

Vocation - Reclaiming an Applied Concept of Liberal Learning

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Introduction

Liberal learning is at a crossroads. That seems to be the consistent message in U.S. higher education circles (AAC&U 2002). 75% of U.S. high school graduates now get at least some post-secondary education. At the same time, the number of Bachelor's degrees awarded in Minnesota has been virtually constant over the past 10 years while the number of two-year degrees has increased by 29% and the number of master's degrees by 78%. Other parts of the country show similar trends that raise questions about the future of liberal arts colleges that serve traditional college age students rather than the growing segment of non-traditional learners, graduate students, and career oriented associate's degree seekers. Are liberal arts colleges no longer relevant? Are the trends in U.S. higher education signaling the end of an era when it was precisely the liberal arts college that was most clearly associated with U.S. higher education?

Questions about the liberal arts are not new. Liberal learning has never been without tension. On the one hand there are the classical tenants of the liberal arts rooted in a commitment to endowing students with knowledge drawn from an accepted canon of basic (the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric) and advanced arts (the quadrivium of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy); on the other hand there is the typically American commitment to preparing students to be engaged citizens, a rather practically focused educational mission. The former has been associated with learning for learning's sake, with intellectual elitism and with a classical body of knowledge; the latter has been more associated with learning for an expressed purpose, with service, and with a changing body of knowledge as the demands of citizenship in an ever more diverse cultural context keep changing. Add the demands of a market place that expects a certain kind of citizen and a certain kind of educational preparedness, the demands of students and parents for an education that is practical and results in a good job, and the demands of a nation that plays an undisputed global leadership role, and it is easy to see why liberal learning is not without tension and why it is at a crossroads. Yet given the theoretical and applied dimensions of liberal learning in the U.S. American context liberal arts colleges should be uniquely suited to meet the challenge set forth by the AAC&U's widely read national panel report "Greater Expectations", namely to "...help students become INTENTIONAL LEARNERS..." who are "EMPOWERED through the mastery of intellectual and practical skills, INFORMED by knowledge about the natural and social worlds and about forms of inquiry basic to these studies, RESPONSIBLE for their personal actions and for civic values" (AAC&U 2002: xi).

Having been educated in the different cultural context of the German education system and serving as dean of a Lutheran college, I offer the concept of vocation as a framework for an applied concept of liberal learning while at the same time challenging the limiting interpretation of learning as purely practical or vocational. My remarks will focus on three aspects of vocation as a concept for liberal learning. They are shaped by my own life story as a German born and educated academic, as an economist and as a higher education administrator serving a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with its distinct mission as a liberal arts college of the church. (1) I will

examine the concept of liberal learning as rooted in Luther's understanding of *Bildung* that became a model for the education system not only of Germany but of much of Europe and the Western world; (2) I will offer five principles of liberal learning that may help us to overcome the theory-application divide; and (3) I share a practical example of liberal learning in the form of a research/service-learning project conducted in the context of an economics course I taught at Green Mountain College (a United Methodist College) in Poultney, Vermont, where I served as provost.

Liberal Learning – A Mission Driven Definition

The German model of higher education has often been viewed as being at odds with the model of the liberal arts college. German higher education is generally associated with the research university and disciplinary knowledge. This model became particularly influential in American higher education during the 19th century and shaped public and private universities in the U.S. to a considerable extent. Yet despite its influence, there are clear differences between the U.S. and German models of higher learning. It is said that it takes many new ideas and output to be successful in U.S. higher education while it takes in-depth thinking and one major life work to be successful in Germany. What is generally overlooked in the juxtaposition of the two models is that the underpinnings of the German university system are quite different from those of the U.S. system. Much of what would be considered a liberal arts education takes place before students enter the university. University bound students attend the *Gymnasium* through grade 13. Students interested in the trades or technical and clerical professions that require practical training attend school a total of 10 or 11 years and receive their education in apprenticeship programs in addition to attending school and trade school (*Handelschule, Berufsschule*). So the trades too require preparation and are not simply "unlearned" practice.

This model of education has its roots in Luther's ideal of *Bildung*, which is the very basis for the Reformation ideal of the priesthood of all believers. If, as Luther argued, ordinary people were to read and interpret the scriptures, if grace was indeed sufficient unto itself, if the priest was not needed as an intermediary between God and God's people, then that required a well-educated general public. Education thus meant more than career preparation, which in Luther's Germany took place largely in the family and in the guild systems (*Stände*), where knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. Luther argued that there is certainly nothing wrong with that kind of knowledge, but education meant more than that. There are two German words for education – *Erziehung* refers to the education that takes place in the home, education as bringing up a child right, as educating children in the proper ways and customs, including those of the trades; *Bildung* refers to an education more akin to that of liberal learning: of educating articulate readers and writers, people knowledgeable in the languages who could read and interpret the scriptures, free thinking people trained in mathematics, in critical thinking, able to synthesize information, and familiar with history, the arts, music, poetry and, of course, theology. In other words, education for Luther meant quite literally education to think liberally, to think freely and to advance society. This commitment is central to the Reformation and it is central to progress and the advancement of the common good. For Luther, a good education is not about individual gain, but about the welfare of the community. In his letter to the councilmen of the German cities Luther wrote:

Now the welfare of a city does not solely consist in accumulating vast treasures building mighty walls and magnificent buildings, and

producing a goodly supply of guns and armor, Indeed, where such things are plentiful, and reckless fools get control of them, it is so much the worse and the city suffers greater loss. A city's best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consists rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens (Lull 712).

