A Christian Liberal Arts Community:  
The Reason and the Need for Residence Life  

David Johnstone

Introduction

As American troops moved into Afghanistan in the fall of 2002, they were confronted with a disturbing situation. Among the prisoners of war, a 20-year-old California man turned Taliban fighter had been identified. John Walker Lindh “chose to reject American liberalism in order to serve a regime that oppressed women, stoned homosexuals to death and executed dissidents” (“Treasonous Reflections”). His education seemed to be a mix of alternative schools, his mother’s Buddhism, Malcolm X’s Islam, and Islamic studies in Pakistan and Yemen (Alonzo-Zaldivar). Neighbors boasted that not only had he learned “to accept other cultures and peoples,” but that the Bay area, where he is from, also “encourages critical thinking about the US role in the world” (“Treasonous Reflections”). While his learning seems to have been diverse, an education that truly liberated him seemed to have been elusive. Upon surveying the details of his life, he did not seem to have a community that encouraged him towards a life of discipline and accountability. Using this observation as a jumping point for a discussion of the role of community in a liberal arts education [and not caring to spend more time on this man], I would observe that the academic community plays a significant role in a student’s life and education. Further, I would suggest that a college’s residence life program is the best equipped and positioned to encourage the creation, development and maturity of a campus community.

Community and the Liberal Arts

The question arises whether a community is really a significant part of the learning process. Repeatedly asking students whether they would be able to learn by themselves, their answer has been a unanimous “no.” In fact, panic enters their eyes when they try to imagine learning course material, understanding theories and doing lab work without someone with whom they can interact. There is an aspect of the biblical “iron sharpens iron” in the pursuit of understanding. Beyond this, Parker Palmer identifies that “truth” itself is a relational pursuit. It is “to be found in the dialogue of knowers and knowns” (55). The relational aspects of learning are the foundations of an educational community.

The notion of a citizenship that benefits the community as the end goal has long been a part of the understanding for a liberal education. For the classical Romans, “The typical justification for the study of the liberal arts seems to have been that such study is essential if a man is to play the role of citizen of the republic” (Calvin 2). With the return to classicism, the humanists asserted, “the aim of education is to prepare the student to play his role of citizen in the city.” Some interpreters have even suggested that if “the life of man as a citizen is the proper aim of education; liberal studies were essential to this end” (Calvin 10). This view of the purpose of a liberal arts education was still prevalent up to the middle of the twentieth century (Marsden). In conjunction with preparing a person for a role as a citizen within their community, a liberal arts education also sought to form individuals of good character and virtue (Calvin 2,10). These were the twin aims of classical liberal arts.

My argument, however, is that the community should not surface only in the goals for a liberal arts education. The community is also an essential component in the success of a liberal arts education. While most would agree that a liberal arts education should encourage thoughtful
citizens and persons of character, the communities in which individuals are educated are also tremendously important. Thus, the community has a role in the means and the end of the liberal arts education. Ernest Boyer observes, “the effectiveness of the undergraduate experience relates to the quality of campus life” (191). Boyer’s use of the word “quality” can be determined by a student’s level of involvement, participation, engagement, and interaction in campus life. This quality is directly tied to the relationships students build with peers, staff, and faculty. They will appreciate their education, but they will value the relationships. Further reflecting on cognitive, faith, and moral development, Sharon Daloz Parks asserts that growth “absolutely depends on the interaction between the person and his or her environment” (1986, 61). It is clear that a campus environment can have a tremendous impact on the success and survival of a student. Therefore, to assert that a campus environment can have a significant influence on the development of a student is not unusual. Yet, how is a community placed within a pedagogical paradigm? How is it intentionally used for educating students?

**Community and the Learning Process**

V. James Mannoia, Jr. explains why the notion of community is important for the pedagogical enterprise. He outlines four variables as being essential for what he describes as critical commitment. Being neither dogmatic nor cynical, critical commitment, as Mannoia describes it, is:

… beyond dogmatism in applying the best critical tools available to the real questions of life. They go beyond cynical skepticism in their willingness to be committed in spite of doubt. They recognize the limitations of human understanding and yet are prepared to take a stand and even stake their lives (42-43).

**Critical commitment** is one way of describing the aims and goals of a liberal arts education. It propels a student to grasp a mixture of knowledge and understanding in order to make wise decisions. It enables a student to assess information and extrapolate implications, which enable them to commit themselves to strong positions with humility and realism.

The four variables that Mannoia suggests are necessary to encourage critical commitment are: provoking dissonance, encouraging habituation while providing both modeling and community. These factors frequently dovetail, but all are necessary for deep growth. Ideally, all aspects of the campus experience are tools for creating dissonance in a student’s life: the material taught in the classroom, the relationships she observes between faculty and staff, the worship that happens in chapel, and the conversations with peers over a meal are all means by which dissatisfaction, questions and “angst” are created. These tools challenge the way students experience their lives. They encourage students to examine the lens by which they view the world. Dissonance by itself does not bring the student to a level of understanding and wisdom. The purpose of dissonance is to encourage the student to identify and integrate the implications of their reflections into a way of life that exhibits more integrity. These implications are translated into habits, patterns and “ways of living” which reflect a thoughtful and critical response to these situations which provoke questions. However, living examples that demonstrate and provide options for responding to these issues must also be present. These models are individuals that provide students with multiple responses or even paradigms for responding to situations or living their life. Besides modeling, a student also needs an
environment that provides security and safety. A community provides the context that gives the student this sense of security in the exploration of their own identity and learning (77-90).

