Liberal Arts and Livelihood: A Dual Design for Higher Education

George E. LaMore Jr.
Iowa Wesleyan College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol5/iss2/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
Liberal Arts and Livelihood:
A Dual Design for Higher Education

GEORGE E. LA MORE, JR.
Multiple Amputee

A haunting relic of any war is the multiple amputee. For some time American higher education has been producing his cultural equivalent. I refer to the knowledgeable graduate equipped to do nothing.

This is not the person thwarted by the harsh job market for the educated. It is, rather, the man who knows Aristotle but cannot fix a flat. It is the man who has consulted the Principia Mathematica but cannot figure out his income tax.

For ages, Liberal Arts education has been peddled as the education of the "whole man." In practice, however, it has usually dealt with him only from the neck up. Information and thought have been magnified to the near exclusion of values and feeling or skills and practice.

True, there have been exceptions, and every educator thinks he is one, but generally speaking, the Liberal Arts student or graduate is deeply confused, disappointed and frustrated. He is aware that his college has taught him to think, but not to be a person or to do a job. For education to neglect these dimensions of the heart and hands is to produce something more tragic than the multiple amputee. It is to produce a truncated head, absolved from personhood and detached from practicality.

A student put it to me this way: "After four years of being held off the job market because there was nothing needed for me to do, it hurts to graduate and learn I can do nothing! And worse than that, I feel so uncertain as to who I am, anyway." This, I submit, is the crisis in Liberal Arts.
For a long time we have followed two basic paths of learning in America. We have called them Training and Education. The first was to provide practical skills, what the Greeks called *techné*, and the second was to enlarge man's self-critical awareness of life—something the Greeks called *sophia*.

How the two got increasingly separated is a complex tale, but blame much of it on man's perennial caste mentality. Although Americans claim that all men are created equal (John Locke, our patron philosopher, actually said we are all born empty, and you can't get much more equal than that), we have always known that they don't stay that way long. Some turn out to be manual in their orientation—and better or worse at it—while others turn out to be cerebral. Since thinkers seem rarer they have been considered superior to fixers and makers. Certainly it has been clever of the thinkers to get that across.

Savor the hierarchical overtones of Thomas Aquinas' definition of Liberal Arts as he comments on Aristotle's Metaphysics:

> Only those arts are called liberal or free which are concerned with knowledge; those which are concerned with utilitarian ends that are attained through activity, however are called servile.

Servile is it? Yet we have always been uneasy about this hierarchy, realizing that each of these arts has what the other needs, and that the most admirable of men have somehow combined thinking and doing. Both common sense and our ancestry have conspired to urge this on us.

Western education has two sets of spiritual ancestors: the Classical Greeks and Biblical Hebrews. Although Greek literature is filled with advice for proper living, the life of the mind tended to be exalted over all. The notion seemed to be that if a man knew enough, this would include knowing what was good, and if he knew the good he would automatically do it. Thus, an informed and thoughtful mind produced the good life. Reason was soul brother to righteousness, or wisdom as they chose to call it.

In the minds of numerous Greek philosophers, the ideal life was one of pure contemplation, or at least, very leisurely discourse. It is small wonder that the Greek word *scholé*, from which we derive "scholar" also meant leisure, idleness, nonactivity. Clearly, a thinker was not expected to be a doer.

Just as the incapacity of long fingernails once marked the elite in the Orient, unemployment was the mark of the scholar in Greece. Small wonder that we who have aped the Greek mentality in education have created campuses which resemble nothing so much as a country club.
The Hebrews sought to relate knowledge and practicality. When two Greeks met in the market place their characteristic question might have been, “What do you know, Joe?” But when two Hebrews met it was more likely “How’s business?” To the Hebrew, the most important thing was not what a man knew, but what he did with what he knew. Goodness was not automatic with learning. The world is full of clever devils.

