

2006

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Lambert, Lake (2006) "The Divide Within (Not Between) Liberal Arts and Professional Education," *Intersections*: Vol. 2006: No. 24, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2006/iss24/7>

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LAKE LAMBERT

The Divide Within (Not Between) Liberal Arts and Professional Education

IN HER ESSAY on professional education and liberal arts education, Gail Summer from Lenoir-Rhyne College persuasively argues that colleges and universities need not choose between the two emphases but should instead welcome and appreciate *Both-And* (see above pp. 22-29). In this essay, I too share her conviction that there is not an important divide between liberal arts and professional education. My argument, however, is that there is a real division in the academy, but it is within rather than between these areas. Within both professional education and the liberal arts disciplines, the important division for consideration is between education for vocation versus education for technique. The former refers to the formative character of education that necessarily includes body, mind and spirit—all in service of our neighbors. The latter involves the objectification of knowledge and often the commoditization that follows objectification.

While the division between education for vocation and education for technique has long existed, it has frequently masqueraded or at least been understood as between liberal and professional education. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when John Henry Newman offered his passionate defense of the liberal arts tradition in *The Idea of a University*, he challenged the view, increasingly held, that education's proper end was practicality and usefulness. Newman feared an education providing only commercially useful expertise. When he speaks of professions and professional education, this is how he uses the terms. One of the examples Newman offers is the study of theology where one could learn only how to give sermons and teach a

catechism while ignoring contemplation of God (Newman 82). The problem with this type of usefulness, Newman says, is that a person can be “usurped by his vocation ... His virtues, his science, and his ideas are all to be put into a gown or uniform, and the whole man to be shaped, pressed and stiffened, in the exact mould of his technical character” (Newman 121). The result is that the public purposes of education are lost, the education of the whole person is abandoned, and all that remains are the private economic gains of the individual who has been trained.

But what appeared to be a divide between professional and liberal education became much more complicated soon after Newman's important work. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was an increasing focus on research and expertise within the liberal arts and sciences along with a methodology and epistemology of teaching and research that espoused objectivity as the central value. Professors were to be subject-matter experts in their disciplines, leading to what William James would call in jest the “Ph.D. Octopus.” The doctoral degree became the sign of expertise, and every college, no matter how small or what its mission, wanted these research experts on its faculty. Gone were the days when learned pastors could provide instruction in multiple disciplines—even at denominational colleges. As James noted a century ago, there was no guarantee that a Ph.D. could teach nor did a doctoral exam say anything about the “moral, social and personal characteristics” of the person. To be blunt, these things did not matter (James 3). Likewise, those faculty and those disciplines who did

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not possess the Ph.D. were seen as inferior because their claim to expertise often came through experience rather than research.

Objectivist Education

Educator and writer Parker Palmer has described this development as the move to an epistemology of “objectivism” because it makes objectivity the primary characteristic of academic work. Palmer says that objectivism “begins by assuming a sharp distinction between the knower and the objects to be known. The objects exist ‘out there,’ apart from and independent of the knower. They wait, passive and inert, for us to know them” (Palmer 27). And when we do come to know them, the resulting knowledge is also like a thing. It is a fact or skill that belongs to the individual knower and that can be manipulated by the knower according to his or her will. Even more, it can be bought and sold on the marketplace, making knowledge a commodity. When certain objects of knowledge do not have commercial value, then they are easily dismissed as esoteric and worthless.

Palmer contrasts this way of knowing with the traditional notion of “truth” as the authentic academic task. According to Palmer, “That word, once central to any discussion of knowing, teaching and learning ... is not used much these days (because it is) not crucial to our conversations about the knowledge we value” (30). It is viewed as “romantic,” but in neglecting it we also abandon what it represented. The word truth is much more relational in its understanding of knowledge, with etymological connections to words like “trust” and “troth.” In the pursuit of truth, knowledge becomes a series of relationships—between knower and known but also between the knower and fellow knowers (Palmer 31-32). Further, the use of knowledge is always connected to its discovery.

The focus on objectivity in the pursuit of expertise, epitomized in the Ph.D., meant that the college or university’s social mission was transformed as well. The social mission was frequently reduced to training mini-experts and producing original research instead of shaping and forming young people spiritually, morally and communally. Even a phrase like “knowledge for its own sake”—a phrase that Newman would have likely endorsed in a different context—now too frequently affirms an objectification of knowledge that removes the creation and dissemination of knowledge from the lives of real people, communities, and the natural world.¹ At best in the objectivist curriculum, theology and ethics became add-ons. At worst, they were seen as unwelcome intrusions and a barrier to value-free inquiry. The list of church-related schools that abandoned their distinctive Christian mission for objectivity and “academic

excellence” through technical expertise is too long to recount. Sadly, it includes some of our sister Lutheran colleges.

