Introduction

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See if this phrase sounds familiar – “I don’t see how we can call ourselves a liberal arts college and not require _____.” You fill in the blank. This was an oft-repeated phrase during recent debates at my institution about the revision of our general education requirements, and it came from across the disciplines – each arguing for its piece of the pie. The answer, in most cases, was “Easy. Modern language, art, mathematics, history, theology, literature, philosophy, biology, psychology, physics, anthropology, chemistry – each has been excluded from some conception of a liberal arts education, just as each has been included in some conception of a liberal arts education.”

The problem we faced, as we tried to shape a curriculum that would express our identity as a Christian liberal arts institution, was that we had too vague an understanding of the term “liberal arts” – or at least no shared understanding of it. And this is not at all surprising. Surveying the history of higher education in Europe and America, quickly reveals that the phrase has been used in very many ways, ways that often conflict with one another.

For example, if any curriculum in the history of Western education has the right to claim to be a liberal arts education, it is the curriculum of the medieval university. That curriculum was, after all, composed of the seven classical liberal arts. Yet the curriculum advanced by the renaissance humanists in protest of the medieval university curriculum matches contemporary understandings of the liberal arts far more closely than that of the medieval universities. Indeed many identify the humanities (the disciplines advanced by the humanists) with the liberal arts, an identification that flies in the face of at least the historical origins of the terms, in which they were understood in stark contrast.

As Christian institutions identify themselves as providing a liberal arts education, they either tacitly or explicitly affirm the goals of a liberal arts education. But the diversity of liberal arts traditions makes clear that this affirmation must be importantly qualified. With which liberal arts tradition are we identifying?

It was just this question, and others surrounding it, that roughly 20 faculty and staff from Westmont College came together to discuss during a year-long project in 2001-2002, culminating in a week-long summer workshop. What follows are the papers that came out of that workshop.

The contributions reflect the different concerns of the participants. Some are more theoretical in nature, some more historical. Several focus on the role of a given discipline in a liberal arts education. Still others focus on pedagogical matters. A number come from student life staff and one from a development officer. Some of these offer insights into the relationship of these parts of the college to the academic side in accomplishing the goals of a Christian liberal arts education. Others discuss how one’s work in these areas is different in a Christian liberal arts community than it might be elsewhere. Together these papers offer a rich resource for faculty, administrators, and staff in many different roles in a Christian liberal arts community.

By way of introduction, I will offer some thoughts on the differences between distinct liberal arts traditions, on how these traditions differ from other views of education, and on how these various approaches to education intersect with different Christian traditions. The best way, I think, to distinguish different educational traditions is by their answer to the question: What is education for? or Why is it valuable? or Why pursue it? Aristotle approached the question this
way, and in doing so arrived at the famous distinction between liberal and practical education. While practical education was pursued as means to some further end, liberal education was pursued as an end in itself. Liberal education was free in the sense of being unconstrained by concerns for its usefulness.

Many still see this as the hallmark of a liberal education. College catalogs that make “love of learning” a goal of students’ education are making an appeal to this tradition. Students who, when asked “A philosophy major? What are you going to do with that?” respond, “That’s not the point, the ideas are interesting in their own right” have been successfully converted to this view of liberal education (and it usually is a conversion.) When I delight in such conversions, and I do, I reveal my own identification with this tradition.

Indeed this educational ideal is embedded within institutions and disciplines that one might initially regard as offering practical education. Much scholarly research is undertaken with the simple goal of pushing back the frontiers of the discipline, without regard for the applicability of the research results to practical problems. The institutional differences between liberal arts colleges and research universities might suggest that liberal education happens at liberal arts colleges and that the research that goes on in major universities is not a part of the liberal arts tradition. But that is simply not true. Pure research, pursued simply for the purpose of discovery, stands firmly within this first tradition of liberal arts education, which we might call the scholarly tradition.

