

Vocation: Where Liberal and Professional Education Meet, a Response

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Dr. Sullivan, I enjoyed your talk and resonate with your points. I was particularly struck by several comments, and will begin my remarks with these, as well as give some reflections from my experience as a scientist and as pre-professional advisor for students seeking careers in medicine.

I find your apprenticeships articulation compelling. Indeed, at our best, a liberal education does provide the apprenticeship for the three areas you address: 1. the cognitive, 2. the skills, and 3. the professional identities. I particularly appreciate your inclusion of this latter category, as it reminds us that our actions as mentors can speak much louder than our words as teachers.

I am reminded in this regard of a recent note from a student who in response to assistance in going to a graduate program observed: “you are a great example of a leader and guide . . . [I am thankful] for the opportunity of being taught some of life’s most valuable lessons” through people here.

So, our students see how we respond, how we live, how we act, and from it they learn, or indeed choose, their own life’s roles and responsibilities. And this is as it should be, for in a liberal education, not only do we name the subject, stimulate development of the tools, but we also lead on the course of professional identities.

What is the purpose of a liberal education? While I agree with you that “liberal education aims at human betterment,” I also find compelling a line from Mary Patterson McPherson, when she was president of Bryn Mawr College. She said that a liberal arts education was “to make your mind a better place to live for the rest of your life.” I love the richness of this quote, as I think it broadens the sense of what we are after. And at the same time it has a sense of developing a comfort with oneself and one’s abilities – that we create a basis for learning throughout life from this liberal foundation. So, what does it mean? I think that this statement is inclusive of a liberal education being one that trains the hands, the heart, the thoughts; that a liberal education prepares us for life. Let me give a vignette on this:

An alumna visited me yesterday – she completed her MD last year and is in her residency now. She commented that her years here prepared her well in that she finds that she can communicate with all the people she comes in contact with in her work and her life. She has the training (let me call it the apprenticeship) that gives her knowledge of history, of medicine, of the arts, of religion, . . . that comes from her education. Indeed, a liberal education does this well: training the whole person for a whole life. And it is this training that makes the “communication and collaboration” and that “maintenance of trust” possible, as you well point out. For these are essential components to having a well-lived life, a life full of experience, betterment and growth.

Well, that’s the cognitive and the professional identities. What about the skills? How does a liberal education attend to this? In my observation of our students, this is accomplished through their life experiences. Living in

community begins to teach the skill of responsible living, volunteering in a clinic helps teach the skill of communication, working in a research laboratory teaches the skill of investigation. And through any of these, whether they be formal internships or other, there is the incremental advance of the varied skills in any vocation. But more critically, there is the development of a confidence in acquiring those skills and a certainty that one can do so for a particular field. So these internships have a dual function. To train one in how to acquire skills, and to allow a student to taste and see if a particular endeavor is one that she wishes to engage in for a career.

In our “culture of the terrific deal,” (what a wonderful phrase to capture the emotive sense of contemporary society!) we see, as you well point out, an increasing rapidity for everything, including careers. It is no longer the normative case for a person to be in a single job or even a single career for their life. In fact, it is considered inappropriate to not change jobs as a way to get ahead. And it is common to have multiple careers in one’s life.

Intriguingly, in some ways this argues against the older training paradigm of a straight vocational education, as one would only have learned the skills for one particular type of job. Rather, the most broad-based training would be the ideal preparation for multiple careers. A liberal education provides that apprenticeship for developing a facility in interaction, transaction, communication, technology, information use, all of which allow rapid assimilation of the particular tools necessary for any one job, and all of which are the basis of the critical skills needed for all careers. So a liberal education can allow one to change from field to field, learning the trade as we go. At its best, the liberal education is one of a motif of preparation for a lifetime of learning, of making our minds better places for all of our lives, of creating the “natural context” for learning throughout our lives.