift a community. One needs not only insight but also constructive cooperation with others.

One of the fascinating aspects of the communal dimensions and collective passions of college life is that they complement, in appealing ways, the intellectual vocation that students develop. What do I mean by this? Intellectuals develop the capacity to question everything, not only the positions of others, but also their own positions and the easy certainties and half-truths of their own institution or firm, their own background or nation (Said). The intellectual's highest allegiance is not to an embodied institution but to universal ideals of truth and justice that may call into question the current policies of existing institutions and alert us to the gaps between how an institution is and how it should be. To be less than fully at home, less than fully settled, where one is, marks the life of an intellectual, but to understand that such a disjunction is a necessary condition of progress is, at a higher level, to be at home in the world as process. The affirmation of higher ideals, in their contrast to embodied institutions, is necessary to ensure the improvement of existing institutions and so can be viewed as identification

with the institution in its higher potentiality. In this sense, criticism can be a kind of solidarity, and in the case of a nation, a form of patriotism.

When students return from abroad, from that distinctive learning experience in which the external world becomes a kind of classroom, they often despair of the weaknesses in their own country, which become visible to them in unprecedented ways. The most appropriate and productive response is to turn that unease into hope. That means asking the question, how might the student contribute to improving her country? This transformation from despair to hope can be accomplished more easily when students have opportunities to discuss with others not only their scholarly development but also their existential concerns.

In a sense, the experience of returning from abroad is a microcosm of the alienation that takes place in any student who goes away to college. A challenge for every liberal arts student, and a reason why some parents do not want their children to attend college or to attend college away from home, is that as the student gains distance from the everyday and encounters new ideas and positions, a moment of partial alienation from one's past becomes inevitable. Not by chance Hegel entitled a section of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Self-Alienated Spirit. Education" (3: 359). William Torrey Harris, the U.S. Commissioner of Education from 1889 to 1906, himself a Hegelian, viewed "self-estrangement" as "perhaps the most important idea in the philosophy of education" (27). The recent *Report of the Task Force on General Education* by Harvard University also stresses "alienation," arguing that "the aim of a liberal education is to unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them find ways to reorient themselves" (1-2).

The critical lens that allows educated persons to see weaknesses in the present that were previously not visible to them

ensures a moment of distance to the present that will carry forward beyond the college experience and is not without its costs. The alienation and, in a sense, disappointment, that comes from developing such a critical perspective can lead to an identity crisis, but such a crisis is also the first condition for a richer and more profound identity (Hösle, "Crises of Identity"). Such distance is also a prerequisite for progress and for work that seeks to improve on the deficiencies of the present. To gain distance from oneself and one's surroundings is essential to self-reflection, self-awareness, education.

Criticism represents a potential tension, in one's affective relation to one's time and place and in the reception of one's critical comments. To note weaknesses not only in other countries, including countries with whom we are at war is easy; to note weaknesses in one's own country, when it is engaged in war, is to invite criticism of oneself. To speak and to hear such tension is a mark of progress, and an intellectual learns to be receptive to discussion of such disjunctions, indeed to initiate such discussions. To express criticism both diplomatically and courageously, with an eye toward progress, and not to fall backward into smug and self-righteous critique, is a moral value. Similarly, to be able to hear criticism of one's nation, firm, or institution or of oneself, not as mere critique but as a gift that can help foster success at a higher level, is a virtue. To work within such parameters is not easy, but to have explored such situations in the liberal arts disciplines, which are replete with examples in literature, history, and the social sciences, can help students grow toward this ideal. No less important in such a context is the emotional intelligence to know what can and cannot be changed, so that one is not bitter or cynical, but content with the present, even as one seeks to improve it. It is important for students who struggle with such issues to have a supportive environment for such intellectual and emotional challenges. Because parents are not the most obvious outlets for such tensions, it is important that interlocutors be found among other

students, among residential advisors, and, to some extent, among the very faculty members whose courses may have contributed to the students' alienation.