Whereas to the Greek, the highest form of knowing was a gigantic blueprint of pure concepts, to the Jew it was ethical laws—guidelines for what to do with what you know. Truth, for the Jew, was a matter of heart and hands as well as head.

The language of the two cultures is suggestive. Truth, to the Greek, meant an ultimate point of reference. To the Jew it had the definition “that which can be depended on to work.” When the Greek spoke of truth, the characteristic verb he placed in front of it was “to know” or “to think,” and this is our habit to this day. But when the Hebrew spoke of truth he often put the verb “to do” with it. To do the truth almost sounds like bad grammar to us, for we have become so brainwashed by the ideal of scholé.

Lately the phrase “tent making” is being heard among the young. This heritage began with St. Paul, that incredibly learned rabbi of the Judaean Christian tradition who earned his living wherever he went by using the trade he had acquired at Tarsus: tent making. The new popularity of blue collars among Harvard graduates is more than a matter of egalitarian, revolutionary window dressing. Nor is it simply the mark of those desiring to actualize their metaphysics courses in new social institutions, though that is hardly absent. It is essentially the mark of those who want to be knowledgeable on the one hand, and also competent to do something on the other. Higher education must become answerable to this double demand.

The Wisdom Side: Sophia

The essence of education is that it be psychedelic. The enlargement of personal identity and awareness is basic. Education is a matter of growing, pure and simple. Daniel Boorstein has written that the heart of education is not a matter of the student learning what he doesn’t know, but of his learning what he doesn’t know he doesn’t know. If one is taught what he doesn’t know, this is a matter of only filling in the blanks in the perspective he had in the first place. But if he is led to the awareness of what he didn’t know he didn’t know, then he comes to whole new perspectives in addition to the one he started with—and he becomes self-conscious of his original perspective from the vantage point of the new one. His very life is enlarged. He has grown from the center.

A man’s life is no richer than the number of perspectives by which he is able to see it. And only a man who is fully aware of more than
one way of seeing life is even conscious of the fact that he has a perspective, and how come.

The humanistic core of Liberal Arts has always been this concern for man’s lifelong outgrowing of himself. It has provided him opportunity and stimulus for the formulation of provisional total views of life. It has encouraged him to find his own larger orientation and commitment through restless dialogue with the great orientations and commitments which have molded the human spirit.

The truly liberal man is a borrower of pieces of identity and world view from many sources. He is ever willing to outgrow his latest composite if experience should one day fall into a more likely pattern. Thus, a curriculum adequate for today must make a man feel at home in the ageless dialogue of ideas, men, creations and events. Not to know this heritage is to be an orphan, and the inability to design one’s own identity from it makes one a slave.

Such a curriculum must make the student alert to the models by which men think today—models often very different from the Seven Liberal Arts of the medieval university still mirrored in the departmental set up of most schools. Anyone familiar with the modern world of affairs who examines college strategies soon grows restless with the sheer unreality of curricular compartments. In the realm of artistic creativity, what discreet lines exist anymore among music, painting, drama and literature? In the sociometric sciences of cultural management where are the functional divisions of sociology, political science, economics? In real life, how are the reflective thinking of philosophy and the thoughtful commitments of religion divorced? And in the natural sciences, where are the dotted lines we cut on to separate chemistry, physics and biology?

Any packaging of learning opportunities is very incomplete, however, unless student self-expression is the constant measure of his achievement. The student is not a vessel to be filled. He is a lamp to be lighted, and he must be given opportunity to express his vision and identity in his studies. Only as one constantly tries himself out does he find himself.

This activistic self-awareness is a dangerous process if it is not supported by a careful counseling program. The experience of genuine growing is a tense and awesome adventure. The psychological problems of undergraduates are enormous already, and likely to be greater in a school that seriously works with students to achieve a sense of identity.