Nevertheless, defining liberal education as having strictly intrinsic rather than instrumental value has been opposed by many since at least Roman antiquity (Cicero), and perhaps even by contemporaries of Aristotle himself. In Roman antiquity, what distinguished a liberal education was that it was education for the free man as opposed to the slave, and the free man’s education was clearly a useful education. But its use was not for trade, or manufacturing, or engineering, or agriculture, but for civic leadership. So another major tradition in liberal education distinguishes it, not by whether or not the learning was useful for some purpose beyond itself, but rather by what kind of use it was put to. If its objective was to shape the character of the student, it was deemed liberal, if it was to develop vocational skills in the student, it was deemed practical.

So there are at least two ways of thinking of liberal education, one as pursuing knowledge for its own sake, the other as valuing it for what it can do for the character of the student. This is a way of stating the distinction made famous by Bruce Kimball in his oft-cited Orators and Philosophers. However, Kimball understates important differences in how education might shape the student’s character. Educators might be after very different things in attempting to shape the character of the student. In fact we can discern two major streams within those understandings of liberal education that seek primarily to shape character through education.

The first, stretching back to the renaissance and beyond to late antiquity, seeks to inculcate the culture’s aesthetic and moral values in the student so that he or she (and until quite recently it really was he) might be prepared for a leadership role in the society, or more properly, so that those predetermined by blood to have leadership roles might be suitable bearers of the tradition. We might call this the humanistic tradition.¹ This is the tradition to which Matthew Arnold

¹ Recognizing the gendered nature of the term, I have elsewhere referred to this tradition as the “gentlemanly tradition” since in its origins it really was an education for males of the aristocracy. (Hoeckley).
appealed when he argued that the purpose of an education was to pass on “the best which has been thought and said” (82, Wilson 6)

The second stream is more recent, rooted in the enlightenment, though it often looks to Socrates for inspiration. The educational goals of the enlightenment and the liberalism that succeeded it stand in stark contrast to those of renaissance humanism. Where the humanists sought to inculcate the values of the tradition in the student, the enlightenment sought to throw off tradition. Appealing to traditional authorities was seen at least as intellectual weakness if not cowardice. The greatest, perhaps the sole virtue that education is to produce is autonomy – as Kant famously put it “the courage to use your own understanding!”

This anti-traditional tradition is the source of the connection between liberal education and liberation. Education was to allow the student, and thereby the society, to throw off the shackles of ignorance, superstition, and parochialism, and to stand up to traditional authorities with the power of his (and, not much later, her) own reason. Liberal education, on this enlightenment view, is liberating education. Thus we might call this the liberating tradition.

What emerge then are three very different ways of thinking about the purpose of education yielding three major liberal arts traditions each appealing to a different sense of freedom. The scholarly tradition pursues the truth free of constraint by concerns for practical application. The humanistic tradition offers an education for the free man. The liberating tradition offers a freeing or liberating education.

The three liberal arts traditions are, as I have already indicated, by no means the only responses to the question: what is the purpose of education? In fact two other responses dominate American higher education today. They are the vocational tradition and the applied research tradition. Each of these is practical education in Aristotle’s sense – each sees education as having instrumental value, though its instrumental value does not lie in what it does for the character of the student.

Vocational education, like gentlemanly and liberating education, focuses on changing the student, but that change has less to do with the student’s values, or character, or breadth of understanding and more do with the student’s mastery of the specialized skills and knowledge necessary for a particular role in the economy. It should be noted that the distinction between humanistic and vocational education has never been absolute. Many of those who went through colonial and antebellum colleges in America, colleges clearly in the humanistic tradition, were preparing for ministry. And the distinction between humanistic and vocational education has only grown increasingly blurred in the twentieth century, principally because the civic leadership roles once played by the recipients of humanistic education, gentlemen, is now played by highly skilled professionals. A humanistic education might serve you in your role as civic leader, but it is increasingly unlikely in our society that you will play that role without a vocational education.

The applied research tradition has much in common with the scholarly tradition. With the scholarly tradition it emphasizes expanding knowledge over shaping the student. But for the applied research tradition, discovery is not an end in itself. The applied research tradition seeks knowledge for the sake of satisfying social needs or wants – curing disease, relieving poverty, providing energy, strengthening the military. This tradition is rooted in the scientific revolution with its emphasis on mastering nature, though with the application of the scientific method to human questions beginning in the 19th century, it has moved well beyond the mastery nature to, shall we say, the mastery of humankind itself.

