The Role Of The Career Center In A Christian Liberal Arts College:  
Partner Or Periphery?  
Dana Alexander

The issue of career development in a liberal arts college can be seen as an elephant in the middle of the living room that only a part of the family wants to acknowledge. Though occupational options, career decision-making, the financial implications of job choices, fitting into the world of work, determining the core of one’s vocational identity, discovering and articulating central motivations/interests/skills/values, discerning God’s “call,” and planning for vocational\(^1\) life after graduation, may be uppermost in the minds of many students (and perhaps even more parents), this aspect of college experience is often marginalized to a department that has little to do with academics or academic programming. Addressing these concerns may be seen by some in the academic community (if it is seen at all) as at best important for alumni satisfaction, and at worst, a necessary evil that students expect and must therefore be provided. The career planning department in liberal arts institutions rarely has any structural relationship to academics, being almost always situated in the student life arena, and I would argue, is most often perceived by faculty as a place to refer students for very practical purposes such as resume preparation, interviewing practice, and accessing job listings.

This paper will attempt to establish the importance of student career development to the mission of a liberal arts college, to explore the question of why career development related issues are often left out of the academic enterprise in liberal arts institutions, and to present some preliminary suggestions of ways to remedy that.

What is the role of the career counselor in a liberal arts college? We need to have some understanding of the goals of the career professional to answer that question. Trained career counselors see as their primary goal to facilitate the unfolding discovery and articulation of the personhood and identity of students such that they can begin to understand the vocational options available to them and make wise decisions based on that knowledge. At its best, this process should be broad and holistic, helping students to get a handle on their deep motivations, interests, personality, skills and values. These are not determined in a vacuum but from virtually all they have experienced in life. But they often unfold and become clear during their college years, not the least in their daily classroom encounters with issues, subject matter, readings, ideas, out-of-class experiences (e.g., internships), etc. Who a student is becoming and how their vocational identity is being shaped should be integrally related to their academic experience. There are some key moments when this can become evident, such as the point at which a major must be chosen. This can be a purely pragmatic decision, a choice forced by parents, a wild guess based on little reflection, or it can be a part of the process of determining a vocational identity. Deciding on further education or employment after graduation continues the process and should be congruently aligned to one’s self knowledge and emerging understanding of meaningful decisions based on that knowledge. For the Christian student, decision-making in this area would involve a deeper understanding of natural gifting and vocational calling, which we would strive for in a fully realized Christian liberal arts education.

\(^1\) “vocation” can be defined in various ways, but for the purposes of this paper I mean it to be work that is congruent with an individuals’ natural talents, skills and interests.
Coming up with a definition of “liberal arts” is a thorny proposition and I don’t presume to do that here. And yet it seems axiomatic that in the process of a quality liberal arts education, as students become more knowledgeable about the world in all its diversity, they also become increasingly aware and knowledgeable about themselves. Education involves the developing of identity in the broadest sense of that word. What a student chooses to study and focus on is (or should be) in part a function of identity and personhood. Writing and speaking are in part an expression of identity. Vocational choice is the same, and must not be ignored or left unexplored if an education is to be complete.

This would seem to be of particular importance at a Christian liberal arts college where the scriptural understanding (and the legacy of the Reformation) of “calling” is deeply rooted in our ethos. I would suggest that two of the major questions of student self identity come to the forefront in the career development process at a Christian liberal arts college: Who am I? And, What am I called by God to do with my life? There are no more basic issues, and yet it seems that too often they are primarily touched on by the periphery of the institution rather than at its core. If participating in and helping to facilitate the shaping of student identity and personhood is part of the mission of a liberal arts education, then the vocational dimension of that education cannot be overlooked or marginalized.

One of the ways in which a Christian liberal arts college would distinguish itself from a secular one is in the attempt to address the issues of career and its relationship to God’s call. This is an enormously complex area, touching on (at least) psychology, theology, and ethics, and is not the subject of this paper. But when we do surveys of topics of interest to students, this often tops the list, and my experience in talking with career directors at other Christian colleges is that the same holds true there. The question remains of how and where a Christian liberal arts college deals with this area and where specifically in the larger academic program it can be addressed. Is this an issue only for the chaplain and student life programming to tackle?