And as advanced as the educational role of the family and the guild systems may have been, Luther was skeptical of the ability of the family and the guild system to meet the education needed for his vision of a free and advancing society. Education, he felt had to take place in schools, and it was necessary not instead of but in addition to the training provided in the trades and the home. He wrote:

Even when the training is done to perfection and succeeds, the net result is little more than a certain enforced outward respectability; underneath they are nothing but the same blockheads, unable to converse intelligently on any subject, or to assist or counsel anyone. But if children were instructed and trained in schools, or wherever learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses were available to teach the languages, the other arts, and history, they would then hear of the doings and sayings of the entire world, and how things went with various cities, kingdoms, princes, men and women. Thus, they could... gain from history the knowledge and understanding of what to seek and what to avoid in this outward life, and be able to advise and direct others accordingly (Lull 725-26).

Education for Luther meant education in the tradition of the liberal arts, yet it also meant education that would bring about progress and innovation, like the translation of the scriptures into the vernacular German, like Gutenberg's printing press, like access to reading materials for all people and not just for learned clerics and aristocrats. Three aspects of Luther's concept of education are particularly noteworthy.

First, Luther was critical of secular models of education as individually-based rationality and segmentation that became later associated the Enlightenment ideal of education. He considered the individualism and "I-centeredness" of such models to be self-absorption and incompatible with Christian teaching. For Luther, education was associated with a profound sense of community and a commitment to serve one's neighbor. The whole purpose of the well-educated citizen was to take up his or her calling, their vocation, by finding their place within the community and by identifying the contributions each individual could make to the common good. Just as the aim of American liberal arts education was to educate young men and women to be citizens, so Luther's aim was to educate young men and women for public service and more broadly for service to one's neighbor. To discern one's calling, one's vocation (*Berufung* – the German word for vocation, means literally "being called," and it forms the root for the German word *Beruf*, which means "job" or "profession") one must know and understand the world, must know its history, politics, social institutions and cultural norms. One must be prepared for service by honing skills and intellectual capacities, and one must be introspective, reflective and prayerful to discern one's place in the community and the contribution one must make as an individual. This community orientation is most certainly at odds with notions of self-realization, individual interest maximization and other Enlightenment-based notions of self that shape our contemporary thinking and our expectations of what a good education should do for us. The hallmark of a good education is not simply individual advancement and individual welfare, but the advancement and welfare of the community. Yet despite the

demands this understanding of education places on the individual, for Luther it was by no means at odds with the goal of educating free, independent and critically thinking men and women. Individual freedom and service are but two sides of the same coin.

The second aspect of Luther's understanding of education is part of Luther's paradox so eloquently expressed in his essay "Freedom of a Christian." "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (Dillenberger 53). God's grace is freely given and thus a Christian is perfectly free and subject to no one but God alone. It is out of this understanding of freedom and out of our gratitude for God's boundless grace that we serve our neighbors and are subject to all. This seeming contradiction is at best a tension with which one must learn to live. And for Luther, tension is not only not bad, it simply is. Lutherans live within the tension between the two kingdoms, the kingdom on the right and the kingdom on the left, the now and the not yet, the human reign and God's reign to come. 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 the community, for the advancement and welfare of all. Only when it finds its expression in service is freedom truly realized. This understanding of education is not only at odds with the individualism orientation of the Enlightenment that so dramatically influenced our notions of rationality and higher learning, it is also at odds with a purely theoretical notion of education. Vocation cannot be simply contemplated it must be practiced in the community, in the world. Thus one cannot simply think one's way into being a liberated, free human being. Freedom must find its expression in doing. Vocation means living out one's freedom.

A third noteworthy aspect is that Luther includes women and girls in his vision of an educated public. He explicitly mentions schoolmasters and schoolmistresses in his letter to the councilmen (see the above quote) and he demands a formal school education for both girls and boys. He wrote: "...for the sake of the Scriptures and of God, this one consideration alone would be sufficient to justify the establishment everywhere of the very best schools for both boys and girls..." (Lull 725). Despite some of the gender distinctions Luther made in his educational agenda for boys and girls, this was nothing less than revolutionary. Girls in the 15th and 16th century rarely received an education.¹ Yet according to Luther, the important role women played in the family and in childrearing made it essential that they received access to education themselves. Beyond offering them an education, Luther's vision offers women a role as educators and as active participants in the public sphere. This is but one example that illustrates Luther's role as an innovator and as a debater. Innovation, new ways of thinking and doing, and the engaged debate about pertinent social issues are at the heart of Luther's understanding of what it means to be a person of faith. The wrestling with current issues, be they whether girls should attend school or whether indulgences were a justified practice (see Luther's 95 theses), is central to Luther's theology. Without understanding its rootedness in debate and in the inevitable tension and dialectic that accompany a commitment to debate, one cannot understand Luther's two kingdoms.

¹ One of the few places that afforded women an education were the cloisters. Some have argued that Luther's opening of the cloisters and the subsequent urbanization of higher education was actually to the detriment of women. However, the later introduction of a public school system opened unprecedented educational opportunities to women far beyond the number of those who had been part of religious orders.

And Luther's concept of education became not just a model for parochial schools, but for public school education in Germany and in much of Europe. Luther's collaborator, the Classics professor Philipp Melancton, who was particularly influential in shaping and advancing Luther's education ideals, is to this day called the *Schulmeister Europas* – the headmaster of Europe. Melancton also brought more humanist perspectives to the educational agenda of the Reformers and much of today's understanding of education in Germany and many part of Europe still goes back to the Reformation ideals.

This does not mean, however, that all is well in German higher education. The German university system is under attack. Its critics point to its inflexibility, to the distanced role of the German professoriate and most of all to its lack of compliance with the demands of the marketplace. German education takes too long, it is argued, and the fact that it is still completely publicly financed has led to undeniable compromises in class size and organizational flexibility that compromise its effectiveness. Yet the tensions between an educational mission that serves the common good and one that serves individual needs, be they private or corporate, cannot be easily resolved. Yes, students and their families have the right to expect an education that prepares them for successful careers, but this cannot be the sole aim of an effective education. Preparation for service to society and the world, for lifelong learning and a passion for the life of the mind are essential as well. Living with and embracing the tensions associated with such educational aims may thus be more important than ever and at the same time familiar as it mirrors the tensions innate in Luther's two kingdoms.