Given the many different purposes for higher education, and the very different uses of the term liberal education, it’s no wonder academic institutions struggle with coherence. Most of
them are trying to do all of these things at once. In many, different departments draw upon different educational visions, and even within departments there might be very different conceptions. Imagine the varied responses one might get from within, say, an English department to the question “Why study literature?”

And the situation is only made messier for Christian institutions. For the goals of a Christian education may or may not cohere with the goals of these various traditions in liberal and practical education. This point was forcefully made some dozen years ago by Eric Springsted in “Liberal Individuals and Liberal Education” (Springsted 467-78). There he charged that church-related schools, while they pay lip-service to their Christian heritage, are really in the business of offering an education in the values the enlightenment and classical liberalism, what I am calling a liberating education. He claims the emphasis on individual autonomy in liberal education is quite at odds with the communitarian values of Christianity.

Springsted is of course right that Christian educators must think carefully about the implications of theological commitments for their educational goals. And he might well be right that what is going on in the classrooms of many Christian colleges is at odds with Christian values. But he oversimplifies the matter to juxtapose Christian communitarian values to liberal individualism. Not only is liberal education a much more diverse phenomenon than this recognizes, the Christian tradition is as well.

It may well be that the communal emphasis in Catholicism is at odds with the emphasis on autonomy of the liberating tradition, and that its relatively high estimation of the authority of tradition probably aligns more naturally with the humanistic tradition (although the emergence of liberation theology over the past thirty years or so might suggest otherwise). But the protestant tradition is a very different matter. Individualism is present in the early reformers’ objection to the mediating role of the priesthood. And personal autonomy lies behind the Anabaptist insistence on adult baptism. The enlightenment may have been anti-clerical in many of its manifestations, but it was certainly indebted to prior intellectual movements within Christian thought.

And if the germ of individualism is present in the early reformation, it comes to be nearly definitive of post-enlightenment expressions of protestant Christianity. Consider evangelicalism’s strong emphasis on the individual making a decision for Christ, on the believer’s personal relationship with Christ, and its growing anti-institutionalism and anti-traditionalism as manifested in the proliferation of non-denominational churches. Such traditions might have more in common with the liberating tradition than with the humanistic tradition (though this is certainly an irony given that many in the liberating tradition see their role as liberating students from the perceived dogmatism of their religious communities).

Moreover, protestant traditions with a strong view of the fall will typically take a dim view of human reason and with it of secular learning. Such traditions are unlikely to see the reading of classic texts outside the Christian tradition as contributing to the moral formation of the student. Indeed, for such traditions moral formation is not likely to be a role for academic institutions to play, with the possible exception of the bible or theology department. Moral formation is the role of the church. Academic institutions serve these traditions by providing students with the knowledge and skills to play roles in society that further the kingdom of God. Given their theological assumptions, such traditions might rightly eschew the liberal arts traditions altogether in favor of the vocational or applied research traditions.

The upshot of this is in essence a call for diversity within Christian higher education. Rather than cobbling together goals of different educational and Christian traditions – goals that may
well pull in different directions – into some generic Christian higher education, we should allow our different theological traditions to express themselves in different philosophies of education. Doing so is much more likely to result in a coherent education. Nor should we import a coherent philosophy of education from a Christian tradition with different theological emphases from our own. Two movements have dominated Christian higher education over the past two decades – the integration of faith and learning, and scholarship from a Christian perspective. Both of these are quite natural expressions of the Reformed tradition, especially as interpreted by Abraham Kuyper. But it is not at all obvious that they are natural expressions of, for example, the Lutheran or Catholic traditions.

What we need then, are many Christian educational visions – visions that reflect the theological, historical, and sociological distinctiveness of the many Christian traditions. Not that we should balkanize. Certainly we have much to learn from one another, and might profitably and coherently draw from one another’s visions. But we can do so only if we know ourselves. We should know our theological, historical, and social roots and develop visions of Christian higher education that grow naturally from them.