In this discussion of the liberal arts, we are particularly concerned about Christian liberal arts. Therefore, in a discussion about community and the liberal arts, it is necessary to state the obvious: Jesus Christ is and should be the center of any campus community. As Mitchell writes:

If community has to do with mutual compatibility, similarities in educational background, psychological make-up, or social status, rather than the Lordship of Jesus, we are building on the premise that something more than Jesus is necessary for unity to occur (40).

Christ has to be the center of any institution that claims allegiance to him.

There is a challenge in defining the term “community,” for it can be a fluid term, difficult to identify and define. It is used to describe groups with similar aspirations, and others who have large nebulous shared experiences. I would suggest that, in the light of what Mannoia identifies as being needed for deep learning, a community needs to provide and encourage a colloquial of factors in order to successfully be a part of the educational process. While I will describe these in different terms, Parks has captured the essence of what a community needs for it to be an educational agent. A community must provide for its members a balance of what she calls the “two great yearnings.” It seeks to respond to “the yearning for exercise of one’s own distinct agency (one’s own power to make a difference) and the yearning for belonging, connection, inclusion, relationship, and intimacy” (2000).

Community as a Place of Security and Intimacy

As Parks suggests, students are desperate for intimacy. Their friendships are inviolable and of great influence (Derryberry). The greatest sin is betrayal. Ironically, while they seek depth in their relationships, they are surrounded by a culture that is fearful of intimacy. Intimacy implies risk, commitment and possible pain. North American culture is permeated with sexual imagery that extols the virtues of gratuitous sex. There is no intimacy in the casualness of media depicted sexual relationships. It is no wonder that students are deeply conflicted. As Levine and Cureton observe, “Traditional dating is largely dead on college campuses” (109). Students move toward group dates, casual one-night stands, or other unpartnered group activities as a way of preventing the vulnerability of close relationships. These are “practice[s] that provide… protection from deeper involvement and intimacy” (109). With parallel thoughts in their conscious and unconscious, students are afraid of intimacy, yet are longing to be known. While they are hesitant to move towards vulnerability, they have an intuitive desperation for relationships deeply rooted in trust, mercy, and kindness.

Students are coming from hard, painful backgrounds permeated with abuse, eating disorders, family suicides, school, and personal violence, drugs, sexual experience and spiritual desperation. In Levine and Cureton’s study, “deans of students reported on the growing rate of dysfunctional families among their students. They talked of violence; instability; blended families; emotional, sexual and financial problems.” Freshmen are starting at a different place than past student generations. Christian students have not been protected from these traumas. “The bottom line is that students are coming to college overwhelmed and more damaged than those in previous years.” As the theme for the sitcom Cheers sings, students are looking for a place where “everyone knows their name.” To be known, to be able to trust, to be accepted
regardless of the things you do or don’t do is the yearning of their heart. Many long for roots, a sense of place, and strong relationships, but they fear they will never have them (95).

This fear is the greatest tragedy. For the Christian campus is more than able to meet the “yearning” of these students. A Christian campus can be a place of refuge for the fearful; it can bring grace and trust into their lives. A Christian campus community can [and should] provide deep opportunities for security and the possibilities for intimacy. How this works out in real terms can be seen by the following responses to students:

1. A young woman whose family has been obsessive about exercise, athletics and appearance was in the midst of major struggles with bulimia. She regularly vomited; daily used suppositories and exercised two or three time a day. She founds grace, kindness and affirmation from peers, staff and teachers not for what she accomplished or how she appeared. She founds that others can love her just for being a child of God.

2. A male freshman was suspended for a major alcohol situation and then was caught up in another significant discipline issue. He was considered a “bad boy” on campus, but at home, he was the “good boy.” At home, all he did was drink, all his friends snorted coke. Through the investment of staff and students, he began to make wiser choices about the way he lived. Most of all, he came to understand that acceptance is not contingent on what he does or does not do.

3. The collaborating of Residence Life staff with academic advisors to intervene in the lives of students who are struggling academically demonstrated to students that they are not just a faceless number.

Answering work orders, navigating network concerns, responding to medical emergencies, and learning names all become a means for communicating to the student that they have a place in this community. That someone is prepared to expend some energy for their sake is often a surprise to many of them. These seemingly mundane tasks are all ways to assist a student to realize that it is possible to develop intimacy, find people to trust and have a place of refuge and security. When dissonance arises, an environment of security is paramount for a student. However, at the same time the community and environment must be a place to challenge, provoke, and broaden the student’s vision.