The professions pursued a similar path as they increasingly became yoked with colleges and universities as sources of training. Professionals became more and more associated with their expertise in a certain area and less and less associated with “the social importance of the knowledge they provide and the functions they perform for the community” (Sullivan). In the past, professional formation occurred through apprenticeship. In the ancient world, the young person would go and live along-side the master worker who would teach the craft and help form the boy’s character. It was even the master’s responsibility to provide for the religious instruction and spiritual life of the child. Apprenticeship was a holistic education. In the new academic environment where professionals were becoming trained, professors were increasingly defined by expertise and so too were those they taught.

The result of these developments is that, for the average person, the word “professionalism” now refers most often to high quality work (Stackhouse 15). Professionals are society’s experts—whether it be accounting, education, college faculty, law, or any other example. But professionalism is more than that, or at least it should be more than that. The professions have traditionally been highly regarded in American society because of their ability to integrate professional expertise with a wider sense of public responsibility. American society has a lingering belief, perhaps nostalgia or perhaps idealism, that professionals are not simply highly skilled people who become “hired guns.” They should have social and cultural commitments for the public good that transcend the knowledge expertise needed to accomplish their occupations. Their educational privilege and social position should foster a sense of duty and obligation, and it is this commitment to social responsibilities that confers legitimacy. In other words, professionals warrant respect not only because of their technical, political or economic authority but also from their moral and cultural authority, arising from their commitment to society and its well-being.

Historically and very recently, when broader concerns for the public good have been neglected, public distrust of professionals has flared. We also witness the decline of the professions when doctors, lawyers and accountants are seen as greedy and not protecting the public good. We curse lawyers who seek riches to the exclusion of justice; we condemn accountants who are willing to “cook the books” rather than seek the welfare of stockholders and society; and we worry when our nurse treats us like a body with an insurance card instead of a human being worthy of dignity and respect. Certainly, all professionals have the potential for corruption, but as professionals trade their knowledge on the marketplace we worry that we can no longer trust them. We are

at the point when we must look at our professionals as we look at any other product, cautioning ourselves with the motto *caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware.

“With both professional education and the liberal arts disciplines subject to objectivism, higher education can be often reduced to a knowledge factory.”

Yet professional education is not alone in these developments. The rise of objectivism in the sciences and even in the humanities has created a similar focus on technical study and expertise. Reflecting on the professionalization of literary studies, Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes how, at the same time literary studies was becoming less accessible to the public reader because of its use of technical jargon and theory, “one of the many by-products of that profusion was a sharp spike in professorial self-esteem” (Harpham 69-70). The use of jargon and technical knowledge that created outsiders and insiders was necessary for the development of professional identity, but the most grievous result was that the study of literature lost its formative power in the lives of students. In the marketplace, this is a problem because this objectification and technical understanding of literature has little or no pecuniary value the way that professional knowledge or some scientific knowledge has, so it is dismissed as worthless. This is the charge, most often heard against humanities faculty, that they are “egghead professors” who do not understand or connect with the “real world” outside their classroom. Humanities majors even joke that they are only economically qualified to say, “do you want fries with that.”²⁶ Those who criticize the objectification of knowledge in the professions and express concern over their commoditization are likely to be seen as liberals because of their concerns about the unrestrained free market of “human capital.” Ironically, those who criticize the objectification of the humanities through theory-laden discourse are sometimes viewed as cultural conservatives because they emphasize instead that the humanities convey important values and traditions.

With both professional education and the liberal arts disciplines subject to objectivism, higher education can be often reduced to a knowledge factory. Students come in, and colleges equip them with current knowledge presumably for a successful career or perhaps for no apparent use at all. Parents and students see higher education as a ticket to a good, professional job and the only path to a financially secure lifestyle. “Value for your

money” becomes the guiding principle, and students along with parents worry whether they are getting their money’s worth. Colleges and universities want to make sure that students get the training and expertise they need so that they can succeed in the marketplace or get into the graduate school of their choice, pay off their student loans, contribute back to their alma mater, and attract more students. Some scholars like Stanley Fish even actively argue against any understanding of moral formation in higher education, arguing that it is outside the realm of faculty expertise (Fish A23), but they unwittingly make colleges and universities more market-driven as a result because there is no means left by which to judge objectivist knowledge except by the values of the economic marketplace. Sadly, when colleges follow such a path, they look little different than the truck driving school advertised on TV, except for the subjects taught and the prices charged.