That fact that college is “pre-vocational” for most students does not diminish the magnitude of the place of employment in an individual’s lifespan. Is there any more central or all-consuming role in the life of most people than that of “worker”? Does it not require the expending of immense amounts of time and effort for most of our lifetimes? As essayist Lance Morrow says, “work is simply the business of life, as matter-of-fact as sex and breathing” (Morrow 93-4). Should such a significant dimension of life not be the source of equally important study, research and focus, both academically and personally?

I wonder about how a liberal arts college addresses issues outside the purview, but of great interest to, the career counselor. Where do students learn about the role of work in society; unions and the history of labor movements; the sociological, economic, and psychological implications of how work is (and has been) done in the world; the impact of work on family life and other roles; the moral and ethical aspects of work and employment; the theology of work; how personal identity is realized through vocational (and pre-vocational) choices – just to name some of the most obvious? I sense this may be missing in the liberal arts curriculum, or at least that many students may graduate with little understanding of these things. Could a case not be made for the importance of “vocation and work through the curriculum,” as has been made for diversity, speaking, and writing? The idea of career development would then be much broader

\[2\] Defining work is a slippery proposition, but I think Keith Thomas’ is as good as any: “Work has an end beyond itself, being designed to produce or achieve something; it involves a degree of obligation or necessity, being a task that others set for us or that we set ourselves; and it is arduous, involving effort and persistence beyond the point at which the task ceases to be wholly pleasurable.” (xiv).
and deeper than simply one’s personal decision of what kind of work to do and would sensitize students to how they are acted upon by, and act on, the vocational world they enter. Their role of “worker” would then be informed by many of the academic disciplines in the college, where the spotlight of that dimension would be brought to bear. In the Christian liberal arts college that should also include an examination of vocation and “calling” from theological and psychological perspectives, again, beyond the strictly personal.

If I am correct in my assumption that career development tends to be marginalized in the liberal arts college, it is important to get a handle on why that might be so. I see three main reasons.

First, and perhaps most fundamentally, from the beginning of our encounter with work and labor, humans have had a highly ambivalent, conflicted attitude toward it. Morrow says that from the time of Adam there has been a “perfectly understandable prejudice against work,” and that “the Lord’s word said that work was something bad: a punishment…” (93). While some theologians might dispute that interpretation, it certainly was the view of the Romans and the Greeks, whose philosophers are in some ways the “fathers” of the liberal arts. Keith Thomas says that a “view of work as inherently repugnant [goes] back to remote antiquity.” (xviii) “To the Greeks,” writes Leland Ryken, “work was a curse and something beneath the dignity of a free person” and “leisure was the goal of life.” He goes on to suggest that “work fared only slightly better in Roman antiquity,” and quotes Cicero asserting that “the toil of a hired worker who is paid only for his toil and not for artistic skill, is unworthy of a free man and is sordid in character” (64-5).

More positive attitudes toward work emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Thomas suggests, when theologians stressed its social and moral usefulness and as a cure for idleness, “but they did not represent work as innately satisfying” (xviii). The Middle Ages saw the ascendency of the dividing of work into the sacred and secular, elevating the former and degrading the latter. Modern Christians no doubt still live with some vestige of this attitude as seen, for instance, in many students today seeming to place mission or pastoral work above any other. Ryken describes how in the Renaissance and the Reformation work is elevated and valued. For the Reformers it is of course closely tied to their understanding of what it means to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Here begins the idea of each believer having a calling and of work therefore being sacred. Puritans took a utilitarian but not entirely negative view of work, following Paul’s admonition that those who don’t work don’t eat, and seeing work as primarily a divine command that kept people “out of mischief and enabled them to provide for themselves” (Thomas xviii).

In the Enlightenment, according to Ryken, we get the secularizing of the Protestant work ethic and a distortion that leads to self-interest and expediency. With the coming of the industrial revolution – despite Marx’s view that work is potentially liberating, leading to self-realization and freedom – Thomas rightly suggests that most people continued to regard work as “a tedious necessity,” where “the object of working was to acquire wealth, and the object of wealth was to avoid having to work” (xix, xvii).

