

Vocation is not a Dirty Word

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Abstract: A commentary on the need for more thoughtful ways to introduce undergraduate students to the world of work.

Essay:

On Broadway *Avenue Q* is packing the house with twenty-somethings who laugh ruefully at songs like "What Can You Do With a BA in English?" and "I Wish I Could Go Back to College." As the characters, engaging but floundering puppet/human college graduates, search for jobs that will pay the rent, the notion that what they are really searching for is "purpose" hits them like a thunderbolt. The night I watched, this seemed to be a new thought for many in the audience as well.

That reaction was a vivid reminder to me, a recent college president and long-time advocate of liberal education, that we need to be much clearer about the relationship among learning, work, and purpose. Our students want to know how to connect their values and goals, their intellectual passions and capacities, the myriad of learning experiences in which they engage during college, and the work of their lives.

Too often students are introduced to the world of work and the process of career planning the same way they learn about sex—on the playground from their peers. The results are often similarly distorted, incomplete, and even risky. As with sex, learning how to connect one's education and life's work is best done thoughtfully and with responsible adult involvement. It's high time for us as educators to think about what that would look like in undergraduate education.

College mission statements testify to the integral connection between liberal education and preparation for work, leadership, and service. Lately academia seems to be

consciously embracing the importance of integrating all aspects of the undergraduate educational experience, including academic, co-curricular, residential, volunteer, spiritual, and athletic life. But even with this comprehensive vision, the dimension of work, past, present and future, is typically left out of the integrative model. Indeed some institutions and educators treat students' fascination with their future pursuits as irrelevant, a distraction, the province of a few specialized staff. Skilled career services staff offer self-assessment, counseling, and other resources to help students plan outward for career choices and job searches, and faculty are typically happy to let them do it. The problem is that these career development processes are not woven into students' central educational endeavors where they could provide powerful material and expand motivation for learning.

Why are vocational and career considerations the Cinderella of the integration ball? One reason is that faculty sometimes recoil from the unfortunate but understandable tide of family anxiety about jobs and pressures for relevance and specific workplace preparation. As one candid colleague put it, "the whiff of vocationalism is downright repulsive to many faculty." Faculty also worry about additional time demands, especially when it is to do work for which they do not feel prepared. They compound the problem by overlooking the potential contributions of career services professionals to effective integration by relegating them to the lower status rungs of the already undervalued student affairs ladder. Finally, higher education called some of this pressure upon ourselves by promoting the worth of college in terms of increased lifetime earnings. That makes it harder now for us to define educational success by such measures as graduates' enhanced intellectual and ethical life and capacity for problem-solving, multicultural understanding, and adaptability, measures that are in fact highly correlated with workplace success.

My mother's advice to me for dealing with irritating junior high boys was, "Ignore them and they will go away." That would be a poor strategy for dealing with the hunger for attention to careers. Here the danger to liberal education is that if we ignore students' interest in educational programs that are willing to speak directly to work preparation and options, the students will indeed go away. The solution is not to ignore or stiff-arm students' curiosity and anxiety—or to overreact in a careerist direction—but rather to use that energy to fuel their educational journeys. Welcoming students' vision, concern, and questions about vocation, work, and careers can reveal their passions and interests and motivate their hunger for further learning. And like parents and mentors willing to talk about sex, those teachers and advisors who are willing to talk about what is on students' minds—in this case "purpose" and work—will invite a new level of engagement and trust.

The goal is to broaden students' vision instead of narrowing it and to support their intellectual passions and ambitions. Constructive attention to work and careers can actually liberate students from short-term, "what job can I get with that?" thinking. The rising enrollment in undergraduate business degree programs is driven in large part by students' expectation that jobs in business will be more readily available to business majors than to others. But the best teachers, including in the business department, tell

students that it is most important to pursue subjects to which they bring intensity, curiosity, discipline, and a desire to learn, and that students of every subject find rewarding work when they have done their best and developed essential capacities.

Offering rich examples of people with liberal educations and satisfying careers is useful. Even more important is to marry academic planning and advising about vocation for fulfilling lives, and then to weave them together into the exploratory and reflective work of college in a thoughtful, systematic, natural fashion.

- For example, Colorado College showcases the relationship of liberal education and future careers at the very start of students' journey, with an alumni panel, "The Surprising Lives and Careers of Colorado College Graduates," on Day Two of orientation. The mission of the first and sophomore year advising office reinforces the relationship between academic and life choices: "The advising program assists students in the development of meaningful educational plans that are compatible with their career and life goals."
- Grinnell College faculty integrate student advising and mentoring for academic and career choices around the organizing theme of vocation.
- The Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning created the Learning Careers Project, which uses a portfolio model and self-coaching process "to support student integration of learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, on-campus and off-campus, in face-to-face and virtual environments, and well beyond the four years the student spends at Stanford."

Those of us in midlife know that finding our vocation(s) and meaning in our work, and linking them to our values, knowledge, and capacities, is a lifelong challenge. Understanding that, we should give our students a strong foundation for conducting that process of exploration, reflection, adaptation, and learning—and we should seize the chance to do it as they make the critical early choices of their college years.

Jamienne S. Studley, is a visiting scholar with the Foundation, former president of Skidmore College, and past general counsel at the U.S. Department of Education. Beginning May 1 Jamie will be president of Public Advocates, Inc.

As part of a current research project, Jamie is interested in collecting further examples of serious integration of academic and other learning experiences and career development.

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