Response to Eva Brann

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I want to comment briefly on Professor Brann’s provocative suggestions about the value or disvalue of the PhD, the qualities we should look for in a good faculty member and the considerations appropriately relevant to tenure and promotion decisions—all this, of course, in the context of the liberal arts college. I think we have in these proposals (and I won’t repeat them here because of time limitations) a call to take the liberal arts seriously, and an intriguing assumption about what it means to operationalize the liberal arts vision.

We, at Westmont (and most liberal arts colleges) work intentionally at raising the professional level and contributions of our faculty. Here I have in mind the standard things: the writing of books and articles, editing collections, reading papers at professional meetings and in general maintaining competence in the areas of one’s discipline and contributing to that discipline—in short putting your PhD to work. The potential for such productivity is taken into account in hiring; delivering on that potential becomes relevant at the point of tenure and promotion. Further, we at Westmont (and most liberal arts colleges) also work intentionally at assisting our faculty to become better teachers. Teaching workshops may be offered, courses are evaluated on a regular basis and faculty are hired (in part) with a view to their potential for effective teaching. And, again, delivering on that potential becomes relevant at the point of tenure and promotion. But when it comes to the liberal arts, however, that seems to be viewed as something that we as a college just are, like being a four year degree-granting institution located in Santa Barbara. It doesn’t seem to be something we have to work at (other than fiddling with the curriculum), or work with our faculty to be better at, or something that we hire, tenure and promote faculty with an eye to.

Are the liberal arts, then, only something that characterizes the college as a whole, something constituted by the sum of its parts or is it also something that has to be alive and well in each of its parts. If the latter is the case, then it’s also true that just as we are not a college of scholarly excellence unless each of our faculty is a competent contributor to her discipline and just as we are not a college that teaches well unless each faculty member is pedagogically effective, so we are not really a liberal arts college unless each member of the faculty is herself liberally educated and manifests that fact in her teaching and contact with students and other faculty.

Or put matters this way. In most liberal arts colleges (unlike St. John’s, I take it) the faculty are specialists who teach their specialty. Students become liberally educated, it is thought or hoped, by their exposure to these specialists who themselves may or may not be liberally educated. Whether they are or are not (like a sense of humor) is irrelevant to our educational strategy. That strategy is one of attempting to produce liberally educated people by exposing them to a wide range of faculty who simply teach (and hopefully teach well) particular disciplines, and we do this for four years. Conceivably we could
produce liberally educated graduates even though none of us who are teaching are ourselves liberally educated. Professor Brann seems to be saying that what we want in our students must also be found in our faculty and she is suggesting that we put in place new criteria for hiring, tenuring, and promoting faculty that will help ensure that those features are in fact present, though to the neglect of other features that many of us would also want in our faculty.

Now, my remarks have not been encumbered by any unnecessary conceptual clarity: What do I mean by liberal arts and what do I mean by liberally educated? I may even have been guilty of a category mistake here and there. But the question remains: if we as a liberal arts college wish to produce people of a certain sort, how important is it that our faculty also be people of that same sort? And if we do think it’s important, how do we ensure that it is in fact the case? The standard operative assumption seems to be that exposure to the right academic disciplines (the standard liberal arts curriculum or some variant thereof) will produce the right kind of people. But we may wonder.

In 1995 Westmont produced a long range planning document. Included in that document was an extensive section entitled “What Do We Want For Our Graduates?” In the opening paragraph it is stated that to believe in the value of a Christian liberal arts education is to believe in “the significant role such an education can play in transforming lives and putting people on a trajectory that will yield, over time, a certain kind of person, characterized by a range of valuable knowledge, helpful skills and positive attitudes. Therefore, the hopes and aspirations of Westmont are hopes and aspirations for its graduates.” But wherein lies our faith? In a well-constructed curriculum? In well-trained and respected specialists? In liberally educated mentors? In some combination of these? Or simply faith in an invisible hand that somehow works its magic despite our inability to discern how it does it? Professor Brann is telling us: don’t overlook the liberally educated mentor.

In my remarks, I have tried not to be dismissive of Professor Brann’s suggestions. I didn’t want to automatically defend all those things that we PhDs enjoy doing—research, technical scholarship, active membership in the guild, etc. How we love it! For what Professor Brann is suggesting is very much like “spitting in the face of a hurricane,” and I saw no necessity to add to its gale force. For the fact is we are not going to abandon our specialization, nor am I in the final analysis convinced that we should do so. Nevertheless, there is something here that we need to grapple with, whatever we may think of the specifics of Professor Brann’s proposals. Are we who teach at liberal arts colleges to be something more than competent specialists who teach our specialty well, and if so, is this “something more” connected with our liberal arts vision, connected with what we want for our students, which in part is to be something more than specialists? We are certainly aware of the tension that can arise between effective undergraduate teaching and the demands of serious disciplinary scholarship, even if it is only one of time. Consequently, we see the need to call our faculty to function well in both arenas and not to neglect the one for the sake of the other. But we tend not to see any comparable tension between our disciplinary specialization and our liberal arts vision. But perhaps we should. I thank Professor Brann for raising that issue for us.
Finally, Professor Brann has said that as we look to the future that the operative word is “preservation,” perhaps it also should be “penetration.”