

Liberal Education in an Interdependent World

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“Education has for its object the formation of character.”

Herbert Spencer

When I was first contacted to speak at the University Continuing Education pre-conference on liberal education, I was given the working title, “Does a Liberal Education Bring Value to the Workplace?” As a title, it frankly did not have much appeal for me, but as a question, it is one that I address every year when I teach.

I bring to my response a dual appointment at Loyola University Chicago in the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Business Administration. I serve full time in the latter, where I am a professor of business ethics and the chair of the management program. As a member of both faculties, I have been teaching undergraduate business ethics courses to business students for almost four decades, and I am very familiar with my constituency and their attitudes. As a group, they are smart, driven, focused, and aggressive. They are also uninterested in anything else but business, and the particular requirements of their majors. So one of my challenges is to make them understand the value of the liberal arts.

Let me confess that my wife, who was an undergraduate business major at the Kelly School of Business at Indiana University, refers to non-business majors as “COASS majors” (College of Arts and Sciences) or “artsy fartsy majors.” Her comments are a form of harmless kidding and reflect the natural competition between the colleges. At the same time, they suggest something much deeper and much more serious. What she and her classmates were unknowingly suggesting was a description of arts and sciences,

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philosophy, and philosophers that William James said too many people uncritically accepted as true. For many, said James, a philosopher is “a blind man, in a dark room, looking for a black hat, that’s really not there.”

Right or wrong, many, if not most, business majors believe that they make money while COAS majors make poetry, pottery, and prose. This attitude is not limited to business undergraduates:

I’m a computer science major at one of the most competitive universities in the world. Undergraduates have a saying with regard to our humanities school (Humanities and Social Science): “H&SS makes for less stress”. The intellectual rigor and academic demands in the school are plainly less. I’ve been awake for 65 hours straight at times chasing programming bugs, on top of the weeks the program took to complete. In my humanities required courses, I never had to put nearly as much effort to get the same results.

The following quotes are somewhat more charitable, viewing the liberal arts as lifelong pursuits but not as subjects worthy of academic study:

What’s the problem with studying humanities in college? Simple: the search for deeper meaning of the human condition, for wisdom, for enriching the human soul through history, prose or philosophy should be what human beings endeavor to do regardless of their profession.

And that is what it comes down to: my major is in preparation for my career. My interest in the humanities, particularly in history, is just a hobby. And that, to be frank, is how I see people pursuing humanities degrees—wasting time and money, because they are simply majoring in what I do in my spare time.

With these attitudes in mind, my thesis is straightforward: We need to build new academic bridges between and among colleges, colleagues, curricula, and collegians. We need a new orthodoxy to eliminate the “siloeing” effects of academic majors, fields, and colleges. The basis for the deconstruction and reconstruction that I am proposing comes not from ideology but from empirical necessity and common sense.

We need not look far to see that the tipping point has already occurred; our lives have been transformed through global connections, whether they are electronic, financial, or ecological. In the words of Thomas Friedman, at the individual, institutional, and governmental levels the world is flat.

For students to succeed, it is not enough for them to think in limited terms. Big business is in radical transition. Toyota and GM are in a close struggle for world hegemony. The former CEO of Toyota America is an American who recently replaced a German as president of Chrysler.

The message that these events send is that we cannot do business the same old ways. The business of business is no longer simply about producing a product or a service and making a profit. Now we have to look at the larger picture. Now, we have to ask, what kind of footprint does a business make? What is the cultural/social impact of doing business? How should business conduct itself on a new larger stage?

At the very least, we have to avoid some of the more obvious commercial, cultural, and linguistic *faux pas* of the past. For example:

- The 1857 Indian Mutiny/Rebellion was, in part, brought on by packing gun cartridges in beef fat and thereby offended indigenous Hindi troops.
- In the 1990s, the Buick division of GM production wanted to change the name of its Canadian-built Regal to Lacrosse until it was discovered that the word was associated with masturbation in Québécois slang.
- The English vacuum cleaner company Electrolux's recent ad campaign featured the tagline, "Electrolux sucks better."
- A Spanish-language airline ad campaign played extensively in Brazil, whose official language is Portuguese.
- Chinese men's new designer underwear was originally called "Pansy's."

More than ever, success in a flat world where competition knows no borders means that our students need to be rounded, and to achieve this, they need to be able to think critically.

CRITICAL THINKERS

William James believed that the true purpose of philosophy was not to teach us what to think, but how to think, and there is no better institution for this than the university, and no better foundation than the liberal arts.

Ideally, what colleges and universities are about is helping to complete students, giving them the opportunity to acquire greater self-awareness, technical skills, and a love—or more modestly—a respect for and openness to continuous learning. In the postmodern age, the unsaid parental expecta-

tion also is that college degrees lead to good, better-paying jobs.

