

Liberal Arts Colleges and the Well-Prepared Teacher

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Consider the following: 1) residential, liberal arts colleges today serve only 4% of the nation's undergraduates; 2) in Maine, my own state, the teaching profession will see approximately a 50% turnover during the next decade; 3) the picture is similar in many other parts of the country--over the next ten years, schools will need to hire 2 to 2.5 million new teachers. Based on these facts, the question of whether it makes a difference that a teacher is educated in a liberal arts college rather than in another type of college or university would seem to be irrelevant, at best a luxury for academics to debate while policy makers scramble to get the next generation of teachers certified and stationed in classrooms. In actuality it is neither of these things. The question is important, not because our liberal arts colleges will ever produce a substantial number of teachers, but because the characteristics of a liberal arts college experience that are related to high-quality teacher preparation may be at least partially replicable in other settings.

I believe the answer to this question is a resounding yes; it does make a difference if teachers are prepared in residential, liberal arts college settings. Yet that answer comes from my gut and from my own beliefs about education. Perhaps there is empirical evidence for this conclusion, but it would appear to be relatively weak. For example, in a recent article in *The Journal of Teacher Education*, Darling-Hammond et al. report that, among beginning teachers in New York City, those who reported feeling most prepared came from two distinctly "outlier" institutions, Bank Street College and Wagner College (2002). Bank Street offers a graduate-level, pre-service program that "deliberately combines experience, reflection, and study" (293).

Wagner, a liberal arts college on Staten Island, “emphasizes a strong liberal arts education plus intensive preparation for teaching” (293). Unfortunately, the researchers do not report on the undergraduate backgrounds of the Bank Street students or on the level of intellectual and social capital that education majors bring to Wagner compared to other undergraduate institutions in New York City. In addition, their study focuses on teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness rather than direct measures of their effectiveness or longitudinal measures of their commitment to the profession. Yet despite these limitations, the results are highly suggestive. Both Bank Street and Wagner are relatively small institutions; both offer students close relationships with demanding and caring faculty mentors. Both are committed to forming a community among a diverse group of students and faculty. Bank Street and Wagner also “share an emphasis on extensive, carefully supervised clinical work...tightly linked to coursework that places significant attention on the development of content-based pedagogy” (293). Learning, in other words, is characterized by active student engagement, regular efforts to link theory and practice, frequent faculty contact, ongoing assessment and prompt feedback.

These findings are consistent with my own personal experiences. I have served as the chief academic officer at two liberal arts colleges, one in the private sector and one in the public, one in the Midwest and one in New England. In both instances, elementary education and secondary education have been two of the largest academic programs. And in both instances my conversations with principals, superintendents, and cooperating teachers have led me to believe that our teacher candidates have been exceptionally well prepared. In both states, teachers and school administrators routinely have compared them to students coming from the land grant and flagship public campuses. Graduates from my institutions have been characterized as better

prepared, more committed to the profession, more confident, and more aware of public policy issues related to education.

Perhaps the lesson to be drawn from these admittedly imperfect and non-representative studies is simply that “small is beautiful,” i.e., that student preparation for the teaching profession is best where student:faculty ratios are relatively low, students have opportunities to receive individualized attention, and higher education institutions only have to manage a limited number of partnerships with practicum and student teaching sites. This interpretation is undoubtedly part of the story, but I do not believe it is the whole story.

The rest of the story, I believe, relates to the goals of liberal arts colleges. While institutions of this type typically provide an education that is personalized and mentored, they also tend to value demanding coursework, coherent curricula, and meaningful participation in a campus community. Most importantly, they tend to recognize that content knowledge and technical skills by themselves are inadequate, especially if an undergraduate education is to prepare students to lead personally meaningful lives and engaged lives as citizens and leaders. To achieve these goals, education must also develop habits of analysis, criticism, curiosity, intercultural sensitivity, and civic participation. It must lead students to question what they have taken for granted, and then it must help them individually and collectively to reconstruct meaning and to discover what matters to them. As Paolo Freire argued three decades ago, education must free students from “cultures of silence” and “circles of certainty” in order to help them “make their own truth” and prepare them for lives as citizens (1970). It must incite *doubt* and stimulate *imagination*. Almost a century ago, Dewey suggested that if a citizenry is to be capable of active participation in the shaping and governance of society, it must be more than informed; it must be *critical* (1916). Liberal arts colleges have long specialized in the

development of these habits and skills. While these attributes are necessary for all citizens in a democracy, I believe they are especially critical for those of our students who aspire to help prepare future generations to take their place in society.