There is wisdom in the Jewish Talmud which claims that men left together have a way of healing each other. This tends to work even with undergraduates. But there can be no substitute for professional counseling staff and, above all, a faculty equipped and encouraged to deal in interpersonal support. The heart of the matter in
faculty counseling is this: availability is as crucial as competence. “Office hours” must count for nearly as much as class and committee assignments in the reckoning of faculty responsibilities.

But with these concerns, another central issue emerges. Just how much of the curriculum should be in the form of general requirements? At present, when the structure and economics of Liberal Arts learning are called into question totally, an attitude of “let the student study what he feels like” or “almost anything goes” has come to pervade curricular design. The costs of such enormous freedom of selection are great, both to the student and to the college.

A student’s choice of courses is usually influenced by three things: his current perspective, faddist gossip among his peers and confusion. As stated above, education should induce a man to learn what he doesn’t know he doesn’t know. A curriculum that says: “Study what you already feel like studying” offers little likelihood of personal growth. Authentic Liberal Arts education should have structure as well as freedom in it—in a blend not too different from the universe we live in—to the effect that students are literally required to stick their noses through many windows and their feet through many doors to discover areas of aptitude and delight which would otherwise remain hidden in them.

As for the fad and confusion parts of student course selection, many schools of late have gone the way of pressing freshmen to declare their Major right off and get started on it. This decision then sets the pattern for their subsequent program. Such a plan contradicts the very temper of our time. Most students entering college do not know what they want to do. Their major, their vocation, their identity are more uncertain than ever before—literally up for grabs. Thus, more than anything else, they need a season for trying things on for size. The trouble is that if left to their own resources in this tryout time students tend to try things very narrowly. As one freshman said to me: “You teach philosophy, eh? I wouldn’t want to take a course in that since I don’t know a thing about it!”

This is precisely the constrained mentality encouraged by the so-called free curriculum. The paradox of the matter is that the structured curriculum which requires a variety of exposures to fields the student “doesn’t know anything about” turns out to be the freer experience.

Cafeteria curricula are expensive for schools as well as for students. Where general curricular requirements do not provide for a stable number of students taking courses in the several departments these departments enter into an intermural competition for sheer survival. This may be less desperate in a larger school, where sheer bulk of student number will tend to provide enough warm bodies to keep most areas going. But in a small school, where any shift of fads in sub-
ject matter can cause a whole department to wink out or be halved overnight, problems of intermural survival for departments can create a caustic competition.

To be sure, there are benefits from such competition. Professors try harder—even do their best, and superfluous subject areas are pruned. But competition for survival can appeal to the lowest in men as well as the highest. In a hard pressed department courses of a highly commercial nature begin to proliferate to provide something attractive for somebody. If any department drops certain major requirements—say minimum hours in sciences, English, or foreign languages—soon other departments have to lower the bar as well to stay commercial. And worse yet, sheer standards of academic performance may begin to slip when flunking five students may mean finis for the course offering.

In such an atmosphere of curricular uncertainty it is not surprising that students begin to assume that it is not they who are on trial anymore, but the school, the professors, the course. To a degree they are right, but this is a point which, if overcarried, puts an end to learning and growth. The college becomes an institution to congratulate students on whatever they know and whoever they are already.

There are grave economic liabilities as well as academic costs in the free-for-all plan. A free style curriculum is devilishly expensive, for the sheer variety of courses it encourages.

An evolving curriculum with basic structure to it, one arrived at by careful and continuing faculty-student dialogue, should present a pattern of required areas of exposure for all students. These areas of exposure should be achievable by a variety of means. For any given area there should be several courses to satisfy the requirement, or independent study possibilities in lieu of the course route.

Courses available for such structural requirements ought to be given primary support by the college so that they become “great courses,” rich in interdisciplinary possibilities and manned by the most gifted faculty. As a rule, colleges tend to give this kind of attention only to rarified and peripheral course offerings used as media attention getters.

