

## Response to Vocation: Reclaiming an Applied Concept of Liberal Learning

*Kenyon S. Chan  
Occidental College*

First, I would like to thank the Institute for the Liberal Arts here at Westmont College for sponsoring this important meeting. In particular, I would like to thank Chris Hoeckley and his staff for their kind hospitality.

I was given the fortunate duty of commenting on a very interesting paper. It is always a delight to be a discussant on a paper that is so fully developed and well done. Dr. O'Hara's presentation was thought provoking and filled with many challenges. Dr. Charles Blaich's response was also quite challenging. I will try to add a few thoughts to our discussion.

First, I mentioned in our discussion group last night that I firmly believe that college is wasted on the young. The discernment of vocation or vocations for a seventeen- or eighteen- year-old person is a real developmental challenge. Yet, our perspective during our conversations implies that a traditional college-age student is psychologically prepared and mature enough to determine their vocation. We act as if they are capable of understanding the differences between a vocation, a career, and a job. Yet, we know that discernment of a vocation is a long process that may take a person into their thirties or forties and maybe beyond. So my first comment is that we should view college and a liberal arts education as a launching point in a process of discernment for the typical student not an end point.

Second, many of us during the conversations here have used the five letter word, *MONEY*, as if it taints or tarnishes a great liberal arts education. We have expressed our concern that many students enter college with the desire to "make money" rather than to obtain an education for self-improvement and vocation. I do not believe that these goals are particularly in conflict. Further, I believe that as more minority students and students from the powerless segments of our society enter college, money or financial security will continue to be a primary concern. Many of these students do not have the luxury or family security to view education in "enlightened" hues. It does not necessarily follow, however, that these same students cannot or do not experience the joys of learning or a commitment to others. Many of them develop strong appetites for life long learning. Many of these same students have strong commitments to serving their families, communities, churches, and others.

Third, I enjoyed Dr. O'Hara's analysis of Luther's views of liberal learning as bringing progress and innovation to society. The rejection of a self-centered or self-absorbed education replaced with notions of service seems quite comfortable in our discussions of vocation and service learning. It reminds me of the very Jesuit mission of developing men and women for others.

Finally, I enjoyed Dr. O'Hara's strong argument for a liberal education as an act of freedom. Dr. O'Hara states that, "Freedom for Luther then is clearly freedom from – freedom from fear, freedom from oppression, freedom from limiting mindsets of traditions, customs and superstitions; but it is also freedom for – freedom for service, for community, for the advancement and welfare of

all.” This is a powerful statement that resonates well with many of our contemporary views of a liberal education.

Yet, I would argue that it also presents a great contemporary challenge. For even in this moment, some students, particularly students of color and poor students, are not free. They are oppressed by the weight of racism, classism, and sexism. Students come to us oppressed by watching their parents tangled in webs of continuing entrapment. A liberal education can provoke anger and resentment in some students, and muddle rather than clarify their worldviews. For many students from powerless backgrounds, there is no need for them to experience the expanding pleasures of “studying abroad” outside of the United States. Simply coming to our campuses is “studying abroad” for many students.

Dr. O’Hara argues that a liberal education can create an environment of freedom of thought and actions that is critical to not only individual development but also the development of our society. It can create leaders and a professional class that is important to a progressive education. I couldn’t agree more, and I further believe that a liberal arts education may be an elite education but not elitist.

Have we made advances over the past several decades? Yes, of course we have. In the last half century in the United States, education has been the key to fundamental change for the previously enslaved, impoverished, and powerless. It has been a tool for ethnic minorities to gain power and prestige within our society and used to breakdown significant social barriers. A liberal education is no longer available to only the elite or ruling class, not just for men, nor just for whites, nor just for one religious group, but rather a liberal education has been transformative for the previously disenfranchised. Our student bodies are far more diverse, and we attend to issues of campus climate and equal opportunity.

Yet, if one examines the fundamental liberal arts curriculum, we continue to find it quite Eurocentric. If one examines classroom behavioral expectations or motivational expectations, they are quite “middle-class” in origin and nature. If one examines the expected worldview of a college student, we are likely to find that we expect college students to perceive the world from middle-class and largely dominant eyes. Much transformation of our liberal arts culture is still required before we can truly expect freedom of the mind.

Thank you for allowing me to comment.