

DRAFT 6/4/80

CAREER vs LIBERAL EDUCATION

Remarks by

Ernest L. Boyer, President
The Carnegie Foundation for
the Advancement of Teaching

Delivered at

President's Symposium
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma

March 4, 1980

This is a remarkable event, and I am delighted to participate. I commend the President for having substituted his own inaugural for what in fact is an on-going intellectual dialogue within the community of this distinguished institution.

I would also like to say that having been here at Oklahoma State University a little less than twenty-four hours I have found it to be a place with warmth and cordiality. That is enormously reassuring. The truth is that our institutions are in low repute. This is a hive of general distrust. We distrust our institutions; we distrust each other. To discover a place where there still remains a congeniality and a sense of caring is so rare. It is a treasure and should be nurtured. It is part of what quality in higher education means.

I want to focus on that, on the meaning of quality in higher education, and, specifically on one issue which will, I believe, in the coming decade become an increasingly important consideration in the general consideration. I want, in fact, to re-examine the conflict between liberal and career education. The conflict is an ancient one, but now, at the beginning of what Mrs. Thatcher calls the dangerous decade of the 1980s it has been revived in a new, more urgent form.

In the next several years there has been a dramatic shift in the sorts of majors students are selecting. During the past six months I have been on campuses from coast to

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coast and the story is much the same. I have been told by college presidents and by deans that last spring two-thirds of the graduates at that institution were in some respects careers--accounting, journalism, health professions and the like--and that only one-third graduated in disciplines that would be closed among the traditional liberal arts. As a matter of fact, three nights ago I sat at dinner with the Dean of a small, distinguished liberal arts institution and I asked him what the dominant major had been on his campus that year. He told me that business was so out in front that he could not even name the one that came second--that from an institution which, if one were to read the college catalogue, would seem to have an interest exclusively in liberal arts.

What makes this shift so dramatic is that the distribution of faculty is reversed. One-third of the faculty and resources available were in career-related fields while two-thirds were in arts and sciences. This has been one of the best kept secrets in education. Concealed from legislative committees, and from trustees, only occasionally does it break out during faculty debates.

The time has come to recognize this mis-match between the distribution of our resources and the preferences of our students. It is true to look closely and ask questions. What is, in fact, the purposes of higher education? What is the meaning of vocation? And in what ways can the two be joined more fully on the campus?

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At many institutions of higher education it has been suggested to students for years that education and work were two very different worlds. The feeling was that the education was demeaned if it led directly to a job. Employment was fine if it followed graduate school, but direct employment, or more specifically, preoccupation with direct employment was somehow unworthy.

For a long time college counselors of professionals have imposed onto students heavily weighted will certain preoccupations. It is somehow legitimate to be a doctor, but less legitimate to be a nurse; fine to be an engineer, but less so to be a computer programmer, fine to prepare to teach in college, but to prepare to teach in elementary school--the tougher job--was less acceptable. Where it was suitable to study the history, it was less suitable as a journalist to write about the events that would become history.

The distinctions are arbitrary. It is time for them to be discarded. It is time to end these subtle and not so subtle career directives which all students get who pass through institutions of higher learning, and to recognize that work is absolutely crucial for everyone. It's time to appreciate just how fully the vocations we select give definition and meaning to our lives.

It is also time to recognize that formal education has always been a blend of inspiration and vocation. Our first

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institutions--Harvard, Yale, William and Mary--were established with very specific goals to prepare students for vocations, and they in turn were part of a long tradition.

Several years ago, while on sabbatical at Cambridge University I became engrossed in C. P. Snow's novel, The Masters. It is a chilling story of faculty politics at Cambridge during the selection of a new master for one of the Cambridge colleges. If what he describes is true, then it makes faculty politics on this of the Atlantic seem nothing but sweetness and light.

Then in an epilogue Snow described how Cambridge first began. He told how in the 12th century a collection of monks and clerics gathered along the Cam River, that insultingly small stream which ran through Central England, and then slowly attracting a small group of young men who camped on the fringes of this monastic colony, living in huts, sleeping on straw and pillaging food wherever from wherever they could find it. They lived, in short, a life of desperate poverty.

Snow ends by asking, "Why did they do it, why did these young men live in such abject poverty?" And he concluded with one simple answer, "They wanted jobs." They wanted jobs in the government; they wanted jobs with the important families; they wanted jobs to survive.