However the history of the university both in the Western and Eastern traditions was always about *sapientia* (Latin for “wisdom”) and not *technologia* (Greek for “technology”). The snobbery we now see exhibited against liberal arts students was directed the other way. There was a prejudice against everything not theoretical, anything that was not wisdom for wisdom’s sake. Even when colleges of medicine became officially and formally associated with the university experience, medicine was seen as a lesser discipline, an applied science. Thus, doctors of medicine wore berets or caps, not the traditional mortarboard of the regular arts and science faculty. It is only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that applied and vocational disciplines were admitted inside the hallowed walls of ivy.

I have been told that one of the Chinese pictographs for the term “liberal arts” consists of two persons bound together at the waist with one person’s head pointed up and the other pointed toward the ground. The implication is that a liberal education allows us to rotate on an axis to examine an issue or idea from more than one perspective. This fuller, rounder view of the world is the aspiration of critical thinking.

After interviewing 12 faculty persons with more than 25 years of experience, and after reading more Stanley Fish than I ever want to do again, I have compiled a short list of the qualities that characterize critical thinkers.

- Critical thinkers examine and are willing to challenge formulas, precepts, ideas, and pieces of received wisdom.
- Critical thinkers can conduct a logical assessment and defend conclusions with facts and lucid argumentation.
- Critical thinkers come make multiple connections because they are open to ideas in a wide range of fields.
- Critical thinkers understand or are more sensitive to other people’s testimony, experience, and arguments.
- Critical thinkers have a greater “geography of life” and an expansive view of the world.
- Critical thinkers share Ovid’s distrust of “the man of one book;” they know that no one source contains all the answers.
- Critical thinkers are able to get beyond our natural state of narcissism.
- Critical thinkers appreciate the power and nuance of words.
- Critical thinkers look at things in context to appreciate better their intended meaning, purpose, and value.

- Critical thinkers, to paraphrase Santayana, remember the past and are not condemned to repeat it.
- Critical thinkers itemize, clarify, and critique objectively their values and beliefs.

A liberal arts education does not guarantee that one will be a critical thinker, but without an exposure to the methods and issues in the arts and sciences, it is hard to acquire the “roundness” that the liberal arts and sciences provide. The qualities, values, and method of thinking associated with a liberal education are not and need not be thought of as antithetical to the world of business. One of the major goals of business is to make a profit, but it is not the only goal. Business is also about what we value, what we need, how we view the rights of others, and what we are ultimately willing to do to earn a profit.

These issues and their answers are not entirely informed or created in a business transaction. Rather, they underlie the transaction and shape our choices and options in the transaction. In other words, our various philosophies of human nature inform and shape our theories of economics as well as our theories of business and ethics.

When I graduated from college in the early 1960s, approximately 12,000 students a year earned an MBA degree. Today, that number is more than 140,000 students a year. The MBA degree is now considered the requisite passport for both corporate as well as more entrepreneurial ventures. In my day, the MBA allowed arts and science graduates to find and do a job in business. At the time, many companies hired according to class rank and assumed that these students were smart and could acquire technical skills on the job.

Today, an overwhelming majority of MBA graduates majored in business as undergraduates. It cannot be denied that a quality MBA degree adds real value to any candidate. But I would argue that for relatively younger persons without work experience an undergraduate business degree followed by an MBA is redundant.

What is needed is a balancing of the scales so that at the undergraduate level the academic experience is not so skewed as to produce graduates without the skills necessary to find a job in the new economy or the awareness to succeed in it over the long term. What I propose is basic, almost elementary, and the rationale for it is one that should resonate with anyone in higher education. And my proposal is a direct rebuttal to the quote from the computer science major cited earlier.

MODEST PROPOSALS

All arts and science and social science majors must minor in business.

All business majors must minor in arts and science.

Classes need to be created across the curriculum that are a blend of arts and science and business, classes such as “Demography, Ecology, and Change,” “International Business Ethics,” “The Politics of a Global Market Place,” “The Literature of Workers’ Rights,” “Global Health Issues,” and “Understanding Global Mass Media.”

Allow me to pause for a moment and say that my proposal is not just a fanciful dream coming from an aging, absent-minded professor who sustained too many head injuries while playing contact sports as an undergraduate. As a veteran of academic wars, I have witnessed the ferocity with which we defend our disciplines and protect our turf. Nevertheless, without being panglossian, I am convinced that the first two proposals can be implemented without much effort or pain. No discipline is being asked to “dumb itself down” or to cut any corners. No professor would be forced outside of his or her comfort zone. And yet we could produce English majors who could read a balance sheet, would know something about marketing, and possessed the basic skills necessary for the new economy; in a word, they would be hireable for most situations. We might also produce finance majors who have read a little Hemingway, taken a few political science courses, and can see beyond the numbers on the bottom line.