I do not mean to imply that liberal arts colleges are successful at teacher preparation because they tend to graduate cadres of politicized teacher candidates. Indoctrination is not the point. Rather liberal arts colleges are ideal laboratories for teacher preparation because the skills and habits that they aspire to develop in order to help students become good citizens are also essential to the formation of good teachers. Specifically, liberal arts colleges, because of their missions and their single-minded focus on mission, tend to be committed to the cultivation of perspective, critique, consciousness, remembrance, and imagination, five traits that Giroux and Kaye (1989) have suggested need to be developed if education is to serve democratic ends.

“Perspective” refers to a general awareness that the way things are is not how they always have been or always must be in the future. “Critique” is more specific, involving a de-reification of the socioeconomic, political, and cultural orders in which we live. By “consciousness,” Giroux and Kaye mean an awareness of “the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present,” i.e., an appreciation of the making of history. “Remembrance” refers to a valuation of the past, not as a source of truth, but as a reservoir of experience. Finally, “imagination” “commands that we recognize the present as history” and thus consider the possibilities it offers for furthering democracy and freedom in the future.

I believe it is clear that a curriculum that achieves these several objectives must inevitably enlarge the parochial visions and diminish the alienation, individualism, sense of disconnection, and narrow materialism that many students bring to college. To fail to accomplish these ends is to send our schools ill-prepared teachers, teachers who have a craft but

not a sense of vocation, a commitment to the profession and its civic role. In other words, I firmly believe that a desire to work with children, content knowledge in a particular subject, and a familiarity with pedagogy and child development are insufficient. Yes, they are necessary, but they are not enough. Liberal arts colleges are successful because in addition to these outcomes, which almost all teacher education programs foster, they are the institutions that are most likely to develop future educators who will regard teaching as a calling, a personally and socially meaningful activity through which they can make a difference, not just in individuals' lives but in the lives of communities. These institutions are most likely to produce teachers who value and recognize the importance of their own dualistic role—as engineers of social reproduction *and* as agents of needed social change. The alumni of liberal arts colleges who become educators are also the most likely to recognize that preparation for citizenship (and for the liberal education so essential for democratic citizenship) must begin long before students reach college.

Of course, liberal arts colleges are not the only places that can offer an undergraduate education like the one I've described. They are just the best places to do it “by virtue of their primary focus on teaching, their small size, residential nature, quest for genuine community, engagement of students in active learning, concern for a general and coherent education, and emphasis on the development of the whole person” (Hersh 1999:192). In contrast, we have the world of large “McUniversities” (*ibid.*). While this term risks plunging us into unfair caricature, it draws attention to certain characteristics of our largest public and private campuses—research institutions where undergraduate education is delivered by an underpaid proletariat and piece workers (graduate students and adjuncts), students are free to shop in learning malls that cater to their whims as customers, and big-time athletics and Greek systems insure access to continuous entertainment (cf. Sperber 2000).

Recognizing the need to extend the benefits of a liberal education to the vast numbers of undergraduates who do not attend liberal arts colleges, the American Association of Colleges approximately two decades ago intentionally enlarged its horizons and membership by becoming the American Association of Colleges and Universities. Now, with a mission to be “the leading national association devoted to advancing and strengthening undergraduate liberal education,” it has published a passionate call for “greater expectations” at *all* institutions. Specifically, the AAC&U report calls for “a dramatic reorganization of undergraduate education to ensure that all college aspirants receive...an education of lasting value” (*Greater Expectations*:2). Its authors advocate elimination of the traditional distinctions between liberal and practical education: “Professional studies—such as business, education, health sciences, technologies—should also be approached as liberal education” (*ibid.*:7). This orientation is already commonplace at liberal arts colleges, many of which began to add “pre-professional” programs in the 1970’s and 1980’s in order to remain competitive in an admissions market characterized by parents and students shopping for educations that would be “practical.”