In a playful mood that evening, I told one of the more distinguished Professors at the institution that I had just finished a book by C. P. Snow and that he claimed that

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Cambridge began as a school of vocational training. The comment was less than enthusiastically received.

And yet does not candor require that we acknowledge, first, that work is the means by which our intelligence and our emotion and our compassion--in fact the essence of our being--is drawn out into life in a way that the job we choose can become one of the most important decisions a person makes? And does not candor require, second, that we acknowledge that the business of education is centrally related to the preparing of us for this decision and the life that follows?

But this said I have now to ask the second question. Where in all this do we confront the matter of liberal education?

While everyone wants a job, I doubt that any of us would be in education if we did not believe that life requires something else as well. Exactly what this something else is none of us would ever agree, but we know it is found somewhere in the arts and sciences. Now if quality education is our goal, we must find ways to draw general education and liberal arts education more directly into the vocational interests of our students. This will not be done with arguments over department structure and course content, but through work which clarifies the attitudes and the understanding which the liberal arts traditionally sought to represent.

But here we have another issue to confront, for we must also recognize that many of our arts and science programs

have themselves become so professional that they no longer serve adequately the ends of liberal education. It may be that the students' preference for career courses over the so-called liberal arts is the direct result of this. The disciplines are approached in ways too specialized to demonstrate the fascination of the overall concerns.

Many years ago, Josiah Royce, the American philosopher, observed that we have become in our culture more knowing, more clever, and more skeptical, but not, he said, more profound or--to use an old fashioned word--more reverent. That summarizes the problem nicely.

The liberal arts are far more than a convenient way to slice up academic fields, more than a convenient way to keep obsolete faculty on the job. A liberal education which goes beyond vocation is a search for those themes of life which are universal and enduring and which will, if properly conveyed, help all students find a perspective and a greater meaning to their work.

It was over ten years ago when Stanford University abolished all required courses, but then in a word of belated caution formed a committee to consider the act, a committee which, after several years of inquiry returned with a recommendation that all students at the institution take at least one required course, and three options were provided. (In a boldly imaginative stroke, one course was dubbed Western Civilization.) The furor over this most modest of recommendations was astonishing. The student paper came out a week

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later with a front page editorial, bordered in black, thundering against this invasion of student autonomy, closing with the indictment that "this requirement imposes a uniform standard on a non-uniform people."

That was a statement that I found startling. It struck me as a grim comment on our time that this student, after at least fifteen years of formal education had learned so little about one person's relationship with another, and the interdependency so essential to our planet that he could pass off a common search for a common heritage as something called uniformity.

Such a view is possible because we in education have been too frequently caught up in the thick of thin things. We expect students to follow their own interests because the institution itself has no transcendent purpose. We transmit fragments of information, but fail to search and highlight the interlocking threads of human knowledge.

Students come to college with questions. They are important, fundamental questions, but rarely, rarely in the course of study are these questions brought forward. Somerset Maugham in the "Writer's Notebook," writes poignantly about the pioneer who lived at the foot of the mountain. For many years it was the man's greatest ambition to climb the mountain and reach the top, and so after enormous effort and the expenditure of energy, he did one day reach the peak. There, at the top, he had hoped to see the sun rise, but

instead he found himself surrounded by a thick fog, "Whereupon," Maugham concludes, "he wandered down again."

I fear that higher education has found itself in a fog and has been wandering aimlessly for sometime now. I have this suggestion to make.

To return again to a form of inquiry which is more stirring, more helpful and--using again Royce's old fashioned word--more reverent--we must look again for the wholeness of life. Unity, not the fragmentation of knowledge, should be central to our search. It is to instill this that the liberal arts are so necessary, because where this sense is not given a person, even embryonically, then regardless of the job, that person will live his or her life in quiet desperation.

I have a second suggestion as well. I believe that to become effective workers, our students must also appreciate that people are important; they must develop a profound respect for the diversity of talents and traditions in our midst. Now this is so simple as to be sentimental, but in our world with all its emphasis on technology, with its pressures and problems, our single most difficult task is to deal humanely with each other.