Community as a place of Significance and Purpose

The reality of a healthy community is one that is able to look to the needs of its members by providing intimacy, security, and deep relationships. However, if this becomes the primary hallmark of a group, it becomes dangerously exclusive and insular. If a community asserts that one of its missions is to reflect Jesus (as “Christian liberal arts” implies) it must be inclusive and purposeful. For a community and its members to maintain a life that exhibits the life of Christ they must seek both the inward care of its members and external impact on the world. This need for an external impact is deeply felt by all students. It is a need “to make a difference” (Parks 2000).

This need to make a difference is also defined as a need for significance. I would assert that all human beings have a need for both security and significance. They need a place of safety, but they also need to have a purpose. Students need to realize that they will be missed. Someone will notice if they are not present; they have a role to play in this world. It is tied to their visions and dreams about life. They are desperate to know what happens after college. Their four years
at college should be a time when they begin to see how they might collaborate with the Spirit of God in multiple vocations and places. It should be a time when they are surprised with how God uses them in current and future moments. It is a time when their vision and worldview is blown beyond their horizon.

How is this done through a residence life program? It is done by challenging students to consider leadership roles for which they do not feel qualified. It is by assisting them with study skills that open up the vistas of an undeclared major to the pursuit of scholarship in Mathematics. It is encouraging them to participate in debating tournaments that demonstrate their skills as communicators. It is helping the “prima donnas” “get over themselves” so that they are able to extend kindness and blessing to others. It is by bringing faculty and staff to share their stories that students discover new models for living their lives. By providing tools, resources, relationships and connections, we assist students to envision what they can and might do in the spheres in which they live.

Is this “community building” restricted to residence life? I would suggest that all who describe themselves as members of the community have a responsibility for it. While residence life may be the best equipped and structured to encourage a community’s growth, all members have a role to play. Too often individuals will excuse themselves by asserting that they are not trained well enough in “that area”, or “that they are not a good enough model.” They are concerned that they may do more harm than good or they just want an excuse. Nothing can be said to the faculty or staff member who does not want to interact with students in less than a formal classroom role. However, to those who disqualify themselves, a change of perspective is needed. It is true that not everyone is a professional counselor, mentor, or advisor. As well, students do not need more peers (those who are equal). They need those who are prepared to stand beside them or in “their corner.” Standing beside them can be as simple as teaching a student to bake a pie, or having them join you in changing the oil of your car. It is as uncomplicated as setting an extra plate and having the student join you for a meal. There is something significant about sharing the seemingly mundane things of life with someone who rarely experiences them. A meal without a tray; laying on a non-institutional carpet with a child; having a candle lit in a dining room; washing dishes after a meal are some of the things a student never experiences while at college. These experiences become moments of conversation and connection between faculty/staff and a student. Seize these opportunities; the risk is worth the extremely high return one receives. As well, the campus community is deepened every time this happens.

**Community is the reason for Residence Life**

The *Annapolis Group*, an assembly of leading liberal arts institutions and their leaders, has written in its mission statement that “residential liberal arts colleges, with the kind of community of learning and living they create, offer one of the most transforming environments in which to pursue a postsecondary education” (www.anapolisgroup.org).

A campus residence life program, if it seizes the vision of community building, is the best-positioned group to assist in the development of the environment needed for learning. Purely by its influence on vast numbers of the residential liberal arts college, it has the ability to shape and sculpt the experiences and culture of the campus.

However residence life’s greatest asset is also its greatest weakness. Residence Life staff members are some of the few on a college campus who are given the mandate and time to establish relationships with students, staff, and faculty. Theirs is the opportunity to establish
connections between the different areas of campus. They are free to use multiple means and styles in order to foster understanding and respect between the various spheres that make up a college.

Yet, as Mannoia warns a complete focus on the relational poses some possible dangers. He writes,

…there is a “divide’ between those responsible for formal curriculum and those responsible for residence life. One staff is responsible for social development, another for faith development, another for cognitive development… (155).

It causes a bifurcation on the campus. Too often, a residence life program is primarily focused on social development. It needs to focus on social, cognitive, ethical and faith development simultaneously. It needs to assist in transforming “the summer camp feel” and the “cruise ship experience” of the residence hall into a force that assists in the educational mission of the college. The collaboration between Student/Residence Life and the academic divisions is essential for the success of the institution’s educational mission in trying to develop a wise, knowledgeable, thoughtful, and whole student. A casual observer acknowledges that students are in college to learn and that most of the cognitive development occurs in the classroom and laboratory. Reality also demonstrates that students only spend about 50 hours per week in class and in studies [if they are diligent]. Over 100 hours of discretionary time are left for sleeping, eating, playing, and “hanging out.” The bulk of that time is spent within the residence hall or with friends and roommates. If there is to be a development of the implications of classroom instruction in the lives of students, those responsible for shaping the residence halls must intentionally create environments, opportunities and communities that allow for this learning to take place. My hope is that this reflection may become a primer for discussion that will provoke both residence life and academic programs to utilize, maximize, and transform campus communities to assist in the goals of a Christian liberal arts education. Therefore as stated above, a campus residence life program is potentially the best-positioned group to encourage the growth of community for the educational purposes of a liberal arts college. Soli Deo Gloria.
Works Cited