Liberal Learning beyond the Theory-Application Divide

So what does a concept of liberal learning that embraces Luther's concept of vocation as an expression of the creative tension between learning and doing look like in our time and in our place? What does liberal learning look like that reclaims the both-and, the theoretical and the applied, the freedom from and freedom for? The Luther scholar Darrell Jodock expresses the aims of such an education as follows:

The liberal arts are those studies which set the student free – free from prejudice and misplaced loyalties and free for service, wise decision making, community leadership, and responsible living... Such an education endeavors to wean them (and their teachers!) from their comfortable, uncritical allegiance to social assumptions and to entice them into both an intense curiosity regarding the world beyond their own experience and an intense desire to make their corner of the globe a better place in which to live.... The objective is not merely to “meet the needs of the students” nor to “help them achieve their own goals;” the objective is to set them free – free “from” and free “for” (Jodock 25).

And what are the elements of a liberal arts education that is true to its Lutheran roots? Not that we needed another list of characteristics describing such a liberal learning agenda, but in an attempt to unpack what Jodack's liberal learning agenda might look like here is my list and it has five elements:²

- Foundational skills in an interdisciplinary world
- Diversity and globalization

² The five elements discussed here reflect my own views and not necessarily those of the faculty of Concordia College. Concordia is currently engaged in a curriculum review process. Faculty Senate recently adopted five learning goals that are similar but not identical to the elements of liberal learning discussed here.

- Being engaged in the world
- Values matter
- Modeling a culture of discourse and innovation

Foundational Skills in an Interdisciplinary World

Despite the many changes U.S. higher education has faced, some things seem to remain the same. Today's students need solid foundational skills that are transferable to any career and to a wide variety of lifelong – learning pursuits. More than ever these include effective communication skills, both oral and written, mathematical reasoning skills, the ability to develop and organize ideas, and the ability to analyze quantitative and qualitative information. The advent of the internet also adds some new demands such as information literacy skills, including the ability to critically evaluate the vast amount of information now available.

Yet even foundational skills long associated with liberal learning are no longer aligned with long-held disciplinary categories. The academy itself has changed. Previously well-established disciplinary modes of inquiry and methodological approaches are no longer as clearly defined. New findings in the sciences and medicine, new insights into the anthropological causes of environmental problems, new insights in history, classical studies and archeology often are the result of interdisciplinary work and collaboration across once separated fields. Our methodological approaches are no longer neatly aligned with our academic disciplines. Skills are thus no longer clearly associated with a particular discipline but cut across once clearly defined disciplinary lines. Economists, for example, may apply historical and linguistic approaches as well as econometrics and statistics, and in a psychology department one might find cognitive scientists, social scientists and humanists working side by side. The world is complex and interconnected and we are learning how to address this complexity without compromising in-depth inquiry.

At the same time, our complex and interrelated world is most fascinating to our students. Particularly younger students are intrigued with real-life problems. Yet our educational approach has not necessarily taken this interest into account. We generally teach basic skills first and then move on to the more complex questions and applications. But this may actually not work very effectively, particularly for first-year students. Real-life problems are complex and they are of particular interest to students who are still searching for their place in the world. It is often the exposure to complexity that challenges students to want to know more and that helps them identify a particular area of interest that they want to study more in-depth. Thus we might rethink our approach and emphasize real-life problems, complexity and interdisciplinarity in our first year courses; we might move on to more disciplinary approaches and methods and advance students' ability to formulate a research question from a disciplinary perspective; and finally we might encourage them to explore other perspectives and methods as one particular approach, traditionally associated with one particular discipline, may limit our ability to find answers to complex questions.

This kind of approach may also offer added opportunities for communicating our educational goals to our students. After all, four years are not enough to reach the goal of equipping our students with basic and transferable skills that they will need for the fast-paced world we live in. We can merely launch our students into a lifelong discovery of complexities, challenges and opportunities and equip them with a passion for learning that will sustain them throughout their lives. This invites students'

participation in the process of learning, it invites active engagement of faculty and students, and it is indeed what college is all about.

Diversity and Globalization

One of the core commitments of U.S. liberal arts education has been to prepare students to be citizens. Yet in today's world this must necessarily mean something different than it did in the early years of higher education. Given the undeniable leadership role of the U.S. in the world community and given our level of interconnectedness as members of an increasingly global economy, preparing students to be citizens must invariably mean preparing them to be global citizens (see, for example, Cornwell and Stoddard). This requires that students be exposed to different standpoints and their respective cultural, social, economic, religious and gender perspectives that invariably contributed to forming a particular standpoint (see, for example, Segovia and Tolbert). The critical review of the assumptions, normative perspectives and biases of particular perspectives must also include a review of the distanced observer perspective of Kuhnian science. Despite the long-held assumptions of Western thought, this perspective is not objective or value neutral, but represents a particular subjectivity. Problems associated with the distancing abstraction of the observer scientist become evident for example in pre WWII Germany. The holocaust survivor Ely Wiesel has argued that Germany was probably the world's best-educated nation in the late 19th and early 20th century. Yet the distanced observer perspective its higher education system advocated offers at least a partial explanation for the indifference its scientific community showed toward the inhumanity of the Nazi regime.

As feminist and non-Western scholars have pointed out, relying on expert systems and their epistemological assumptions alone ignores the fact that different disciplines and their respective knowledge systems bring distinct biases to the debate (Harding; Ferber and Nelson). Reducing the diversity of voices thus leads to selective knowledge and to the loss of valuable social and cultural perspectives that may be similarly problematic as the loss of bio-diversity is to the stability of our natural systems (O'Hara 1995). By ignoring the power structures operative in the selection process of voices admitted to or excluded from the process, operative biases, be they epistemological, economic, or political, are simply perpetuated rather than critically reviewed (O'Hara 1999a, 2001).

