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ROBERT D. HAAK

Assessing the Value of Liberal Arts: A Review of *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs*, by Richard A. Detweiler

As is no doubt true for most of you, I spend many an hour these days speaking with prospective students and their parents about the decision about where their child should go to college.

I have slides on the screen as they walk in. One asks the question, “What is this college thing all about?” You would anticipate (incorrectly) that families who are about to spend a significant amount of money and considerable time over the next few years on a college education would have a fairly articulate idea of what those resources and time were for. What are they “buying” for their time and effort? Too often, they are not able to articulate that answer very clearly. The most common reason for college given is “to get a good job” (cf. Chan and Cruzvergara 6). I talk with them as a representative of the college who should be able to answer that question with some confidence, even if they can’t.

The next slide on the screen gives an overview of what I think education at Augustana College is about. It reads Explore → Reflect → *Transform*. This understanding of education is clearly informed by a long conversation with the Lutheran concept of vocation, a conversation that many readers of *Intersections* have been a part of for many years.

But both of these conceptions of the purpose of a college education—to get a job, to transform your

life—lead to a difficult question. How will we know when we have succeeded? Most of us recognize that simply “getting a job” is way too minimalistic an outcome to be useful. And if that is all it’s about, there are easier and cheaper ways to accomplish the goal. Alternatively, if the goal is transformation, the question might well be: “transformation into what?”

We have spent a lot of years, a lot of words, a lot of effort to define the answer to these questions. Lutheran colleges have used the designation *vocation* as a very productive and important shorthand for what our answers would look like. This journal has been an important voice in those conversations.

Once these questions of purpose have been addressed, a second question becomes important. How do we know if and when we’ve done it? Some might argue that what happens at Lutheran colleges and universities is so ineffable that it cannot be measured. But this begs the question. How do we (or the students, or their parents, or donors—you can add to the list) know if we are being successful?

Richard A. Detweiler, former president of the Great Lakes Colleges Association and Hartwick College, tries to



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approach these questions from a new direction, one that is worthy of considerable conversation. While he is speaking from the point of view of liberal arts colleges broadly conceived, his approach is a relevant conversation partner for Lutheran higher education institutions as a subset of this group.

There are two problems with pursuing answers to the questions raised above. What counts as evidence for an answer? It might seem obvious that the statements by liberal arts colleges about their missions must be the answer to the question about the purpose of a liberal arts institution. And testimony from graduates of these institutions about their effectiveness surely must be the answer to this second question about assessment and evidence. But both of these “obvious” answers are problematic.

In the first case, anyone who has surveyed even briefly the words of mission statements of colleges and universities will not be surprised by the conclusion that there is no common understanding articulated by liberal arts colleges about “what we do.” Rather than adding to the plethora of existing statements of the purposes of education, Detweiler reviewed the history of the philosophy of education and then analyzed over 240 statements of four-year colleges. This led to a grouping of six categories of goal statements that he believes fairly represents the goals of a liberal arts education.

These goals are summarized as:

A Life of Consequence by being a

- Leader
- Civic Altruist

A Life of Inquiry by

- Continued Learning
- Cultural Involvement

A life of Accomplishment by living a

- Fulfilled Life
- Personally Successful Life

Detweiler then proceeds to a similar analysis of the content and context of liberal arts institutions. He finds that there are three components to each:

Content:

- “Nonvocational” (i.e. studies that are not primarily pre-professional or career-oriented)¹
- Span of Study
- Development of Intellectual Skills

Context:

- Engaging Pedagogy
- Development of Larger Perspectives
- Authentically Involving the Learning Community

These few cryptic words are explicated in somewhat more detail. But it is tempting to respond, “Well, *our* program is much more complex and nuanced than this!” No doubt that is true of all of our programs. But these categories, because they cross over the large number of program descriptions, provide a rough but useful definition not of the fine points of liberal arts education but of fixed pillars in the landscape that can be useful guides.

Detweiler summarizes his conclusion:

It is clear that the *why* of education in the tradition of the liberal arts—its purpose—has been consistent since its inception. Its purpose has been, and continues to be, the higher, common good. The *what* of liberal arts education—its content—has always been about foundational preparation for life impact, including the nonvocational development of ways of thinking and an understanding of the span of human knowledge. ... *How* this education is experienced—the educational context—has consistently involved pedagogy, people of different backgrounds and life experiences, and a personally engaging educational community. (93-94)

If these words mark the “what we do” of liberal arts education, how can we get a handle on the “how do we know if we have succeeded” question? How do the content and context of liberal arts education relate to the goals?

Detweiler interviewed more than 1000 students who had graduated from colleges of all types, not only from liberal arts colleges. Information that was gleaned from these interviews determined the types of adult behaviors that characterized the goals of liberal arts education. Detweiler then looked for evidence of these behaviors in graduates of all sorts of institutions. In this way he was able to

determine whether graduation from liberal arts colleges exhibiting the content and context determined above made significant differences in the behavior of graduates at various stages of life.

The results of this work are striking. For all goals, students who graduated from self-defined liberal arts colleges achieved a significantly higher likelihood of having achieved all three broad goals. That is, graduates of liberal arts colleges had a significantly higher likelihood of leading a life of consequence by being a leader and civic altruist, of leading a life of inquiry by continued learning and cultural involvement, and of leading a life of accomplishment by living a fulfilled and personally successful life. The analysis was sophisticated enough that Detweiler was able to determine which content and context elements resulted in the most significant achievement of individual goals. The overall conclusion is that "... the available evidence suggests that liberal arts educational experiences indeed have a real impact on the way that people live the rest of their lives.... an education in the tradition of the liberal arts contributes to adult life impact and success" (186).²

While this is surely good news for the educators at NECU institutions for whom this journal is intended, Detweiler does not speak directly to the current understanding and use of *vocation* within the Lutheran colleges and does not specifically apply his results to this group. Maybe it is enough that we share in the good outcomes of the broad range of liberal arts colleges. But it also seems that this study invites us into a further conversation.

Questions that could be the topic for further consideration include the following:

- Are the goals, content, and context of liberal arts institutions that Detweiler examines also characteristic of Lutheran colleges? Or are we outliers in some respects?
- Are there similar common characteristics of our schools that are distinct from the broader landscape of liberal arts institutions? Should there be? What might those be? How would we determine if these are in fact "common" to us?

Does the methodology Detweiler developed point a way forward to answering these questions?

- How do we as individual schools and as a network compare to other liberal arts colleges using Detweiler's methodology? If we do better (i.e. our graduates have a higher chance of reaching the goals), why is that? What contributes to our success? And if our students are not as successful, why is that? And how can we improve? Detweiler's study provides specific guidance on which practices most significantly influence which outcomes. Can we make use of that information in structuring our campuses toward certain outcomes?
- What other questions should we be asking?

These are the sorts of conversations that have always marked a Lutheran college or university. The Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education summer gatherings provide a fertile venue for such conversations. I would hope that we make use of this moment to refine and further our understanding.

Endnotes

1. Detweiler clearly is not using "vocation" here in a nuanced Lutheran sense but rather as studies leading to "a particular job or profession" (Detweiler 82).
2. Detweiler is to be thanked for not simply presenting conclusions, but for providing definitions of his methods/terminology and giving the data on which these conclusions are based. Because of this, those more skilled in this area than I are able to query his methods and interpretation to contest, correct, or expand his conclusions.

Works Cited

- Chan, Andy and Christine Cruzvergara. "Outcomes and Metrics that Matter: Embedding Career Services at Higher Education's Core." Handshake. Accessed 1 April 2022, tinyurl.com/2uumbk92
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