The claim may be made, and not without some justification, that in the student’s eye no required course is ever great. Yet there are so many courses across America which prove otherwise—courses whose students are frequently heard to say, “I’m really glad somebody made me get into that!” I fear that academicians are too much taken in by the freedom lyrics of the young. A bit of heart-to-heart listening around soon reveals that the majority are begging for some structure and guidance, if only for the sake of a responsible target to rebel against.

A major factor in such a structured plan should be the larger employment of upper class students in given fields as assistants and
tutors. This is one of the most valuable learning experiences for both the senior and the new student, and a cost-reducing factor of genuine potential for the college.

This is not to be confused with the use of paid graduate students in undergraduate courses at the university. Rather, this is the strategy of undergraduates working with undergraduates in courses of study they have shared in common, and with the professor highly available at all times.

In such a structured curriculum, emphasis should be put upon quality of learning as much as quantity. Adjustments in academic hours granted for a course should be made on the basis of student performance. A course worth three academic hours if passed with a C grade ought to be worth three and one half for a B, or even four for an A. This does not rule out possibilities for ungraded pass/fail courses at the student’s option, but delivers cash value for significant performance and a sobering influence on professorial grading procedures.

It would be very interesting to see what influence such grading procedures might have on recruitment among academically superior young people. A three-year B.A. or B.S. for high performance rather than compressed calendar ought to appeal to the honors student more than any other plan.

There is yet another consideration to be aired in this matter of curriculum. Many schools have recently gone to a kind of semaphore pattern of semesters—a kind of semaphore “K” ration of two longs with a short in the middle. The basic rationale for the short spell has tended to be: “A creative change of pace.” In many schools the short term has proved to be a mixed blessing—a tremendous time for a few creative students at the bored expense of so many others. The basic problem has usually been that it has proved too different from the regular curriculum. It has borne all the earmarks of a noble but tacked on afterthought based on the rationale: “But everybody else is doing it!”

A more likely calendar might be a long, a short, a long, a short (call it double-N, from the international code). In this construct, at the end of each long semester the student could select any one or a likely combination of his current courses for further, independent exploration. This would be a change of pace, as one were encouraged to try out new procedures of learning—field trips, work experience, creative expressions—but above all, it would be based on solid familiarity to the field built up in the long semester. In essence, it would be a chance for the student to go into business for himself in a field already familiar.

If carried out properly, such a program could go far to obviate many multiple level courses in the same subject. Progressive levels
in a given subject would be achieved increasingly through such inde­
pendent or small group carry-through.

So far this essay has described an agenda for liberal arts studies—
studies dealing in ideas, values and human expression. This is the side
of education devoted not primarily to what one will do, but to who
he will be. In the era of increasing leisure before us, persons capable
of dealing in this dimension of the spirit are the most likely to find
meaning.

The story is told of the boy who pressured his father saying, “I'll
be good when the guests arrive if you'll give me fifty cents.”

“Fifty cents!” cried the father. “Why when I was your age I was
good for nothing!”

In a sense, the humanistic heart of Liberal Arts education is in
studies which are good for nothing. They are simply good in them­
selves. We do not think of Beauty, Goodness, Truth, Love, Health, or
Personality as being good for something. They are ends in themselves,
and so is the study and awareness of them. Other things may con­
tribute to them—even be good for them, but to treat finalities as good
for something else is like giving the boy trumpet lessons to straighten
his teeth. Some things should be done for their own sake.

Only as a student is brought to a profound awareness of those
things which all generations have held in ultimate reverence will he
ever know that there are dimensions of life which exceed cash value.
These are the points of reference by which we make sense of the rest
of life.

To know this alone, however, and have no practical facility in
one’s culture is still to be the multiple amputee described at the be­
ginning. There is another side to the education of complete persons.

**The Practical Side: Techné**

Education should grant a man both grasp and facility in his world.
The grasp is largely a matter of understanding. The facility lies on the
side of practical competence—what Aquinas called the “servile arts.”