This exceedingly truncated review is simply to suggest that humankind has had very contradictory attitudes toward work, and no unified view in either the secular or Christian

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3 Kimball would say however that there has been a “misguided appeal to Aristotle and, sometimes Plato, who are cited as originators and defenders of the distinction between ‘useful’ and ‘liberal,’” and that “this interpretation…does not do them justice” in that “neither [were] committed to the exclusionary rationale that studies that are useful in one’s work, career, or profession are ipso facto illiberal.” (Kimball 231)
worlds. It might be fair though to suggest that (not surprisingly) for most laborers in the history of the world, the attitude toward work has been more negative than not. I wonder if this negative view infuses the liberal arts approach and whether in fact some of the remnants of the perspective of antiquity remain. Perhaps in focusing on an elevation of the “life of the mind,” those who advocate for the liberal arts end up devaluing work simply by omission. By failing to make the connection between education and vocation, between what is learned and what one ends up doing, a traditional liberal arts education may give short shrift to the importance of work in personal life and society, and cast a negative – if unintentional – light on the life of work that will follow graduation.

Second, historically, liberal arts representatives have appeared to have an ambivalent, changing and uncertain view concerning the role of work and vocation in the education process. Bruce Kimball has asserted that for most of its history, liberal arts advocates have assumed the utility of a liberal arts education for professional preparation and that it has only been since the eighteenth century that “the utility of classical study was eroded as the professions became increasingly independent of classical sources” (230). The history of the liberal arts in America shows the conflict between the more utilitarian approach to education which focused on preparing graduates for functioning in the commerce of the country, versus those institutions which focused on the educational endeavor primarily as an end in itself, and secondarily as a way to develop informed and capable citizens with a common knowledge base. Kimball suggests that “by the end of the nineteenth century [there was] no universally accepted characteristic of ‘liberal education’ than its being defined, in contrast to technical or professional education, as non-useful, pursued for its own sake” and that “transmitted to the twentieth century, this demarcation became the battle line on which many liberal educators took their stand, with some even arguing that only a ‘useless’ education can be called ‘liberal’” (230-1). It would seem that liberal arts colleges have felt (and may still feel) under siege to a certain extent, having to defend themselves from accusations of impracticality and elitism. It is understandable therefore that any framing of a discussion of higher education that hints of vocationalism, job training, or utilitarianism would be fought vigorously by the liberal arts proponent.

Unfortunately, it is my sense that most career centers in liberal arts institutions are painted with the “job training” brush by academics, and therefore would usually be given only grudging and minimal acknowledgment. Sadder still, because career centers may be stereotyped in this way and not integrated into the academic area of a college, they may in fact live out that function and become glorified placement agencies. It is my experience that even the most benign faculty have a limited understanding of what a career center is about and how it might enhance the mission of a liberal arts institution.

One of the criticisms of the career development area coming from the academic side is that a liberal arts education is debased and abused if it is used “just to get a job.” Joanne Ciulla says that “it is ironic that most students today pursue a liberal arts education so that they can get a job, when ideally it was meant to teach them how to use their leisure, not how to work” (6). But I wonder if this is not a simplistic view of things and an easy argument (perhaps self-protective on the part of academia) that justifies ignoring the complex motivations of students and the importance of connecting a liberal arts education to the life of work that follows graduation. Does asserting the “education for its own sake” credo simply make life easier for the academician?

Finally, career development (as we know and practice it today) is simply a young concept and field. Richard Bolles (Figler 48-57) provides a very helpful history of career development
ideas beginning in 1909 when the notion of matching people to jobs was first published. In 1918 a career was for the first time defined as “the expression of one’s own personality, working through some medium (ideas, people, things or symbols).” The first true job-hunting book was not published until 1936. In 1939, the first edition of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles was published by the federal government, in which 17,500 jobs were described in detail. The idea of the transferability of skills, a concept crucially important for liberal arts students to understand, was developed in 1949 by Sidney Fine and described as “the continuous use of acquired knowledge and abilities when moving from one job to another; the methods, procedures…remain much the same in circumstances and for problems which at first sight appear very different from one another.” It wasn’t until 1953 that Donald Super suggested that “vocational choice is not an event but a process; one’s choice of vocation is a way of implementing a self-concept” (Figler 53).

Career counseling as a field can be traced back to Frank Parsons in the 1920’s, and the first formal assessment tool, the Strong Vocational Interest Blank for Men, wasn’t published until 1927. Career counseling professionals to this day struggle for credibility, and there is no licensing in any state for the profession (not for want of trying by trained professionals). Thus, anyone with any background can call themselves a career counselor and charge for their services. It has only been in the last 20 years that academic programs to train career counselors have been available (in 1980 there were six such programs in the United States), such that now many schools around the country offer Master’s degrees in the subject and career development is seen as a legitimate academic subject.