It is also essential for firms to recognize that at appropriate times what they most need to hear in order to improve is what is not working well. To that end, leaders need to have the courage to hire liberal arts graduates, at least those who have critical thinking skills along with a combination of honesty and diplomacy. When I was a graduate student at Princeton and my wife worked on Wall Street, the word in her firm was never to hire a Ph.D. Doctorates, she had been told, have a reputation for narrowness and arrogance and are rarely seen as team players. The firm did not feel the same way about liberal arts graduates, whose most recent education included both intellectual and social components and who were more in touch with what they did not yet know. In that, they knew more.

Whereas the first value of the liberal arts could be said to focus on content, what questions are important and what students should know in the diverse disciplines, the second involves the development of students' capacities, the formal aspects of education. Many see the end of education in knowledge of content, mastery of a certain set of ideas or works, exposure to the appropriate material of a discipline. Others define the purpose of education as the development of formal capacities and intellectual skills—writing, quantitative reasoning, and so forth. Those who believe that education is about the knowledge of specific content do not always agree with one another. If we are to teach students about civil society, for example, should they take courses in the great books of the Western tradition, which offer insights into founding principles, or should they focus on contemporary problems and issues, which allow them to understand arguments concerning the basic topics of our age, such as the challenges of developing countries, race and gender issues, or the ecological question?

My response to these two dilemmas, first between content and form and then concerning which kind of content, is that students need, in some way or another, each of these approaches, along with a third, what I call the existential component. The existential dimension of education can be layered into each option, as the great questions do give meaning, contemporary issues have obvious existential resonance, and the development of formal skills has significance for students' futures. Students want to learn not only *about* a subject; they also want to learn *from* a subject.

Students benefit from encounters with the tradition, especially because some of the great questions asked by earlier thinkers tend to be neglected over time and because the knowledge of other ages and other cultures is one of the best strategies to recognize alternatives to one's own worldview and those of our time and place. But this cannot be undertaken in an anti-quarian way; the issues must be shown to have relevance for value questions that engage the students today. Students, for example, learn more when they are allowed to formulate their own seminar paper topics and explore themes that are of particular significance to them, about which they have developed a personal curiosity; such choices need to be made within parameters that are appropriate for the course. One of my colleagues in the department of history at Notre Dame requires papers with only three guidelines: the paper must relate to the general theme of the class, it must utilize primary research, and the professor must approve the topic. Within that broad frame, students can be creative and can develop a topic that they find personally compelling. We need to link the established content and methods of the disciplines with questions that truly engage students and help them develop as intellectuals and as persons. A course on the ancient world will appeal to students more when they see that the questions asked by characters in Plato's dialogues and Sophocles' dramas still have meaning and resonance today. And a course on econometrics or on quantitative analysis will be more positively received when a connection is

drawn to issues that the student recognizes as significant today. Often a choice needs to be rethought in its exclusivity.

Yet such decisions do not always come easily. At Notre Dame, we discussed at more than ten faculty meetings, beginning before I became dean and ending some six years later, what to do about our so-called core course, which lacked both student and faculty support, but could not easily be abandoned without some loss to the students. We solved the impasse, I believe, by focusing on three questions: First, how do we define an educated person today, especially a liberal arts graduate of a Catholic university? What characteristics does such a person have? Second, what are the greatest gaps our students have today? What are their most glaring weaknesses? Finally, what courses will help students approximate our educational ideal and overcome their existing weaknesses? By focusing on an educational ideal and on our students' current gaps, we were able to take off the table the entrenched disciplinary interests that sometimes drive curricular discussions. We settled on the above-mentioned College Seminar, which addresses great questions but also focuses on those formal skills that we thought students most needed to develop.