Languages play a particularly important role when it comes to gaining an appreciation for different standpoints and perspectives. Languages are important not simply for their utilitarian purpose of enabling us to communicate with other non-English speakers. Learning another language gives us a sense of how others frame the world, frame their experience of reality, and frame their values of human and non-human relationships. Virtually every discipline has a critical role to play in this framing process — there is the study of international relations in the political sciences that is critical particularly in our post 9-11 world; there is the tension between local and global economies and national and foreign business practices (Hampton Turner); there is the need to study formal and informal institutions, cultural practices and social systems; there are the challenges posed by our shrinking pool of biological diversity, and the need for virtually every country on the globe to wrestle with water management issues of too little or too much water; and the list goes on. Study abroad and off-campus study experiences in virtually every discipline are critically important in facilitating such learning experiences in global citizenship. Cultural literacy should thus also be a

dominant theme in our co-curricular programs so that students can make meaningful connections between their curricular and co-curricular learning experiences.

Yet the ability to distinguish differences in perception and, therefore, to be able to reduce the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding cannot come at the expense of reflecting our own standpoint and knowing our roots. How can we critically reflect on others' perceptions and presuppositions if we are unaware of our own? The study of Western philosophy, history, literature and religion are critical departure points and we can no longer be certain that our students bring this knowledge base to our colleges. This may require a rethinking of our core liberal arts curriculum as we wrestle with how we can best explore our own roots while embracing the diverse educational goals associated with a commitment to educating informed, aware and thoughtful global citizenship.

Being engaged in the world.

The need to be engaged in the world around us is part of what it means to be human. We are social beings. Particularly in the U.S. and its pragmatist tradition, we have also come to value the power of learning as active participation. For Luther the need for engagement with and in the world was expressed in his call for a community perspective rather than the individualist perspective that became prominent during the Enlightenment and continues to shape Western thought and inquiry. Yet who defines the well being of the community? Particularly from a Christian perspective, engagement has all too often meant "doing for" rather than "doing with." We tend to want to define what others need and what is best for them, when what is needed instead is the true interaction and engagement with others and with their perspectives as engaged citizens. This kind of engagement is not necessarily comfortable for us academics. We are skeptical of too much engagement and like to keep our neutrality. Thus we are not easily swayed to admit the perspective of "non-credentialed" community experts as an addition to the perspectives of credentialed experts (O'Hara 1997, O'Hara, et al. 1998). In my own discipline, the biases of the expert system have included a preference for distanced observation rather than participatory research design, for data analysis rather than data collection, for theory rather than applied work, for revealed individual preferences rather than discourse-based reflections of "citizen preferences" (Sagoff 219) and for production rather than the often unrecognized, yet essential, sustaining functions of nourishment, care, waste assimilation, and restoration (Kim, O'Hara 1997, Pujol).

And in our time and place, engagement is called for not only with our social context, but also with the larger environmental context within which we live. This engagement (or lack thereof) with environmental issues is in fact also a reflection of our social and cultural perspectives. For some, cows are merely a source of human nourishment, for others they are holy; for some there are thirty different words for snow, for others merely five. Our engagement thus reflects more than activism. It reflects the perspective of a particular actor or agent. This may be the perspective of the detached, self-interest maximizer of economic theory, the bureaucrat, the African women who must walk two additional hours to the well due to growing desertification, the child who never knew a spring clean enough to drink from, the researcher bringing new water purification technologies to remote rural areas, the father who would rather find day care close by than drive one hour to get reliable day care for his child, the Inuit who knows that this year's Salmon run is too small to reach her village. Our perspectives as engaged citizens are not one-dimensional but reflect the complexities of our life-worlds. The inclusion of

non-credentialed experts, who provide context specific knowledge and community perspectives in our notions of expertise, may also contribute to leveling the value biases between paid and unpaid work as a broad range of stakeholders – including entrepreneurs, workers, homemakers, community volunteers, scientists etc. – offer their insights and perspectives as a basis for making equally valuable contributions.

And how do we expose our students to such engagement? One model is service learning that takes students out of the classroom and engages them with the community in which they live. Too often, however, service learning is limited to supporting existing organizations and to a charity orientation, as valuable as that might be. Real engagement must also challenge the status quo and must seek to offer service for social change, for environmental improvements, for engaging in defining the common good and in identifying needed improvements in the community's quality of life. This kind of engagement takes time and institutional support, yet it offers invaluable learning experiences to our students as they actively engage in discerning what their place in the world might be.

Values Matter

Values matter, and values discussions must cut across disciplinary lines and cannot be left to philosophers and theologians alone. For some, values may be rooted in the Christian tradition, for others secular ethical perspectives or other faith traditions shape the values they hold. Yet values are also contextual and find expression in a particular place and time. The Swiss ethicist Arthur Rich points to the etymological roots of the word "ethic" to convey the challenge and the necessity of confronting the assumptions behind our values (Rich). The word "ethic" has its roots in the Greek word *ethos* which means: familiar place, the place where one lives, or the place where one is at home. "Ethics" thus can take on the meaning of "custom," "common practice" or "manners." This connotes a definition of ethics as socially and culturally informed proper behavior and commonly held values. Another meaning, which Rich attributes to Socratic roots, views ethics as reason-informed insight about what one should do, not simply what one is expected to do based on cultural expectation or tradition. This meaning of ethic challenges familiar norms. Rich writes:

Ethics has to do ultimately with a claim to do not simply what has become familiar to us by our growing up in society, but instead calls us out of social conventions and juxtaposes itself to the existing law, thus challenging us to new action and behavior. When this happens "ethos" confronts "ethos," that which one should do confronts that which one customarily does, conscience confronts convention (Rich 16).

