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THE WOOF AND THE WARP

S.R. Wiersteiner

What is the mission of the university: To prepare for life, or to prepare for a career? If one follows the secular press and pursues the various journals concerned with higher education, one is struck with the "either/or" nature of the articles and comments concerning the goal of a university. But should it be an "either/or" question? Can the preparation for life's work be divorced from the preparation to enjoy that life to its fullest? The whole cloth is not made from only the woof, it must also include the warp.

The purpose of a liberal education is to "liberalize," to free the intellect, to develop appreciation, to stimulate the ability to evaluate and make choices. Liberalization, however, has as a precondition the freedom from want. Basic needs must be met before the need for and the acceptance of liberalization is acknowledged. As Thoreau observed, "The gross necessaries of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success." Only when the need for food and shelter is met does attention turn to the higher callings of a culture. It is difficult to liberalize an individual when his or her overpowering need is for survival and security.

On the other hand, after securing a means of assuring the basic needs, the lack of a liberalizing experience may result in the loss of a culture. Albert Speer, Hitler's Minister of War Production, is supposed to have said that he would not have been so ready to associate with Hitler had he had a more liberal education instead of his "professional" training as an architect. One of the dangers of producing a nation of "technocrats" is that the citizenry loses its ability to evaluate and influence the course of events intelligently.

In America, we have developed a multifaceted university with the characteristics of both the traditional European university and the polytechnic, combined with a sense of pragmatism and yankee ingenuity. By accident, if not by
design, we have spawned the very type of institution best suited to weave the “whole cloth” of the individual. What is happening, however, is that the university is being polarized from both inside and outside by the “either/or” nature of the question. Recent defense of the liberal arts has suffered from an attempt to polarize the question, and those who wish to mandate a “professional goal” for a university program suffer the same fault. Should not the question be asked as to what value both vocational and liberalizing dimensions have for the individual in today’s society?

Our universities can influence the course of the arguments by highlighting the fact that they are in a position to point to and achieve solutions.

One of the most critical arguments to come out of this “either/or” discussion is that of the rapid obsolescence of those programs which have only a vocational or professional goal. The argument has merit; but it is fallacious to argue that, on the other hand, a good liberal education is the only education one needs in order to render to personal possession the coin of the realm. There is a need to bring into the picture new approaches to the development of professional curriculums which are responsive to the threat of obsolescence brought about by swift changes in societal needs. There is also a need for those in the liberal arts and humanities to demonstrate in a meaningful way that these disciplines are indeed relevant, not only to the quality of life, but to professional development and advancement.

One of the more interesting individuals in American letters in recent times is Eric Hoffer, a laborer-philosopher. His essays and other writings carry a refreshing flavor which reflects his contact with the world of manual labor; and his world of manual labor must be somewhat the more rewarding by virtue of his studies and contemplation.

While most of us will never be the worker-philosopher in this sense, we can certainly strive to realize that model in our present-day baccalaureate scholar. Such an effort would require each member of the university to identify those elements in our various disciplines which are alike, rather than to concentrate on those elements which are different. The popular press, ever looking for issue-oriented material, seizes upon our own internal justifications of our separate disciplines as an expression of the lack of ability of a university — or even education itself — to influence positively the method and quality of our livelihood and lives. Therefore, it behooves us to set about demonstrating our ability to weave “whole cloth” of both woof and warp.

What, then, should be the pattern of our cloth: How shall the woof and warp be woven into the whole cloth of the perfected individual? First, we, the weavers, must recognize and accept the worth of both the woof and warp in the whole cloth. We must acknowledge that a vocation contributes just as surely to the individual as does liberal education, and that one without the other suffers a significant deficit.

Second, we must examine the objectives of each and every curriculum in our university to determine whether or not it brings to the individual those elements which allow the fullest participation in life and the greatest contribution to society. Those who promote liberal education must examine curriculums with a concern for the graduate who must function in a society where minimum levels of existence require incomes that would have astounded our forefathers. Those charged with the transmittal of professional or vocational skill and knowledge must ensure in curriculums the existence of courses which teach critical evaluations of issues that would have taxed the ancient philosophers.
Third, we, collectively, must not be split apart by those who examine our curriculums, demanding the greatest return for the least dollar spent. We must ever be on guard against those who insist that quality can be quantified and that vocationalism can be weighed against liberalism on some absolute scale; that by so evaluating university curriculums, dollar values may be assigned; and either the warp or the woof will enjoy ascendancy while the other suffers exclusion.

We must, as university faculties, demonstrate and convince others that it is the concept of a liberal education that makes the vocational or professional life worthy, and that it is the professional or vocational education that makes possible the time and relief from economic stress necessary to appreciate and utilize a liberal education.