Liberal arts educations, of course, have always been highly practical. In recent years, admissions directors, public relations officers and presidents at liberal arts colleges have aggressively tried to make this point, typically by citing surveys of corporate CEO’s and human resource managers that show that business and industry are interested in hiring college graduates who are well-rounded, flexible, creative, and prepared for continuous learning. In addition, they have cited the dramatic differences in lifetime earnings between college graduates and high school graduates. Unfortunately, these arguments cede the most important ground—i.e., they focus cost-benefit analyses on the narrow materialistic calculations of a consuming public, while ignoring the larger, also practical (but not narrowly individualistic) purposes of college

education. Those liberal arts colleges that added new “practical” majors that ended up housed in a “pre-professional” ghetto separated from the arts and sciences ceded this ground in an even more troubling fashion. Fortunately, most have not.

My own history as a chief academic officer has taken me to a private liberal arts college that expanded into pre-professional fields such as education, business, and computer science and to a former state teachers college that kept its commitment to teacher education as it re-oriented itself to become a public liberal arts college. In both instances, teacher education has been closely connected to the arts and sciences—e.g., through general education requirements and expectations that all students complete an arts and sciences concentration or major. But most importantly these schools have viewed education professors as full partners with colleagues in the arts and sciences in the delivery of a liberal education. This has meant that education departments have shared on an equal basis with arts and science departments the responsibility of providing students an array of challenges and learning opportunities designed to foster “the intellectual, practical, and evaluative judgment and the sense of responsibility a college degree should represent” (*Greater Expectations*:8). They have also fully shared the responsibility of helping students integrate the many parts of their education.

This does not mean there has not been more work to do. Perhaps most important, as AAC&U has recognized, is the need to transform general education from an introductory curriculum (the stuff that college students have to get through before they get to the important, i.e., “practical” stuff) to a developmental curriculum that is closely integrated with the developmental agenda found in the majors. If we do this work well, we will design our curricula, at least those of us who serve primarily 18-22 year-olds will, based upon an understanding of where most young people are when they arrive in college and where we want

them to be when they graduate. Today's college freshmen, if we can trust recent surveys and assessments, "believe that since they are paying for their education, faculty should give them the education they want" (Levine 1997:7). This is consumerism run amok. What these students want is an entry pass to a comfortable life, and that entry pass they have learned from parents, teachers, the media, and our own admissions officers is a college degree. Although more and more report having been involved in volunteer or community service activities during high school (up to 53% in 2002), their visions of their own future tend to be individualistic and materialistic (73% believe it is essential or very important to be well-off financially; 74% to raise a family; but only 20% to influence the political structure, 22% to participate in community action programs, and 17% to become involved in programs to clean up the environment). Less than one in three believe it is important for them to keep up with political affairs. Yet curiously they do not feel a sense of impotence or a lack of hope, an inability to shape their communities and the larger world (only 27% agree with the statement, "realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society") [*The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2002*].

These data are problematic if we wish to graduate four years down the road young people capable of responsible citizenship and, more specifically, new teachers who view their profession as an important expression of their civic commitments and values. Yet the data also offer cause for hope. If many of our first-year undergraduates have already experienced community engagements but have dreams for their future that are largely individualistic, then perhaps we need to build opportunities and requirements for continued service into our colleges' curricular and extra-curricular programs. And perhaps we need to link these "real-world" experiences to opportunities for guided reflection so that service and study are intentionally integrated. In

addition, if our first-year students bring to college a ray of hope that individuals in our society *can* indeed make a difference, then perhaps we need to nurture that hope and help it find direction and connection by fostering in our students the development of serious commitments.

The first of these jobs is relatively easy for teacher education programs. On most campuses, education faculty members already have rich experience and expertise in integrating service learning into the curriculum. Education students are already engaged, often from their first year, in practica and field placements that are linked to challenging courses where there is ample opportunity for reflection on the connections between theory and practice. The second job, the development of commitment, may be a steeper challenge. Yet there are guides available to help us think through how to do this.