Ethics thus continually challenges our understanding and defines and redefines it in light of a historical and practical understanding of the issues and circumstances demanding ethical decision. The awareness of the extent to which our individual life contexts, from which we perceive the world, shape our ethical framework is described in the work of sociologists like Robert Bellah (Bellah et al.) and theologians like Leonardo Boff (Boff, Herzog) and Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza (Fiorenza). It is in the wrestling of the community with critical issues of our time that new ethical standards are defined and existing ones are challenged.

Yet liberal learning must do more than provide a space for values discussions and for helping students practice a moral compass. It must also make room for being engaged with the transcendent, room for contemplation and reflection. It must make room for discerning one's vocation in the midst of the noise of residence hall life and

digital music, off-campus jobs and student organizations. Consequently we must be intentional about making room for reflection, about providing meditative spaces and celebrations. This implies far more than the commitment of campus pastors and it adds a challenging dimension to the role of faculty. A campus committed to exploring values must invariably change student advising from a checklist approach of what distribution areas to take, to a commitment to guiding students to find their voices and their vocations. Concordia is fortunate to have a Lilly Foundation grant that allows us to foster such a focus through faculty development opportunities, student-faculty retreats and campus-wide explorations of what it means to be called and to live out one's vocation. Can we make a difference as educators? I believe the answer is a resounding "Yes!" As we reflect on and debate our own values and motivations we can become accessible to our students in new ways, not by having all the answers to their questions, but by admitting to our own ongoing process of having our answers questioned again and again.

Modeling a Culture of Lifelong Learning and Innovation

This fifth element of being a contemporary liberal arts college in the Lutheran tradition may well be the most challenging one. Luther exercised his commitment to ongoing learning and innovation first and foremost through his passionate commitment to debate. To model such a commitment for our students demands that we as campuses be discursive communities where ethical discourse is practiced.³ Yet as simple and as compatible with the culture of academia as this may seem, it may well be a serious challenge. No doubt, we academics are trained in debate and accustomed to the tensions and tug and pull of an intellectual argument. But what about being and becoming a truly open and engaged community, a place where challenging questions are raised, where ethical discourse is practiced, where we wrestle with answers to tough issues our institutions face and where all are invited into the conversation? Intellectually we probably affirm such a commitment to discourse and it may indeed be one of the most important contributions we can make as liberal arts colleges today. Our society is so in need of a deliberative public space where we can debate challenging social, political and ethical issues of our time without calling each other names, putting each other down, or simply checking out. To quote Bishop emeritus David Preus:

A college of the church is frequently accused of being a "hothouse" carefully protecting its students from alien ideas, blocking out the future in order to maintain a hallowed past. On the contrary the church college ought to be intellectually open with no ducking of hard questions.

This is indeed the liberal education Luther's Reformation envisioned, where education is understood as a commitment to a broadly educated and informed citizenry that is empowered to debate and to wrestle with critical questions in an atmosphere of acceptance and support. And yet the challenge does not end here.

While we may embrace the engagement with critical societal questions, we may be far more reluctant to embrace the engagement with critical questions facing us as

³ Ethical discourse is based on the reasoned and reflective communication process among mutually respectful and responsible discourse participants (Habermas 92ff). Mutual respect, acceptance and openness to others are what constitutes its ethical quality. The rationality expressed in the discourse process is inseparably linked to and informed by human experience of social, cultural, ecological life. Discourse can take the form of conflict resolution, dispute mediation or communicative settlements provided that ethical process guidelines are followed.

colleges and universities. We are not exactly used to modeling a culture of lifelong learning and innovation as organizations. We are not keen on innovation and change. When was the last time you revised your curriculum and what was that debate like? With all the calls for outcomes assessment and goals this is possibly one of the biggest blind spots of the new accountability trend in higher education. Assessment focuses all too often on the inside of the organization alone and not on its context. Institutions driven by ongoing learning and innovation pay attention to the inside as well as the outside, that is, the context in which they operate. An outcomes orientation that focuses only on objectives formulated from an internal perspective can all too easily become trapped in a tautological cycle of formulating outcomes that simply re-affirm long-held assumptions and presuppositions (O'Hara and Schwendner). To simply respond to internal signals reflects a behavioral strategy of "reactive cleverness," or, if there's nothing left to repair, as "reactive reckoning" (Schwendner). A strategy that seeks to balance complex information that lies outside the organization with internal information requires "preventive wisdom." Such preventive wisdom is neither reactive nor one-dimensional. It relies instead on a strategic intelligence that is capable of taking multiple factors and multiple perspectives into account that dares to debate ideas and think outside of the box (Weinert). One way to improve an institution's ability to deal with complex content information is to add more diverse voices to the debate. Yet this is not enough. Added diversity does not necessarily ensure a broadening of the information base or a more informed debate. It improves the information potential, but does not address whether added information is actually considered and acted on.

This then gets to the heart of modeling discourse and innovation. Effective discourse requires that we take a look at ourselves and address our own value biases. Modeling a community committed to debate, ongoing learning and innovation, committed to agreeing to disagree in love, is essential to our staying fresh and alive as institutions of higher learning. Our students face the demands of a world shaped by diversity, rapid change and teamwork. To prepare them for this world we ourselves must practice a commitment to diversity, change and teamwork even as these commitments make us feel uncomfortable at times.

Liberal Learning as Vocation - A Practical Example

The third part of this paper moves from the broader considerations of a college to the specific considerations of my own discipline, economics, and to my own vocation as a teacher of economics who brings a broader context based perspective to my discipline (O'Hara 1996, 1997, 2001). My own work and research interests have led me to not only think about education, but to experiment with what an education might look like that addresses several of the elements of liberal learning as vocation outlined in the previous section of this paper. The example described here can be viewed as an example of service learning in economic development. However, service here is viewed as civic engagement taking the service-learning model beyond the support of existing organizations in their work and mission to the idea of a change agenda. The approach might thus serve as an example of social change oriented service learning (Snarr). This illustrates the commitment to "being engaged in the world" as an expression of Luther's commitment to innovation and to advancing the common good. The context here is a college course that facilitates opportunities for envisioning a community's economic development agenda. At the same time, the approach offers an opportunity for hands-on student learning that advances students' skills and understanding in a decidedly problem-oriented manner that engages students in a complex real life project that offers

opportunities for learning while making a difference in the community where students study and live. Students thus have an opportunity to reflect on their contribution to the common good as well as on the theoretical, methodological and practical learning they experience.