Not only students and their parents, but also faculty members, who might themselves become all too easily absorbed in the fascinating details of their own subjects, need to be reminded of the distinctive values and opportunities of a liberal education. Learning goals, which are central to every college course, should address not only the specific content and methodology of the course but also the ways in which the course satisfies our intrinsic desire for knowledge and the joy of discovery. In rushing to specific content, faculty members sometimes forget to include a learning goal that addresses the value of learning for its own sake. Learning goals on course syllabi should spell out, among other things, that students will gain familiarity with

a fascinating question appropriate for emerging intellectuals and, in so doing, will learn to enjoy the life of the mind and to grasp the value of wonder and mystery. To help students achieve such a celebration of the life of the mind, the teacher must express in the classroom and beyond a love of the subject that is not one and the same with scholarly competency or command of the material. In this, faculty members must be more than mere academics; they must be intellectuals and lovers of wisdom.

Whatever discipline one is teaching, the development of formal skills should be highlighted as learning goals or outcomes. Faculty members might state that students will learn the diversity of ways in which several disciplines approach a challenging issue; that students will advance their skills in evaluating the tenability of various kinds of arguments; that they will develop felicity in making arguments with the help of quantitative evidence; that they will develop their capacity to interpret cultural documents, for example, by asking pertinent and interesting questions of works and arguing for and against various interpretations; that they will learn to become more adept in intellectual discussion, improving their capacity for empathetic and thoughtful listening as well as for precision of speech and persuasive argument; that they will discover how much they are able to learn from one another; that they will advance in their mastery of the English language, both spoken and written, including their sense of style; or that they will improve their basic communication skills insofar as they accompany the organization and communication of their thoughts. By introducing learning goals along these lines, a faculty member can encourage meta-reflection on the methods of a discipline as useful beyond the discipline itself and so help students feel comfortable taking a course for the love of the material, all the while knowing that they are gaining the skills that will allow them to flourish beyond the classroom.

Very important is to extend learning goals also toward the transcendent, by opening a window onto the existential and

higher purpose of a given discipline and the questions it pursues. An example would be a set of statements such as the following: Students will develop their own positions on the topic of the course, and they will be able to describe them and defend them in the light of alternative positions. At the same time, they will become more conscious of the mysterious and inexhaustible nature of the subject matter. In relating to these issues in a personal way, students will recognize a strong relationship between their academic work and their personal lives, developing in the process a sense of the meaning of the material for their life goals and values. A history class might include as one goal among many helping students understand how various historical figures set priorities or dealt with problems and crises. Such a goal has intrinsic value, helps sharpen students' capacities for interpretation and evaluation, and aids them, indirectly, as they seek to develop themselves as persons who will similarly have to set priorities and deal with problems. A science class might stress some of the virtues of character, such as honesty and integrity, discipline and perseverance, modesty and teamwork, that will be developed in the course of exploring a topic as part of a research team. Or a course goal might note that students will see a connection between the scientific principles explored and questions of public policy.

While not every course will have a clear and discernible link to a higher purpose, we, as educators, should attempt to articulate such goals in every one of our courses so as to fulfill our own ambitions for holistic education. As part of their calling, faculty should be encouraged to integrate learning goals and assignments that help students develop in these ways. Liberal arts educators—that is, faculty members, not professional advisors or career center personnel—are best poised to encourage students to think about a higher calling and to guide them as they reflect on their sense of vocation (Lagemann 11). Faculty members must engage students as persons who are searching for more than mastery of the content; they must perform a pastoral role, the role of mentor.

As mentors, faculty members must both encourage and welcome the great questions that give meaning to a student's journey toward independence and maturity. While most assignments will focus on the precise material being explored, occasional assignments that engage students in their relation to the material can aid learning in other respects. Great questions can take at least three forms. *Enduring* questions surface in the eyes of students, such as "What is beauty?" or "What is the meaning of death?" Students also seek out *contemporary* questions, such as "What strategies are most likely to reduce poverty in developing countries?" or "Can religion, which is at the center of so much conflict, also serve as a catalyst for peace?" Finally, students are often captivated by more personal and *existential* questions, such as "What values do I hold higher than all others?" or "What am I looking for in friendship?" These, too, are great questions. Existential questions should be at home in a liberal arts setting that aspires to help students develop as persons. Such questions include: What do I prefer to study? Which questions most intrigue me? What are my greatest talents and passions? How can I best improve? Who are my most appealing and inspiring models? What are my dreams for the future? By what criteria should I identify my most prominent goals? How important for my own sense of identity is recognition from others? What do I think are the greatest moral challenges of my generation, and what will I contribute to addressing them? Where can I make the greatest difference? On what would I be willing to stake my life? Some questions are enduring, contemporary, and existential. A good example would be, Why choose the liberal arts?