As noted before, the donning of blue collars by university students
and recent grads may smack of romantic, classless revolution, but it
contains genuine insight. Man must be able to do something. Albert
Schweitzer expressed it well when, after years of accomplished study
in the Humanities, he began to study medicine and missions because,
as he put it, he wanted to do something with his hands.

In any intelligent culture the education of the young provides what
might be called survival skills—hunting, fishing, tree house main­
tenance or what have you. Western culture has drifted away from this
awareness. The reason seems to be that we have developed an ant
hill mentality. We are to fit into a system in which the majority of
our needs are to be provided by others. From plumbing to manicuring,
increasingly one does not do for himself. He is done for, and all too often with a vengeance.

Today many are seeking a new independence and self-reliance, realistically within the system of goods and services beyond our capabilities. We have had to. The plumbers arrived late, the pipe still leaked, and the bill was unconscionable. This does not mean that we are about to enter a Walden III era of home brain surgery or space travel in kit form, but it does mean that the expensive complexity and free time of our era encourage us to develop versatile self-reliance.

Survival skills which should be taught before college and throughout college consist of most of the things the Liberal Arts graduate rudely discovers he doesn’t know in the first five years after school, and of which he perennially laments, “Now why didn’t they teach me that?” The list is long, but not limitless, nor beyond the capability of education. Sample elements are these:

Marriage and Family
Cooking: basic, including nutrition
Clothes care
Money Management: including purchasing
Housing: finance and maintenance
Health: including first aid
Basic Law
Income Tax
Minor Repairs and Adjustments: automobile and home appliances
Lifetime Physical Education
Social Aptitudes
Basic Political Organization: community level
Basic Service Organizations: community level

Education in these matters could readily become the fun part of the curriculum. Some of this preparation could be taught in separate classes. Other parts could figure into regular courses. However packaged, a person prepared in these several skills of daily living would be equipped to deal with the primary pieces of livelihood which come to us all.

A person who is not active in the political and social functions of his community is a cripple in democratic society. Students should be given large experience in democratic process in their college years, focusing on significant issues of campus life, not simply holding referendums to decide the band for the next social event. Academicians who have never granted students such freedom always seem convinced that the kids would turn the opportunity into a fellahin holiday. But where responsible self-government has been assigned to students, as a rule they have quickly shown unusual sobriety and restraint.

It might be claimed that the responsibility side of freedom never
strikes a man so clearly as on the day after he goes into business for himself. This is true similarly for students allowed to do business for themselves in a constitutional, democratic process.

Voluntary social service in a free society is just as important as political responsibility. Colleges should grant major academic support for programs of student service to society, conceiving of them as learning experiences, too. Such programs must not become an unguided summons for eighteen-year-old messiahs, following each new crisis declared by *The New York Times*, but a carefully counseled program drawing students into the habit-forming experience of doing for others, with all its frustrations as well as its potential for personal growth.

In addition to these personal survival skills, it would be a new departure in education if the Liberal Arts major were equipped in one basic, marketable skill—be it computer programming, stenography, salesmanship or manual craft. Such cash value capabilities would create a new mentality on the part of the educated man—one of personal practicality, fellow feeling with those less educated, and security in the shifting fortunes of today's economy. It would also create in the mind of the white-collar graduate a lifetime option—the freeing awareness that he could always do something else if he chose to. In a free society, this is an important conviction, and higher education should support it.

Practical education need not detract from the wisdom studies outlined above. In an intelligently structured curriculum these wisdom studies need not take up nearly so much room as they have done, especially in the face of upgraded high school programs and new devices for learning. The ratio of time given to the two basic sides of education which we are calling *sophia* and *techné* would have to be individualized. It might range, however, from a 75%-25% to a 50%-50% division.

A more practical question than time ratios is Where might resources be found for the practical side of education? The answers are several. Many campuses already have staff competent to teach both personal and market skills. Likewise, many resource persons and facilities exist in every college community. What is required is for the college to see its community as a rich resource for the learning process.