The first guide comes from the work of William Perry, who studied the cognitive and ethical development of college students (1981). Perry's studies of undergraduates at Harvard and other universities led him to believe that most beginning college students arrive on campus looking to absorb the knowledge and expertise of their professors, who after all are authorities in their fields. These students are "dualistic" thinkers, in that they are looking for the right answers. Such thinkers often include our brightest pupils, since they are the ones who in middle school and high school learned most effectively how to memorize and regurgitate information. To move students beyond dualism, Perry argued, we must first help them see that for the most interesting questions there is no one "right" answer. Instead there are many ways of looking at things. When students realize this, they have entered a stage that Perry labels "multiplicity." This constitutes important growth, but it is a transition that is fraught with danger. Once students recognize that even the experts often disagree, they may conclude that one idea is as good as another. Therefore anything goes. This attitude of non-criterion openness, often referred to

disparagingly as relativism, has frequently been criticized by conservative critics of higher education. However, for Perry “relativism” is a stage subsequent to and distinct from multiplicity. And it is important that we get students there. The key ingredient of relativism is an ability to think in contextual terms. Relativistic students not only understand that there are different points of view on a given topic, but they recognize that these multiple perspectives derive from the different assumptions and different personal histories of the diverse experts to whom they have been exposed. Students who have reached this stage can argue one side of an issue with one set of assumptions and then turn around and argue another side with a new set of assumptions. There is a sense of empowerment that occurs, as they realize that they can trust their own reason. But there may also be a sense of frustration, because there are fewer right answers and so many ways of viewing things.

Perry believed that for students the way out of relativistic frustration is for teachers to help them ask a new kind of question: if everything is relative, on what basis can I make my own decisions and thereby create order in my own life? Such questioning leads ultimately to the affirmation of standards, i.e., a set of values and principles that can be applied to diverse concerns. In Perry’s terms, the student who makes this final transition has now entered a stage of “Commitment.” This growth is not a structural change in cognitive development; rather it is a qualitative movement made in the awareness of relativism.

Perry’s model has important heuristic value. It may help us understand where students are coming from and where we want to lead them. More importantly it is suggestive of a road map for getting there. While faculty members cannot coerce students into intellectual and ethical development, they certainly can offer conditions that are conducive to it. Education faculty and their colleagues in arts and sciences, especially in general education, might usefully discuss how

they can together reform pedagogy and curricula so that they are optimally designed to invite, encourage, challenge, and support students in the development Perry has outlined.

A second guide, also of heuristic value, comes from the recent work of Lee Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Shulman's "Table of Learning" begins with Engagement and Motivation; it then moves through the categories or stages of Knowledge and Understanding, Performance and Action, Reflection and Critique, Judgment and Design, and finally Commitment and Identity. Here is the narrative of how a curriculum might lead students along this path:

In a nutshell, the taxonomy makes the following assertion: Learning begins with student engagement, which in turn leads to knowledge and understanding. Once someone understands, he or she becomes capable of performance or action. Critical reflection on one's practice and understanding leads to higher-order thinking in the form of a capacity to exercise judgment in the face of uncertainty and to create designs in the presence of constraints and unpredictability. Ultimately, the exercise of judgment makes possible the development of commitment. In commitment, we become capable of professing our understandings and our values, our faith and our love, our skepticism and our doubts, internalizing those attributes and making them integral to our identities. These commitments, in turn, make new engagements possible—and even necessary (Shulman 2002:37).

This description could easily be applied to the developmental sequence that is embedded at least implicitly in the curricula of many education programs. Shulman's "Table" calls attention to the fact that learning to be a professional, whether it be in law, medicine, or teaching, isn't a purely intellectual endeavor. Shulman likens it instead to the process of formation that theological educators often discuss—"the development of an identity that integrates one's capacities and dispositions to create a more generalized orientation to practice" (2002:38). The circularity of Shulman's model is also noteworthy. It appears to echo the value that liberal arts colleges place on the production of lifelong learners. It suggests that the commitments that our

students develop in college are the necessary foundation for active engagement with the world after college and for continued learning.

I do not believe that education faculty isolated in professional schools can adequately engineer these outcomes. They require a close collaboration with arts and sciences faculty. If that does not exist, if students' engagement with subject matter occurs through a potpourri of disconnected courses sprinkled across a fragmented curriculum, and if we expect that they themselves will make the necessary connections across these courses, then their reflections will be shallow, their judgments ill-informed, and their eventual commitments weak. I do not allege that larger institutions cannot overcome these hazards. However, in their efforts to do so they typically are emulating liberal arts colleges, e.g., through the creation of residential, honors programs. The gold standard remains the liberal arts college. It is the ideal place to prepare future teachers who will find meaning in their work, who will see their work as a piece of a larger communal endeavor, and who will have the habits and commitments to sustain them and keep them fresh over the long haul.

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