To ask such questions with both ambition and honesty is to take an important step toward developing character. Students do not want to be given answers, least of all to their own existential questions, but they do welcome and need encouragement, contexts in which to explore ancillary questions, and categories with which to discover connections between their own questions and larger perspectives on life. Faculty can help

students draw connections between the issues of the world and their own motivations by raising questions that link academic inquiry with existential meaning and practical challenges. Students ultimately desire to explore areas that they enjoy and then to channel the skills that they have learned into a life lived with a sense of meaning; a life lived to make a difference. Little makes a greater difference than the encouragement that comes from a mentor who recognizes in a student an emerging capacity or a spark of interest in an important topic.

To realize each of these ambitions for a liberal arts education, most especially the third and most neglected ambition, that of the existential component, we need teachers who by their very lives inspire students. I can recall as an undergraduate wanting to model various developing characteristics on the intellectual and social virtues I recognized among my diverse teachers. One of my teachers who joined us for meals each month in our residential hall had a wonderful capacity to engage us in questions about ourselves, our studies, and our plans but also to ask our views of pressing international questions. He set the bar high. A truly educated person offers grounded opinions and perspectives about such issues and thinks about them often. As young persons develop a sense of themselves, they naturally imitate and reject the behaviors of others, whether it be the kinds of questions they ask, the way they interact with others, the books they read and recommend, or the kinds of meaningful activities they pursue beyond their scholarship and teaching.

Faculty members who teach in the liberal arts are invited to engage students as whole persons, to address broader questions in and out of the classroom, and to serve as role models. Faculty serve in many diverse roles—as models of scholarly engagement, intellectual curiosity, clear thinking, persuasive rhetoric, moral integrity, or community service, to give just a small num-

ber of examples. Modeling, even unconscious modeling, can be a much more powerful source of education than explicit discourse. One is reminded of the line attributed to St. Francis: “Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words.” As James O. Freedman suggests, “By the power of their example, professors engaged in liberal education convey the humane significance of such values as inquiry, integrity, empathy, self-discipline, and craftsmanship” (57–58).

Modeling is a classic idea in pedagogy, recognized already by Plato, who presented Socrates as a model of reason and virtue. Cicero notes that we tend to imitate those we admire and those admired by our community, for good and for ill (*Laws* III.30–33). This pedagogical concept continues in modernity with classical theorists such as Locke and Rousseau. Locke notes that there is “Nothing sinking so gently, and so deep, into Men’s Minds, as *Example*” (“Some Thoughts” §82, cf. §§55 and 89). Rousseau writes unambiguously that “man is an imitator” (104, cf. 71, 95, 186). The idea is also prominent among early American thinkers. Thomas Jefferson, for example, writes: “When any original act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also” (233). While we hope primarily to model good thinking and good action, it does not hurt for students to see our struggles: “Show your weaknesses to your pupil if you want to cure his own. Let him see that you undergo the same struggles which he experiences” (Rousseau 334).

Above all, if faculty members are to inspire students and help them along the path to liberal learning, they must seek to embody the threefold value of a liberal arts education by exhibiting passion and a love for their subject and for the greater questions that surround it; by modeling clear and graceful thinking and asking the difficult questions that challenge us to see a topic more fully; and by living according to a higher

calling or mission, both in their passion for scholarship and in their engagement with students, as they seek to develop students' minds and spirits. Teachers model not only ideas. Students attend to the ways in which thoughts influence the way they live. Students have an intuitive sense for the Socratic insight that what is important is not only how to argue for a set of propositions but also how to relate those propositions to how they live and what they value.