In many cases colleges might set up contractual relationships with persons, businesses and institutions of the community for the more practical education of its students. It is true that learners provide a questionable form of manpower, but they are also very inexpensive, which could be a reciprocal benefit to participating institutions.

The most adventurous possibility, yet one with much going for it, would be for a college to join on a partnership basis (or organize *de novo* where necessary) businesses and institutions in which its stu-
udents should gain training experience. These might range from private experimental schools for students studying education to computer centers serving the larger business and service area. Such a college would, in effect, become a kind of holding company in free enterprise.

Two obvious justifications come to mind. One, the Board of Trustees of most schools is accomplished not in matters of education but precisely in these practical institutions where liaison is sought. Their pool of genius might be tapped in a meaningful way for the first time. Two, although such entrance into private business would be highly problematical for state-supported institutions, in the case of private schools, so hard pressed economically, the liaison would be the only natural one. The future of private education rests more likely with private business than with public taxation. In this plan there would be created an organic liaison with the private economy rather than the vague ties of charity heretofore practiced.

Most private colleges would find a very likely opportunity for practical education in what has become of late their most threatening competitor—the area community colleges. These are rich in vocational technical resources. Until now, most educators have envisioned only a one-way traffic of students from the community college to the four-year institution. There is no reason why these schools could not work out a two-way traffic, granting Liberal Arts students major exposure in the practical curriculum of the sister institutions.

In many cases it has been the community college, first conceived as a vocational technical school, now expanded into Liberal Arts competence, which has struck the best balance of education for the dual needs of man—wisdom and practicality. The four-year institution would do well to study this model carefully as it moves beyond the level of achievement possible in a two-year calendar.

However the vision is carried out, the ideal is one of a liberally educated man capable of doing for himself in matters of personal, social, political and vocational responsibility. It is the ideal of a person who knows what he is doing and is able to do what he knows.

**Lifetime Liaison**

Alumni of American colleges have long had reason to ask annual college solicitors for funds: “But what have you done for me lately?” If education is a lifetime process, as every school affirms, then why shouldn’t a college create a lifetime liaison with its graduates, other than the annual academic community chest drives?

A school that takes the continuing education of its alumni seriously ought to take a hand in that process with due regard for both intellectual and practical subject matter. Recommended reading lists reflecting current campus usage ought to be mailed out periodically. Periodic alumni seminars, regionally and on campus, should be pro-
vided by the faculty. The participation of current students in these affairs would provide valuable inter-generational dialogue. Sabbatical study opportunities of varying duration should be provided for alumni, not only in liberal studies but in matters of vocational and personal competence, responsive to the fast changing world.

Overcoming the New Suspicion of Higher Education

To be able to do for oneself as well as to think for oneself, to be a participant in the great ideas that shape human culture and be skilled to function socially, politically and vocationally, this is to be an educated person.

It is a fact that many graduates of Liberal Arts colleges intend to go on to graduate schools in order to enter into complex professions, vastly beyond the competence of undergraduate study. But these persons need to know the basic personal skills outlined in matters such as food, health and home maintenance, as well as anybody else. Likewise, their lives would be enriched by a major exposure to manual and technical skills. Nothing is more obvious than the difference between a professional man with no experience in practical vocations and one who worked in a factory on his way to law school.

Automation and cybernetics are enlarging the spare time for everybody. This spare time is the raw material from which creative leisure or voluntary self-expression may come. Such leisure will be achieved by those equipped first, to deal meaningfully in scholé, the creative life of the spirit, second, to do for themselves in matters of personal daily function and, third, to be vitally involved in the social, the serviceable and the political processes of their community.

Relevance in higher education, so plaintively sought by today's students, will be achieved by that academic community which overcomes the split between the intellectual and the practical life of man. The pervasive new suspicion of higher education on the part of many young people and their parents will be overcome as Liberal Arts schools become liberal enough to face up to the total role of man in today's world and equip him for it.