In this particular example of service learning, the goal was to advance a small rural community's economic development agenda in a way that would improve residents' quality of life. The community, Poultney, Vermont, is a small town of 3600 residents on the western edge of south central Vermont. Poultney is a typical rural town with the notable distinction that it is home to a small private college of 750 students. Green Mountain is Poultney's largest employer. Beyond that, Poultney's economy is characterized by family farms and small, family-owned slate mines. Three sizeable ski resorts are located within a thirty-mile radius to the south, the east and the southeast, but the tourism boom has not (yet) reached Poultney. Poultney is a struggling community yet it is clear about its intention to remain a "real" rural community rather than becoming an outlet-store destination like its neighbor to the south or a vacation home community like its neighbor to the southeast. In 2001 students enrolled in an economics course at Green Mountain College conducted a household survey to gather information about households' stated needs, assets, habits, and interests, with the goal of identifying needed improvements in key quality of life factors as a basis for economic development.⁴

Interdisciplinary Learning in a Disciplinary Context – Development Theory

The community-based approach to economic development and regional revitalization taken in the described service-learning project differs from the standard approach to economic development (O'Hara 1997, 1999, 2001; O'Hara and McDonald). Traditional economic development models have generally relied on incentives and on citing industrial parks as a means of attracting and retaining businesses within a community or region. This approach assumes that business drives development: as a core business (also referred to as a base industry or base sector) is strengthened or attracted to a community, the result will be more jobs, more income for the local work force, more demand for other businesses in the community or region and thus further job expansions, income growth and increased tax income. Yet there is little evidence that this approach actually yields the desired long term results, especially as businesses have become more mobile and more globally connected. Desired stimulus effects are often dispersed with little or no benefit to the regional labor force or other businesses in the region (Cole and Florida). Alternative approaches have focused on local renewal. In many cities development corporations were formed and urban revitalization programs spent often sizable amounts of money on downtown beautification and "ghetto economic development" programs (Spratlen, Harrison). Yet by competing for footloose businesses through more incentives like tax breaks and attractive location benefits, regions have also bid each other down and out of much needed public revenue streams.

Newer research questions the role of the business sector as the sole force behind economic vitality and places a stronger emphasis on consumers and their interest in locating in a community that offers a high quality of life, a safe and rewarding network of social connections and desirable recreational opportunities. According to this alternative view, communities or regions should take consumers' needs and desires seriously since residents' desire for a high quality of life appear to be the stimulus and

⁴ O'Hara and Denali, spring term 2001.

not only the desired outcome of development efforts. By improving a community's quality of life and meeting the needs of its residents, a community will be able to attract and retain residents, who in turn have consumer needs that form the necessary demand to drive business development. An educated and stable resident base is also attractive to businesses that seek to expand, start-up or relocate. Resident-based development strategies can thus have a positive impact on regional and local business development. Yet successful strategies require that specific community needs and assets are identified so that one is clear about "what people want" (Power 182). This alternative approach to development forms the basis for the Poultney service learning project described below. The project's core is a household survey designed to provide much needed information about viable development options.⁵

Engaging the Community to Advance the Common Good

The core of the service learning project, a household survey that exemplifies a resident based approach to development, is structured around three broad types of questions: (1) demographic information (2) household needs (3) broader quality of life issues. Local residents and community organizations were involved at every level of the survey design. The approach thus serves as an example of participatory research that engages various viewpoints within the community. The survey's lead sponsor was Poultney's Downtown Revitalization Steering Committee, an informal committee of citizens representing key stakeholders, and the town of Poultney represented by its town and village manager. Twenty-five community members from a wide range of socio-economic and demographic backgrounds participated in an extensive pilot group to test the survey tool and offer feedback. Students enrolled in an economics course at Green Mountain College had a first-hand experience in applying development theory and becoming engaged in their community as they conducted extensive interviews with focus group members and a broad range of community members to design and test the survey tool. The students also distributed and collected the questionnaires with drop-off stations at the local town hall and post office serving as convenient survey collection points. The survey was well publicized by Poultney's Downtown Redevelopment Committee through newspaper articles, direct mailings, and notices posted at highly-frequented downtown locations. A total of 367 households representing 864 residents responded to the survey representing a response rate of 29% of all households and 24% of the population. 50% of the surveyed households live in the village of Poultney, 33% in the town of Poultney and 13% in Lake St. Catherine, a summer home area located nearby.

The majority of surveyed households (28%) are multi-generational with children and young adults under the age of 18. 21% live in single person households with the majority of single person households (49%) being 65 or older. Household incomes fell largely into three income categories with 15% of the surveyed households reporting income levels of \$10,000-\$14,999, 15% reporting incomes of \$25,000-\$34,999 and 15% \$35,000-\$49,999. 7% of households reported income levels of \$100,000 or more, placing Poultney well above the national average of 1.3% upper income households. 32% of respondents age 18 or older are employed full-time, with the majority working in

⁵ The survey design and premises about the role of residents in local and regional development was based on previous work in other communities (O'Hara 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, O'Hara et al. 1999, O'Hara and Vazquez, under review).

education (25%); 8.5% are students and 20% are retired. Survey respondents' main work locations are Poultney (33%), the nearby county seat of Rutland (23%), and various small towns in the area. An unusually high 74% commute less than 25 miles.

