

## Taking Vocation Seriously

*Charles Blaich  
Wabash College*

As we traveled to this conference, my Dean and I talked about vocation. It was a new and good conversation. We work at a secular liberal arts college and when we talk about “vocational education,” we typically think about training students for jobs; an idea that spurs little interest among liberal arts devotees on our campus.

Our conversation led me to wonder how embracing the idea of vocation at my campus would change the way we think about our students and ourselves. Would we think differently if our mission, our institutional calling so to speak, was to help our students find their calling?

First, I thought of admissions. When we discuss admissions at my campus, we talk about SAT scores and class ranks, extra-curricular activities and institutional fit, merit aid and “summer melt.” What qualities would tell us if an applicant was ripe for finding her calling at our institution? If our mission was to help students find their calling, would we be more likely to seek applicants we could serve best, and less likely to worry about which applicants would serve us by increasing the prestige of our institutions?

I thought about retention. We all know the basics of the retention game. The more students who start classes at our schools and complete a degree four years later, the better; it is the stuff that institutional score cards and college guides are made of. Suppose, however, that after two years one of our students said, “You know, I’m beginning to understand my calling, and I don’t think this institution is going to help me get there, so I’m outta here.” If this student’s sense of our institution is accurate, this “dropout” is a success story, regardless of the impact on our retention figures. At the same time, our new mission might lead us to muster the courage to ask how many of our graduates, even those students with stellar grades and offers from high-powered companies and graduate schools, are no closer to discerning their calling than when they arrived on campus.

I thought about curriculum. At my institution, we have a nice “tight” curriculum that is a source of pride with our faculty. We have core courses, special first-year courses, and common experiences. We limit the range of distribution courses and we strive for coherence. But what if those curricular structures do not help students find their calling? What if taking a wide range of courses increases the chance that a student will find his calling? When it comes to “finding your calling,” maybe coherence is just another word for “limiting.” As much as it might violate the collective aesthetic of our faculty, maybe a sloppy, wide-ranging distribution system is just the ticket for helping students find their calling.

Thinking about the possible impact of our curriculum on our new mission led me inevitably to the dreaded “A” word -- assessment. Saying that faculty “dislike” assessment is like saying that swimmers have a “mild aversion” to piranhas. Most faculty think of assessment as yet one more item on the overflowing to-do lists imposed on them by busybody outsiders.

Assessment is viewed as pointless make-work because most of us are confident that we are doing a good job. We believe our students are

accomplishing many good things, including some of the lofty goals we highlight in our mission statements. But what if instead of having some “rah-rah” mission statement crafted by a crack marketing team, we made a real and abiding commitment to help our students find their calling -- would that make assessment more important?

If we make a commitment to helping students find their calling, are we not compelled to ask, “Well, how often are we successful? Which students are more likely to find their calling? Which programs, courses, and experiences are better at helping us fulfill our commitment to our students, and which ones are not?” Would we place such a high value on our commitment that we would seek out assessment, despite the extra work and inconvenience, to ensure that we lived up to our word?

I do not know the answer to any of these questions, but I know that taking the idea of vocation seriously led me to think about many old problems in new ways. Indeed, I am convinced that embracing the idea of leading students to their vocation could help radically improve liberal arts education.

But the very promise of vocation also causes me deep concern. For if we begin talking in high and lofty terms about helping students find their calling, if we plant “vocation” and “calling” in our admissions brochures and web pages, if we do all this and ignore our responsibility to determine whether we fulfill our new covenant with students, then we will further diminish liberal arts education.

I have become acutely aware of one sad fact in the last couple of years; parents, prospective students, politicians, and many people in higher education have enormous skepticism about the claims we make for liberal arts education. When I first noted this skepticism I thought it was the product of an increasingly materialistic and cynical consumer-oriented society. But having thought and read about this problem for a number of years, and having discussed it with faculty and administrators from across the country, I am prepared to say something that liberal arts advocates will not like: This skepticism is our own fault. We are reaping the bitter fruit of our unbridled rhetorical enthusiasm.

To the true believers, and I count myself among them, the power of liberal arts education is almost limitless. It tills our students’ minds into verdant fields of critical thinking, moral character, and civic mindedness. It makes them more humane, and more human. Liberal arts education transforms our students’ lives.

We say these things so quickly and so effortlessly that we rarely consider the enormity of the promises we make. To say that we have transformed someone is to say something tremendous. Yet, as quick as we are to make such claims, we liberal arts advocates resist any attempt to assess our efforts to achieve them. We shout, “These qualities are ineffable!” We become kindred spirits of William Wordsworth, crying that when we assess, “We murder to dissect.” Ironically, the impact of liberal arts education, which is so clear and compelling in our faculty talk and admissions material, somehow vanishes at the mere mention of the word “assessment.”

If we make the promise of helping students find their calling but then fail to take responsibility for ensuring that we fulfill that promise, we will add vocation to our already long list of lofty aims that we use for self-promotion with little regard for whether we accomplish them. We will also hammer one more nail in the coffin of liberal arts education.