But even if these proposals are too radical for the university community to adopt, I am convinced that my third proposal can effectively help students to live a more balanced life in our increasingly intertwined and complex world. Allow me to share with you my ideal example of such a class—“Management and Political Thinking: Lincoln and Leadership.”

Leadership is a key ingredient in the realm of business, politics, and life in general. Without the continuous commitment, enforcement, and modeling of leadership, standards of ethics cannot and will not be achieved in any organization. The ethics of leadership—whether good or bad, positive or negative—affect the ethos of an organization and thereby help to form the ethical choices and decisions of its members. Leaders set the tone, develop the vision, and shape the behavior of all those involved in organizational life. Like it or not, business and politics serve as the metronome for our society. And the meter and behavior established by the leaders set the patterns and establish the models for our behavior as individuals and as a group.

The fundamental principle that underlies my thesis regarding leadership and ethical conduct is age-old. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggested that simply reading a treatise on virtue would not result in morality. The spirit of morality, said Aristotle, is awakened in the individual only through the witness and conduct of a moral person.

I am further convinced that leadership can only be grasped and evaluated in the particular instance of an actual leader doing the job of leadership. Given that February 12, 2009 is the bicentennial of his birth, I submit to you that there is perhaps no better model or action guide for leadership studies than Illinois' own Abraham Lincoln. In the words of William Lee Miller—*Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography*:

Abraham Lincoln was not born...on Mount Rushmore. He did not come into the world as a certified hero with his memorial already built on the Mall and his face already stamped on the penny. He came into the world as you and I did, as a bare and gurgling bundle of possibilities. He was, as you and I were, free, within some limits to make of himself what he would.

In retrospect, Lincoln used his freedom well, and he made choices that led him from a log cabin to the White House, from illiteracy to fame as the most eloquent prose writer in presidential history, and from total anonymity to the status of icon.

But at the outbreak of the Civil War, Lincoln's prospects for success did not bode well. According to Joshua Wolf Shenk in *Lincoln's Melancholy*:

Never had the conditions for a president-elect been so severe, and never had one seemed, by his credentials, so poorly prepared. Lincoln's fifteen predecessors had included war hero generals, vice presidents, secretaries of state, and veterans of Congress. His own resume listed, as he put it, "one term in the lower house of Congress." He'd had barely a year of formal education; he had few connections in the capital and no executive experience. Before coming to Washington, he has been east of the Alleghenies just a handful of times and still bore the stamp of a man raised on the frontier. Surveying the start of Lincoln's term, Harriet Beecher Stowe compared the nation to a ship on a perilous passage, at its helm "a plain working man of the people, with no more culture, instruction, or education that any such working man may obtain."

But in the end, Lincoln became America's secular saint. There are, for example, more books written about Lincoln than any other president—more than 14,000, and more statues of Lincoln and more bridges, schools, and highways named after him than any other president. In 2006, *The Atlantic* magazine named him the “most influential American of all time.” Again, as William Lee Miller pointed out:

Except for religious figures, he has had few superiors on the short list of the most admired, and even shorter list of the most loved, of humankind. Among his countrymen, I believe, he has—given the vicissitude of Jefferson's reputation and certain loss of popular attachment to George Washington—no equal. There he stands: tall, homely, ready to make a self-deprecating joke, stretching higher than the greatest of his countrymen, an unlikely figure among the mighty of the earth.

Leadership is a necessary but elusive concept. Yet as Charles de Gaulle pointed out, “Men fundamentally can no more get along without direction than they can without eating, drinking, or sleeping.” Leadership is a requirement of all organized life, a prerequisite for security and success in business and politics. But as much as we need leadership we have a hard time defining it. As a result, there are no set rules or formulas for leaders to follow. There are only guidelines and concepts, perceptions and ideas, abstractions and generalities. That is why the art of leading people is so difficult to master and to teach. And that is exactly why the best way to teach leadership is by following Aristotle's principle of the “witness of another,” i.e., the model of leaders struggling to lead.

For me, Lincoln fulfills this model, and a class on “Lincoln and Leadership” is my paradigm for classes that blend arts and science and business. In classes like this, students learn that leadership is about knowledge, technique, preparation, and commitment as well as character, virtue, values, and vision. In classes such as these, I hope that we will stop fragmenting knowledge, stop forcing facts and details into separate cubicles, stop the pedagogical habit of hyper-specialization and mini-expertise.

If as a nation we hope to survive and thrive in a brave new networked and interconnected world, our system of higher education needs to produce people with an expanded vision, people who can grasp the “connects” as well as the “disconnects,” people who know the meaning of myth and metaphysics as well as the processes of money and machines. To view the entirety of one's college experience as preparation for a career while regard-

ing the study of humanities as a hobby or what you do in your spare time is to ignore the value of thinking critically at a time when the challenges are enormous. Does a liberal education bring value to the workplace? For four decades, I have been convinced that the answer is yes! 🌐

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