Cooperative Education - General Education: A New Synthesis?

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When I first proposed this paper some months ago I had a number of specific purposes in mind. First, I'd grown interested in the development of a concept in American higher education which has been termed cooperative education. Secondly, I wondered about the linkages between cooperative education and what traditionally we have called general or liberal education. Thirdly, I wondered if the linkages between these two concepts were of recent origin or have they existed for a long time without formal recognition. Fourthly, I wondered if this "new synthesis" was something that could have a significant impact on the quality of education of today's students, especially those students pursuing a liberal education. Finally I wondered if it was possible to answer all these questions in the short space allotted to me. I am pleased to report that I have, I believe, the answers to the first four questions.

For brevity and with the hope of sidestepping some fundamental disagreements which could cause us to never address the topic I propose to discuss, I will assume that we all have a basic definition of what is meant by a general or liberal education, that part of a student's academic program which is the core of learning and knowledge. A liberal education is that set of academic experiences where students develop understanding and competencies in the arts, the humanities, the social and behavioral sciences, the physical, biological, earth and space sciences, mathematics and in oral and written communications.

I wish not to assume that we all have a common definition and understanding of cooperative education. This concept, which is distinctly American, was born at the University of Cincinnati in 1906. It enjoyed a quiet and unglamor-
ous beginning. In 1909, three years later, Northeastern University adopted a cooperative education curriculum and in 1930 Antioch College did the same. By 1960, 60 colleges and universities had incorporated cooperative education in their academic programs. In 1970, only ten years later, the number of institutions swelled to 127. Seven years later, today, in 1977, over 1,000 collegiate institutions report themselves as having a cooperative education program. It is alleged that over 200,000 students participate in co-op programs annually.

I hesitate to offer a simple definition to this concept for fear of losing half of my readers. The simple definition, commingling periods of campus study with periods of off-campus “on the job” academic learning experiences, is enough to turn some “liberal educationally oriented” individuals away, looking for a new paper to criticize. The nub of this problem, however, is the vexing conflict between the value of experiential learning versus the value of formal academic classroom education. Regrettably, experiential learning is viewed by some as a dilution of academic quality while others believe that “real” or “lasting” learning comes about only through experience. In my opinion, this dichotomy is unfortunate as learning occurs in both spheres.

As I thought about what to quote to report to you that there is a linkage between formal academic classroom education and experiential learning, I was tempted by a number of sources. Incidentally, I wish to pursue the notion that the linkages between cooperative education or however you choose to define it — be it experiential education, internships, practica, field work, off-campus learning opportunities or whatever — and general or liberal education is a long standing relationship. I don’t believe it is new or of recent origin. It is a relationship which has not enjoyed wide acceptance.

On July 2, 1862, then President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Land Grant Act offering each state free public land in order to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life.” Alfred North Whitehead, in The Aims of Education, stated “first hand knowledge is the ultimate basis of intellectual life. To a large extent book-learning conveys second hand information, and as such can never rise to the importance of immediate practice.” Many have entered the debate on the value of a liberal education versus a practical one. I wish to stress here that the problem lies not with the value of one type of education, a liberal education versus a practical education; the problem really is that the two types of educations are viewed as in conflict with each other — that one is right and the other is wrong. That probably is the greatest single disadvantage of this debate. As former U.S. Commissioner of Education Earl McGrath stated, “one of the basic errors made by earlier advocates of general education as well as by their opponents was the assumption that an unavoidable conflict exists between specialized vocational training and the goals of a liberal education. The more realistic and, in fact, theoretically authentic conception of higher education for a democratic society is that the two types can and ought to be pursued simultaneously, but in balanced proportions.”

The references here cited suggest that these two concepts are related to each other. I do also hope to convey that practical and theoretical education deserve careful attention and review especially in these troubled times in American higher education and especially in the difficult times which the liberal arts have experienced during the past decade. There is increasing evidence which suggests that students and the general society as a whole are less appreciative and understanding of the value of a general or liberal education. This decline
in attractiveness is, in my opinion, related to the rise in attractiveness of
certain types of academic majors which have obvious work-world linkages,
for example, accounting, business administration, etc. The task at hand is to
find ways to commingle the values of a general and liberal education with a
practical preparation for life following completion of formal academic study.
For too long many in the mainstream of liberal education have left that
particular activity to someone else. The questions are simple — can we leave
this to someone else and should we? Another way of asking the same ques-
tion, can the values and traditions of a general or liberal education survive if
we leave this important and extremely attractive component preparation for life
after graduation to someone else?

Without intending to suggest that it is easy to philosophically and practi-
cally commingle experiential and liberal education, I do wish to suggest that
what is proposed here is that students be permitted to undertake off-campus
internship experiences which are integrated within their undergraduate cur-
riculum. In meeting requirements for their degrees most students are respon-
sible for completing a core of courses to meet basic requirements, a selection of
courses to satisfy major requirements and finally a cluster of elective credits.
While there are variations among colleges and universities this arrangement
of credits is not uncommon. The essence therefore of this idea is to mesh
experiential and liberal education by promoting undergraduate off-campus
internship experiences which complement a student’s undergraduate educa-
tion by providing useful, effective information which assists the student to
understand how he may make a useful contribution to society following
graduation.

Off-campus internship experiences for credit need not be viewed as a
dilution of academic standards for such experiences can be structured to
provide significant individual cognitive development. Worthwhile intern-
ship experiences are most frequently realized when faculty and student work
together to develop an academic component to the internship experience
which serves to integrate the practical work experiences with the under-
graduate curriculum. The application of theory to practice and their integration
serve as the bridge or link between cognitive and experiential education. When
off-campus learning experiences are structured in this fashion, it is easy to
assign a credit value to the experience and to make this credit become a part of
the student’s undergraduate program.

While we are here attempting to liberalize that which is represented by a
liberal education by permitting academically oriented internship experiences
to augment the curriculum, one must at the same time call for a liberalizing of
the many occupationally related majors which are just as closed-minded to the
values of a liberal education as some liberal arts people are to giving credibil-
ity to experiential education. This is a two-way street which demands open-
ness on both sides and not just a willingness on the part of liberal arts to accept
what for so long has been viewed in negative terms.

Increasingly I have learned to believe firmly in the value of a broadbased
liberal education as a preparation for the complex world which every student
faces following graduation. In my judgment we must provide for our students
every opportunity to take full advantage of the multiplicity of learning experi-
ences as preparation for the future. A liberal education is a worthwhile
experience but we cannot stop there for we must begin to articulate the values
of a liberal education in practical, down-to-earth, non-intellectual, if you will,
statements so that all can understand what we mean when we say that a liberal
education is an effective preparation for life after graduation. We would be in a much better position to begin to articulate the advantages of a liberal education if at the same time we were willing to recognize the value of academically oriented, off-campus learning experiences which would serve as an addendum to the basic classroom instruction and cognitive development we offer. Internships, practicums, field work, cooperative education, experiential learning, call them what you will, they have been valuable experiences for many and, in my judgment, there is no need to separate them from that which we mean by a liberal education.