Surrounded, sometimes even mastered, by our inventions, it is all too easy to pass people off by their labels. A person is an engineer or professor, a bus driver, a chancellor, a member of the middle class, or the silent majority. Even on campus we classify our colleagues as economists, deans, mathematicians, radicals, administrators, chancellors or

members of that faceless, often beleaguered group, we call the office staff.

But by labelling we distort. We lose sight of the fact that we are talking about a fellow human being. Someone capable of laughing and loving, someone with unique talents and aspirations.

What does this have to do with the issue of work and education. The answer is, very much indeed. Just two weeks ago, I met with the top executives of one of the nation's largest corporations, and during that entire session I was struck by the fact that these business leaders spent most of their time talking not about profits and not about technology and not about inflation. They spent most of their time talking about people and how they could somehow bring the organization onto a human scale.

To prepare for a vocation is to prepare to work with other individuals. And this can be the job--of a liberal education.

In the end, the blending of vocational and liberal education on the campus will be achieved only by the curriculum we offer, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the attitudes we convey. I was reflecting a year or two ago about my own formal education and I was able to discover four teachers who, in my judgment, dramatically reshaped my life. As I thought of those four teachers--a first grade teacher, a teacher in high school and two teachers in college--I asked

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myself what it was that these four individuals had in common, which made them so special. It was not knowledge of the subject--although they were well informed. It was their candor--the way they revealed their subject by showing its importance to them. They taught with more than ideas and facts; they taught with themselves and brought me to understand that as an educated person, you did have feelings, you might have doubts, you occasionally had hopes and, at the base of everything else, you had values.

I am the first to recognize that whenever the discussion turns to values, especially in the academic world, a strange kind of embarrassment seems to overtake us and we've come to accept the view that a value-laden education is off limits. Somehow we have deluded ourselves into believing that we can be responsible people without ever taking sides and without expressing firm convictions about fundamental issues. I submit that nothing could be more contrary to the liberal arts tradition. In his penetrating book entitled Faith and Learning, Alexander Miller observed that a decent tentativeness is a wholesome expression of scholarly humility, but sometimes we have a sort of dogmatic tentativeness which suggests that it is intellectually indecent to make up your mind.

We are just beginning to understand that education divorced from values is an illusion. We realize the significance of the fact, as George Steiner points out, that a man can be intellectually advanced while at the same time be morally

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bankrupt. We now know that such a man, again from Steiner, can listen to Bach and Schubert at sundown, he can read Goethe in the evening and the next day he can go to his daily work at the concentration camp and methodically exterminate his fellow human beings. Steiner concludes by asking rhetorically, "What grows up inside literate civilization?"

Education alone does not humanize. And education without values is less than worthless.

This then will be our task if we are to have quality education in the 1980s. The issue will not be the budget, or enrollments. It will be a rediscovery of the values inherent in education and importance of the liberal arts in the preparation for work. Looking beyond course titles to identify the underlying principles necessary to all who work.

There have already been a few experiments in this direction. One venture was tried and abandoned but intrigues me nonetheless. The University Center at Binghamton, New York joined with Broom Community College, a technical institution, and put together an integrated program in which the graduates there could have a baccalaureate in history or literature or whatever from the University of Binghamton plus a two-year field of study, whether in dental technology or the like. I have been to other campuses where they are looking for new majors that combine certain studies in literature with the applied fields of journalism going all along. I have seen some efforts in which new courses were being formulated to fit neatly into professional fields of study. After

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all, courses that deal with ethics, and history, and literature, and values, absolutely must be clamped closely to those who are going into business, medicine, law and journalism, because of the crises in these disciplines is not the substance, its the application.

By being more flexible in the substance and more gentle and even (forgive me) pragmatic in the label, we could relate much of the essence of liberal learning to the vocational interests of our students. Is it impossible to suggest that we might even have a very dignified course entitled The History of Work? I have a hunch that by viewing civilization through that prism, we would begin to learn a lot about our culture--who works, what work is valued, what work is diminished, do they have slaves, why do they have slaves, do women and men work in the same fashion? This then, to me, is the central challenge of the 1980s. Can we bring together in our curriculum what inevitably we must bring together in our lives, where we intertwine the vocational interests and the inspirations and urges of the heart?

Education in the end is important business and it should help our students not only find productive work, which is the revelation of who we are, but also help to live a worthwhile life as well. These two represent the essence of excellence in education.