Several survey questions addressed Poultney residents' needs and preferences for service improvements in their community. The first question asked respondents what kind of business or services they would like to see move to town. Results showed a strong desire for entertainment and retail. 14% of respondents were interested in having a movie/video rental store, 13% wanted general shopping opportunities, 9% listed a café, bakery, or juice bar, 8% wanted more dining options, and 8% listed a community center. A follow up question asked respondents to rank services on a prepared list on a scale of "very important", "important", "somewhat important" and "not important." The list had been established based on the feedback from pilot group participants and findings in other communities. Of the services listed, a youth/community center, affordable housing, health care, a bakery, and a drug store ranked as most important (see Table 1). Asked what types of activities/ services survey respondents or members of their household typically left town for confirmed the identified needs.

When asked about Poultney's aesthetic qualities and assets, respondents indicated a generally positive impression of their community. They generally viewed the area's natural beauty as good or very good. However, none of the community's assets were ranked as excellent. Respondents thus seem to be generally satisfied with their community but see a clear need for improvements. Poultney's small size (42%) and the area's natural beauty (42%) are generally viewed as the community's biggest assets (see Table 2), while improved walking/hiking/running trails, improved community programming, a town park, better sidewalks and streets ranked high on the list of needed improvements. This expressed need for improved aesthetic and recreational opportunities is consistent with similar findings in other rural and urban communities.

Table 1
Services Ranked According to Importance

Service Type	Mean*	Std. Deviation
Community/youth center	1.97	1.08
Affordable housing	2.14	1.32
Health care	2.24	1.28
Bakery	2.53	1.02
Drug store	2.54	1.62
Video rental	2.61	1.23
Clothing store	2.65	1.11
Daycare	2.65	1.25
Bus service	2.68	1.16
Restaurant	2.77	1.61

* 1=very important, 2=important, 3= somewhat important, 4= not important

Table 2

Community Assets that Attracted Respondents to the Town of Poultney

Community Assets	Votes
Small size of the community	42%
The area's natural beauty	42%
The rural setting	39%
The college	30%
Friendly people	22%
Recreational opportunities	21%
Close to employment	17%
Family moved here	14%
Lifestyle	13%
The cost of living	6%

Several survey questions addressed residents' recreational interests and habits. Most highly ranked were outdoor activities like hiking, walking, and running, followed by cycling/mountain biking, swimming, snow sports (skiing, snowboarding), and boating/water sports. Other activities mentioned less frequently were hunting, gardening, golf, snowmobiling/ four-wheeling, skating, arts/music/crafts, rock climbing, and fitness center activities (see Table 3). Outdoor recreational activities thus appear to rank highly in survey respondents' enjoyments. This preference for outdoor recreation as well as respondents' stated service needs indicate needed improvements and investments in the area of recreation and entertainment infrastructure (see Table 4).

Table 3

Respondents' favorite Activities

Recreational Activity	Votes
Walking/hiking/running	17%
Biking/mountain biking	8%
Swimming	8%
Snow boarding/ skiing	8%
Boating/water sports	7%
Team sports	5%
Fishing	5%
Camping	4%
Movies/social outings	4%

Table 4
Desired Improvements

Desired Change	Votes
Community center	20%
Physical/ Aesthetic improvements	13%
Evening entertainment	13%
Park/ picnic area	11%
Ice skating rink	9%
Hiking/ walking trails	6%
Biking trails	6%
Public pool	4%
River/ lake front improvements	4%

The town’s school system and health-care services received low to moderate marks and may pose a development challenge. Given the importance of quality education and health care in residents’ assessment of their quality of life, the town of Poultney faces some challenges. Schools are ranked merely as good to poor and health care services as poor. Improvements in Poultney’s schools may be especially important since 30% of respondents said they came to Poultney to attend college. Others indicate that they would like to stay or return to the community after completing their education. College-educated populations generally highly value a quality school system.

Continued Learning and Innovation - Follow-up Work and Remaining Questions

Like many small, rural communities, Poultney has not experienced the kind of growth and development that communities in close proximity to metropolitan areas have experienced. Newer development models that question the driving role of the business sector and place a stronger emphasis on residents’ needs and desire for a high quality of life are offering alternative and complementary development opportunities. A resident-focused approach to development is generally also more consistent with the kind of small business development that allows a rural community like Poultney to maintain its small town character, which many residents view as the community’s biggest asset. Yet survey results also indicate considerable challenges. Like many small communities Poultney has a limited customer base and thus limited business development opportunities. In addition, residents’ stated priorities for improving their community stress social interaction space (community center), aesthetic improvements, and improved recreational opportunities. These do not easily lend themselves to private sector development.⁶ A community center, for example, requires public funding, although some community programming can be offered on a for-profit basis. The potential for meeting some of Poultney’s service needs through local small business development may actually be relatively encouraging since residents have an unusually high preference for staying in the community. The local college population adds to the local focus. Development opportunities compatible with residents’ stated preferences that were frequently mentioned in follow up meetings with residents and key stakeholders include small-scale tourism with an outdoor and historical focus and

⁶ These priorities are consistent with the findings of other studies.

“green” manufacturing. Both are compatible with development that seeks to sustain the community’s small town qualities. They are also compatible with Green Mountain College’s environmental and recreational focus. The college can thus play an important role in assisting the community in meeting its development goals by providing support for testing and advancing stated priorities. Apart from providing some needed technical expertise, the college can serve as a place of public discourse where residents’ values and goals are openly discussed and translated into practical solutions for development and service.