The career counselor in a liberal arts setting has had struggles with identity and role that can be seen in a historical review of the field. Donald Casella describes three career-counseling paradigms that have developed from the 40’s to today (33-9). The first, characteristic of centers in the 1940’s and 50’s, would come under the rubric of “placement,” where the central goal was job placement of students, with the closest resemblance being to an employment service. The focus was on getting students jobs, learning only enough about them to be sure the “fit” was not completely inappropriate. The staff identity would be “job filler.” In the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s, Casella says that the paradigm changes to one of “planning,” influenced more by a counseling (some would say even therapeutic), self-knowledge approach and less by a business model. Career counselors were (and are) being trained more in psychological counseling programs than in the business arena4. There is more emphasis on the individual and self awareness (what might be called the “journey inward”) and a realization that a key factor in career satisfaction is self understanding, which is equally as important as –and often needs to precede – occupational exploration (the “journey outward”). Casella then asserts that a new approach for career centers is emerging (beginning in the 90’s) which he dubs the “networking” paradigm. This new approach provides “the most effective method of performing both the job placement and career planning activities.” Here the counselor is much more of an “information manager” whose more central function is that of a “connector,” linking students to information, resources, people, learning opportunities, internships, and of course, jobs. One of the key driving forces behind this trend is the rise of information technology and “self-help” approaches. “A significant change with the Network paradigm is the introduction of faculty/staff into equal client status with students/alumni and employers…[The] new mission is to connect all three, for it is in this very connecting among them that each is best served.”

4 Though it is not uncommon for career counselors at colleges to have a business background.
Although Casella’s description is both accurate and useful, it still leaves the career center as a “support services” program that has little to do with the academic mission of a college. It provides activities and resources that could stand alone in any college or university setting and have no significant or integrated relationship with academics. Some have even proposed that career services in the future could be outsourced to private companies much in the way food services are. A case could easily be made for the utility of each of the paradigms the author delineates, and in fact this is in my experience the way most centers are run: they are part employment agency, part counseling center, and part one-stop, self-help/resources/network service center. All that is good and necessary, and yet I wonder if there is not much more that could – and should – be expected of a career center at a liberal arts institution.

That leads to our final question: How might a career development program at a liberal arts institution be integrated into the academic mission of the college?

First, it seems to me that there must be a careful examination of how the curriculum of a liberal arts college addresses all matters related to work, labor and vocation, not as a career counseling or job placement issue (typically seen as the purview of the career center), but as a legitimate subject area that students should be expected to have knowledge in, as much as they would any other subject deemed worthy of study. This is part of “the way the world works” as much as biological systems are. The results of such a focus would indeed be helpful information for life after college, but that would not be the primary goal. Perhaps it would be helpful to think in terms of a course that would cover such issues.

Second, career development professionals need to be regarded as resources for all faculty on issues related to vocational identity, the “translation” of a liberal arts education into meaningful and significant work, career development programming that is focused on particular majors, etc.

Third, in order for any of the above to become meaningful, there must be an on-going conversation between the career center and the academic community centering on all the issues raised by this paper.

In the context of a Christian liberal arts education, we are given the immense privilege of elevating the concept of work out of drudgery, and integrating it into our understanding of personhood and identity in a way that touches, even if slightly, on the pre-Fall experience of work as inherently satisfying and pleasurable. This is not unlike the Scriptural concept of discovering our spiritual gifts for use in the church, such that what may seem difficult (perhaps impossible), uninteresting, even mundane to one individual, is intrinsically fulfilling to another because it is congruent with how that individual is created. It seems that one of our mandates as Christians is to as closely reproduce that paradigm in our role as workers as well. This is a significant responsibility, since as those living in the first world and given essentially unlimited opportunity, we actually have the possibility of realizing some of these ideals in a way that the majority of the world does not. As Keith Thomas says, “through the centuries, the lot of the human race has been hard toil for small reward” (xviii). Amazingly, that does not have to be true for our students or us.

However we frame our goals for students graduating out of liberal arts institutions – whether focused on leadership, character development, preparation for effective citizenship – the more confident they are in their identity and the more closely their work is congruent with their identity, the more fully realized these goals will be. That can most effectively happen as career development staff work closely with the academic side, such that what they are doing is seen as (and becomes) an important part of the liberal arts educational enterprise.
Works Cited


