Response to Eva Brann

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I began reading Eva Brann’s paper on the liberal arts with a sense of refreshment. I am still relatively new to the work of an academic officer, but I quickly have become weary of the seemingly endless speculation about higher education’s future. Perhaps I am simply following my own temperament. As a historian, and I am convinced that one of the best views we have for dealing with the present and preparing for the future is the rear view, much like the rear-facing seat in my old Taurus station wagon. Therefore I am quite taken with Professor Brann’s insistence that higher learning, at its best, developed long ago into a basic and enduring form. It will always be, as Professor Brann puts it, that “Some older people, who have spent their lives learning, will show some younger people, who have come to learn from them, the skills by which they can interpret nature and humankind, the arts by which they can appropriate works of beauty and insight, and the disciplines by which they can master the products of the intellect.” That indeed is our common endeavor.

She moves on from this fundamental point to argue for an undergraduate education that is basic, introductory, and in its major outlines a recapitulation of the growth of Western Civilization. She warns that we too often neglect the fundamentals upon which the disciplines are built: the basic skills of mathematical logic and of scientific inquiry; the right ordering of personality, society and government; what makes for artistry in words and materials; and underneath these issues, the nature of knowledge, goodness and beauty. She sees liberal arts education, then, as recovering the conceptual history of our civilization, of thinking the disciplines back to their beginnings.

If reenactment and preservation are the basic tasks of a liberal arts education, argues Professor Brann, then there are implications for how we organize our campuses and develop our professors. Indeed, professor is the wrong model, she insists; it signifies a disciplinary professional who is qualified to pursue specialized study. Instead, liberal arts education needs teachers, cultured people who have a love of broad learning, who have an insatiable curiosity about thought and creativity in a variety of modes, and who are masters at engaging and guiding students. She looks to a campus of common reading, common inquiry and communal conversation. And she urges those who would educate undergraduates to flee the world of PhDs, specialization, problem-solving research, and individual inquiry. There is nothing inherently wrong with those pursuits, she admits, but you can’t do both well and you have to choose.

For most of us here, no doubt, this is the world we have lost, the classicist, humanist education that was practiced with some modifications by the old-time American college. As George Marsden stated yesterday, we live on the other side of the ascendancy of the research university, with its emphasis on the generation of new knowledge, the vigorous pursuit of specialized research, and the training of future researchers. We have organized the world of inquiry into separate disciplines, elevated and diversified the new fields of
natural science, and created autonomous departments to pursue academic work in these disciplines. American liberal arts colleges, with few exceptions, have adapted the curriculum, infrastructure and ethos of the research university for their undergraduates. Most are now hybrids, with a “core curriculum” that still reflects the classicist tradition, but also insisting on students pursuing a major concentration and professors sustaining a research agenda.

I think that this change has much to commend it, and I would be loathe to renounce it. There were some good reasons behind this grafting together of the liberal arts and research in a discipline. Let me illustrate by recounting the decision of my home institution, Calvin College. Calvin’s faculty made a deliberate transition toward this hybrid view of higher education thirty years ago. The college linked the classical ideal of a liberal arts education as personal formation and preparation for civic life to the more narrowly focused research ideal via major concentrations in the disciplines. My predecessors were concerned that the classicist approach was too passive. It taught appreciation and perspective, but not engagement, discovery and creativity. It tended to reduce all disciplines to intellectual history, to functions of culture, and thus it downplayed nature and scientific investigation of the natural world. It emphasized understanding and judging culture, but not contributing to it. It relished “the reading of old books,” as C. S. Lewis put it, but not the making of new books. So my predecessors developed a curriculum that would also emphasize the engagement of the various disciplines, not only at their origins, but in their current states of play. We have worked to involve our upper-level students in the actual investigations of their chosen discipline, often working alongside an actively researching professor at the laboratory bench, or on a study team, or as personal research assistants.

This hybrid brought some new strengths and dynamism to liberal learning, but it does not seem fully satisfying today. The problem is the potential for gaps to grow between what we say are our educational goals and the limits of how far disciplinary studies alone can take us toward them. At Calvin College, we continue to say that the ultimate goal of a Christian liberal arts education is to prepare students for a life of caring service in contemporary society. But how does a focus on introducing students to the disinterested study of the disciplines do that, unless they are preparing for a life in academe or in the larger “knowledge industry?” So we are seeking a more direct connection between the education we offer and our stated goal of preparing agents of God’s shalom in the world. Students need to be introduced to the world in which they are called to serve more than to the disciplines themselves. So we come back, in some respects, to humanist ideas of education as character formation for citizenship.

Yet as Calvinist Protestants, we are not fully convinced that our common heritage of humane wisdom has all the answers; we are restless to be about the Lord’s work of redeeming, right ordering, and healing fallen institutions and systems. We want an education for reformers. Professor Brann proposes a largely preservationist agenda; she suggests that we think about the liberal arts as a way “to preserve and protect the good things we have and to improve them where we can as if we were living under the aspect of eternity.” Her emphasis is more on preservation than improvement, I think. A Calvinist
might push the other end, the matter of improvement. We are indeed living under the aspect of eternity, in Professor Brann’s lovely phrase, but where is there a sense of urgency, a reckoning that our own time is short, and that we have promises to keep, causes to pursue, and a high calling to strive after? That urgency, I believe, calls us to the present as well as to the past, to investigation as well as appreciation, and to engagement as well as disinterested inquiry or leisured reflection.

**Sources**