So what follow-up steps are possible? First, Poultney succeeded in securing a planning grant for downtown revitalization from the state of Vermont using survey results as evidence of its revitalization potential. The chamber of commerce, which is well represented on the Poultney Downtown Revitalization Steering Committee, plans to use some of the survey information to develop more effective information materials for prospective businesses. Support services for micro-enterprise start-ups may prove particularly useful and could be supported by Green Mountain College’s business department. The survey information can also be used to more effectively communicate Poultney’s assets despite the fact that survey results also indicate the need for considerable improvements in the community’s appeal and services. The development of a trail system along the Poultney river, for example, which has been a priority for the college and the local elementary school, would clearly address residents’ stated preferences and could improve Poultney’s attractiveness to residents and tourists alike. A downtown corridor was identified as the center of Poultney’s downtown revitalization focus. The steering committee brought in a streetscape architect to help the town address its aesthetic improvement needs. Initial drawings helped residents visualize how Poultney might recover its beautiful, historical streetscape. Follow-up is also under way to assess possible options for developing a community center, park and other projects that require public/private partnerships, foundation support or other innovative funding measures.

Much of the follow-up work points to growing efforts of the community to become a learning and innovation-driven community that values the perspectives of local stakeholders and residents. Throughout the project, Green Mountain College faculty and students did not simply act as experts, but made every effort to engage residents and key stakeholders as local experts. This commitment to engaging local experts can be considered an example of citizenship education and public discourse as the, sometimes competing, values of different stakeholder groups become evident in the community’s debate about desirable development options. Quite apart from its practical implications, the Poultney study is also an example of community education and of advancing the notion of a well-educated and engaged public. An open follow-up meeting at the local high school, sponsored by the Downtown Revitalization Steering Committee, brought together a wide range of community members to discuss survey results and follow up steps. The survey, as well as follow up discussions initiated in its wake, have raised awareness of residents’ needs and of viable community revitalization and development options. In the process, local development needs, awareness of the community’s assets and residents’ preferences have taken on more concrete form. Students in turn were engaged in a learning opportunity that advanced their skills (survey design, data collection, data analysis, communication, and development theory), exposed them to a variety of diverse perspectives, actively engaged them with community members, and empowered them to contribute to the community in meaningful ways (freedom for service).

Conclusions

Luther's ideal of *Bildung* as the basis for a well-educated and engaged citizenry, free from ignorance and constraints and free for service, is more than a commitment to abstract educational principals. Freedom from blinding ignorance and the constraints of customs and tradition finds its expression in service to the community that advances the common good as individual members of the community seek to live out their vocation. Such service cannot simply be contemplated, it must be practiced; at the same time, an applied or practical notion of education cannot simply be understood as preparation for a particular service or career, but encompasses a calling beyond individual goals and practical aims. This seeming paradox of freedom from and freedom for, of seeking one's individual calling and advancing the common good, of tradition and innovation is not simply dissolved, but requires a comfortableness with living in the in-between, with living in the tension and dialectic of the theoretical and practical, the human realm and the realm of God.

The concept of vocation encompasses these tensions. Vocation for Luther was rooted in the tradition of the trades and the education provided in the family, and in the many common and everyday tasks of individual and communal life; yet vocation is also rooted in the transcendent, the calling beyond oneself that requires awareness and the ability to reflect and to think critically about the community and one's place in it. In other words, vocation encompasses the aims of a liberal education at its best. This paper offered five characteristics of liberal learning in the Lutheran tradition in an effort to spell out what it might have to offer to liberal arts colleges today. These five characteristics or principals — foundational skills in an interdisciplinary world, diversity and globalization, being engaged in the world, attention to values, and modeling a culture of discourse and innovation — suggest a rethinking of liberal learning. Liberal learning must address basic skills and application in complex real-life issues; it must advance awareness of the diverse perspectives of a wide range of cultures and traditions and of our Judeo-Christian, Western roots; it must be engaged with the community and non-credentialed experts and committed to in-depth inquiry and expertise; it must be dedicated to values education that engages pressing issues of our time, and to making room for contemplation; and it must model a culture committed to discourse and innovation.

Yet how does one implement these principals in the concrete context of a curriculum or course? The example offered here describes a service-learning project that engages students in a local economic development and downtown revitalization project that moves beyond a model of service learning as supporting existing organizations in their work and mission and moves to a model of service learning as social change. The project is decidedly interdisciplinary and complex, while offering opportunities for addressing disciplinary-based theory and methodological approaches; it introduces students to multiple stakeholder perspectives, their expertise, and their hidden and not-so-hidden agendas; it offers students and faculty opportunities for engagement with the community in which they live and work; it draws attention to complex questions of values as one seeks to address a community's economic development needs while at the same time addressing broader needs of community life and its quality; and it offers an example of stakeholder discourse and innovation.

Particularly the last of the five characteristics of liberal learning, modeling a culture of discourse and innovation, shifts attention from a focus on learning outcomes and content, to a focus on institutional practice. Can we as liberal arts colleges be and

become discursive communities? Can we model discourse committed to diversity, innovation, and values? Can we model rigorous inquiry that is not just disciplinary and not just expert based, but interdisciplinary and participatory? To become such a community we must invariably focus on faculty and staff development. Interdisciplinary work, the work of the public scholar, the work of the engaged scholar-teacher committed to working with student collaborators, the work of the advisor, the work of linking curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that make a difference in local and global communities, the work of creating a deliberative campus culture that embraces innovation all require time, resources and practice. Yet practicing what we preach we must, lest we run the risk of being left behind, encumbered by an educational model that is lost in the past.

As U.S. higher education seeks direction for the 21st century, liberal arts colleges have an essential role to play as we build on our heritage of educating students for lifelong learning and citizenship in a global world. And church colleges have a particularly important role to play as we uphold and update our heritage for the 21st century. The concept of vocation lends itself well to defining what we are about as we seek to prepare students for fulfilling and successful lives, and as we seek to prepare ourselves for claiming a heritage of reform in our communities and our world. Our contributions may not necessarily put us in a comfortable place as we seek to question existing answers rather than simply answering existing questions. Yet particularly as Lutheran colleges we may be able to more than accept this station. We are, after all, familiar with the ongoing process of questioning and seeking that comes with living between the two kingdoms.

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