The significance of sparking the student's passion for learning is nicely portrayed in a white paper, sponsored by the Teagle Foundation, on economics and liberal education:

Total classroom contact of students with faculty at college involves less than 1 percent of the students' first 21 years of life, with the major being only about one third of that. This suggests to us that the success or failure of a liberal education, or of the major, depends far more on how the educational process influences a student's passion for learning than it does on the specifics of what they learn in their major. In our view, classroom education is best thought of as a *catalyst for education* as much as it is thought of as *the* education. The implication of this view is that colleges will succeed in providing a liberal education almost independent of what they teach if they *instill a passion for learning in the students*. (Colander and McGoldrick 1-2)

Aspiring learners attend to whether a faculty member sparks their interest in fascinating and meaningful questions, encourages them to aspire to the highest possible standards, and offers a supportive, trusting, and also demanding context for learning (Bain). Faculty who care about student learning will exhibit the courage to grade their students appropriately, and when colleges assess teaching, they should review grading practices as well, so that demanding teachers are not unjustly penalized and easy teachers not unjustly rewarded. A rich evaluation

of teaching will ask not only whether students perceive themselves to be well-taught (the so-called student evaluations of teaching) but also whether the faculty member articulates clear learning goals, is current and competent in the field, and develops a well-structured learning environment, and whether the students actually learn. To become a faculty mentor to students is to support them, challenge them, and inspire them.

Such faculty members are able to transcend their specialized research pursuits in such a way as to have a lasting salutary impact on students; indeed, such faculty members change students' lives. Students learn as much from the emulation and appreciation of such persons as they do from the knowledge they possess and the ideas they propose. Here is yet another reason why colleges must continue to cultivate an atmosphere that transcends the dominant categories of the age: the marketplace today does not elevate the intellectual as a model, but if students are to reach their full potential, they will need to encounter intellectuals who live their ideas and who model in this way at least one element of virtue.

A great liberal arts education brings forward not only smart and knowledgeable persons, but also good persons, with a sense of mission. For that reason faculty members have an obligation beyond the conveyance of professional expertise. The university as an institution must transcend the more widely accepted purpose of a college education: academic exploration, critical thinking, and career preparation. It must also nurture a sense of vocation and participatory citizenship, and it must do so across our individual disciplines. Students endeavor not simply to learn a discipline, but to cultivate the mind and the heart. Faculty members who can excel in fostering such learning endeavors, in addition to meeting a college's or university's expectations for scholarship, should be recognized and rewarded in multiple ways. Our greatest challenge is not to help our students find a career that satisfies their specialized intellectual interests and capacities or their material needs and desires but to help

them find a higher calling that allows them to gain meaning and to be both at home in the world as it is and active in the wider world as it should be, so that learning becomes service to wisdom and justice. For that, no path is more worthy than a liberal arts education.

Notes

Introduction

1. See *Digest of Education Statistics* table 271. In 1970–71, 50 percent of the majors at American colleges and universities were in the liberal arts. The figure dropped consistently over the next fifteen years, reaching 35 percent in 1985–86. During that same fifteen-year period, business majors grew from 14 percent to 24 percent. Subsequently, liberal arts majors grew modestly; they have leveled out at 40 percent to 42 percent from 1991–92 through 2007–8. For an attempt to explain some of the oscillation over time, with particular attention to gender considerations and enrollment demand (including strategies for attracting and retaining students), see Turner and Bowen.

In 2007–8, the most recent year for which data are available, majors in the liberal arts were divided as follows: social sciences and history (26 percent), psychology (14 percent), visual and performing arts (13 percent), biological and biomedical sciences (12 percent), English (9 percent), liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities (7 percent), multi- and interdisciplinary studies (5 percent), physical sciences (3 percent), foreign languages and literatures (3 percent), mathematics (2 percent), philosophy and religion (2 percent), theology (1 percent), and area, ethnic, cultural, and gender