On the Value of a Liberal Education

Tom Sullivan
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Over the last several months, a debate has ensued across higher education on a fundamental question: What should be the responsibility of a college or university in the education of its students? A similar question has been posed: Do Americans expect too much from a college degree? The discussion was sparked by a new book and essay by a former professor at Yale (Deresiewicz) arguing that America’s elite universities are not teaching their students to develop the whole individual, including one’s self and one’s soul. Other leading scholars (Pinker) respond that universities are not particularly equipped to teach personal development or emotional maturity. Other commentators (Bruni) believe that the current discourse has been too narrow or that we should return to a time when education was rooted in moral understandings and purpose (Brooks). Reading these debates, one could quickly come to the conclusion that the discussion to date has been too unbalanced in a way that reminds one that extreme positions are infrequently persuasive and ultimately not very useful for reaching consensus.

The debates, however, bring us back to two central questions: what should be the purpose of a college education and what should it accomplish for the student? As classes began at the University of Vermont this fall, I asked our colleagues at the first meeting of the Faculty Senate to spend this year considering several foundational questions, including what it means to be an educated person; what it means to be educated at UVM; and what it means to hold a degree from the University of Vermont. As the national discussion suggests, many people will have differing views on this important subject, but every great educational institution should engage in asking the right questions and seeking a thoughtful exchange of ideas on these topics.

I hope we can all agree that the purpose of higher education should be to expose the student to thinking broadly and deeply about our collective knowledge and new discoveries while fostering critical and analytical thinking that connects intellectual curiosity and careful reflection. It should offer students both depth and breadth on a broad array of topics that inform and shape a coherent reasoning ability that inspires lifelong learning, maturity, and personal growth and development.

As I have often remarked, a broad liberal education is a very valuable springboard for lifelong learning, understanding, and inquiry. It is a window to asking the important questions of what is the meaning, nature and purpose of life. A well-rounded education opens our eyes and curiosity to the “analytical, empirical, moral, and aesthetic” (Menand) issues that we will confront in our lifetime. A worthwhile education should give students ample opportunity to acquire both broad and deep knowledge in
certain fields, incorporating qualitative reasoning and quantitative analysis over a range of ideals, values, including moral dimensions and cultural and religious differences.

In a recent conversation with Professor Emeritus Luther Martin of UVM, he shared with me several examples of the synergy that universities often achieve when integrating qualitative and quantitative learning: fields such as behavioral economics and the cognitive science of religion. As Eric Kendel recently explored in *The Age of Insight (2012)*, “intersections of psychology, neuroscience and art” reveal “the human mind in all of its richness and diversity”.

A rigorous experience should encourage and teach students how to write and speak clearly and persuasively, a set of skills that often have been decried as lacking in the present generation of students. These skills cannot be developed and sharpened unless there is fundamental knowledge and critical, analytical thinking beneath the expression. It is often said that in today’s technologically-connected world we are flooded with information, but we are left with very little understanding of the nuances or complexities around us. The mere learning of information is not enough; there must be an ability to think through the avalanche of facts and information to reach an understanding what the acquired information means across many dimensions, including morals, ethics, and practical application to one’s daily activities and ambitions, including personal growth, maturity, and career aspirations and successes.

At the University of Vermont, our faculty over a course of years has developed six learning outcomes within its general education criteria. These learning outcomes are 1) communication, writing, and information literacy; 2) quantitative reasoning; 3) science, systems, and sustainability; 4) cultures, diversity, and global perspectives; 5) integrating and the application of knowledge; and 6) art, aesthetic and design. These carefully considered learning outcomes, I believe, address almost all of the issues contained in the debate about the purpose of an education and the responsibility of our universities.

They also are complementary to important developmental outcomes that we seek for our students before graduation. The mission statement of UVM is clear on this point; it captures the essence of the University and the meaning of an engaged educational experience: “To create, evaluate, share, and apply knowledge and to prepare students to be accountable leaders who will bring to their work dedication to the global community, a grasp of complexity, effective problem-solving and communication skills, and an enduring commitment to learning and ethical conduct.”