Vocation and Education

Yet places like our Lutheran colleges were not founded for the purpose of creating and disseminating objects of knowledge. They did not count on an invisible hand in either the marketplace of ideas or the marketplace of commerce but instead had faith in God for what they considered to be a religious mission expressed in education. In his teaching on education, Martin Luther insisted that schools and education were absolutely essential to the life of a community, and establishing and maintaining them was a Christian responsibility because God has entrusted young people to our care (LW 45:353). Luther advocated study of the liberal arts, and he dismissed the arguments—even then—that a classical, liberal education was a waste of time and money (LW 46:217). An education was valuable because it prepared young people for service in a variety of roles and responsibilities, as well as for the general responsibilities of good citizenship. In this way, education was, for Luther, closely tied to a more foundational concept in his emerging theology—that is, the vocation and calling of all God’s people. In their vocations, Luther asserted, Christians become “little Christs,” ministering to and serving one another in unselfish and Christ-like ways (“Freedom” 618).

As you might imagine, there is a close relationship between vocation and profession, and it can be explored both etymologically and theologically. First, by studying the word “professional” we learn that the term is not rooted in the language describing expertise. Rather, its basis is in the word “profess.” In the Middle Ages, what distinguished the professional was not solely his knowledge but the requirement that a professional take an oath. Echoes of these ancient professions are still heard even today. Formal ethics codes also define the various

missions of the professions and set forth the responsibility and ethical guidelines which professionals will follow. These oaths are often taken in formal admission ceremonies when someone joins a profession or a professional society. Whether ordination as a pastor or taking the Hippocratic Oath as a physician, there is a ritual division made between the professional and an ordinary person, defining the contexts, purposes and public responsibilities of a particular role.

Etymologically, another interesting word to consider, as a contrast, is “career.” Ethicist William May has pointed out that “career” and the word “car” stem from the same root. The root is the medieval French word for racetrack, and both career and car “refer to movement—to the ways in which we get off and running” (May 16). May expands this image, writing:

Both car and career refer increasingly today to private means of transportation. The modern car appeals to us because it lets us travel alone... It frees us from traveling with others; it saves us from the body contact of public transportation. Even though a car takes us out into the public streets, it wraps us in a glass-enclosed privacy as we race down public thoroughfares. Similarly, a careerist tends to calculate privately, even in public places. At the beginning of his race, he asks, what will I be? What career will best serve my interests—provide me with the means, in both money and power, to satisfy my wants? In the course of the journey he asks, what moves shall I make to get where I want to go, and most speedily? Whom shall I cultivate? Whom, avoid? And at the end of the race, he looks back on the track, the honors won, the fortune acquired, the opportunities missed, the mistakes made, and wonders whether it was all worthwhile. In such a race, questions of public obligation and responsibility fade to the marginal and episodic. (May 16-17)

So, when people refer to the “rat race,” there is more than humor involved.

Turning to theology, the connection between vocation and profession is one of call and response. In a vocation or calling, Christians come to know gifts, talents and abilities as well as where they may best be used in the world as service to God and neighbor. We also find ourselves connected to the rich biblical tradition of calling from the call of Abraham to the call of Matthew the tax collector, from the call of Jonah and his reluctant response to the call of Saul on the road to Damascus. When we discover and claim a sense of personal calling, and when our students do the same, we and they become part of this biblical tradition; they become part of God’s work to call humanity to

be in relationship to God and in relationship to each other. And we become like the young Samuel who hears God calling in the night and finally responds by saying, “speak Lord, your servant is listening.” In their oath-taking, professionals publicly accept the responsibilities of their distinctive calling and pledge to use their gifts in just and socially responsible ways. The point is that a calling and a profession are more than expertise that can be exploited to the highest bidder. A profession is not a career but a relationship—a relationship with your fellow human beings and a relationship with the God who called you into existence with the distinctive gifts that make your service possible.

“The connection between vocation and profession is one of call and response.”

I am convinced that the distinctive place of church-related colleges in higher education is to uplift the centrality of vocation and calling in teaching and learning. For Lutherans colleges especially, it is our birthright. We all know that we are involved in helping students in the discernment process. We help students to recognize their gifts and abilities by both praising them and correcting them. We serve as mentors who listen and provide counsel. We provide both curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to explore different vocational areas. We also equip students with knowledge that will allow them to serve in meaningful ways. Simply to have a call is inadequate unless you have the skills necessary to fulfill it. Again, expertise and purpose are always related; they cannot be separated.

Recently in higher education, there has been a great deal of emphasis on ethics. We hear the need for students to take ethics courses and hear ethics lectures. Colleges and universities even establish new positions in ethics; my endowed chair in ethics was established over ten years ago for this very reason. Ethics alone is an inadequate strategy, however, because it too can become overly technical. The task is not for students to learn moral theory but for them to become good. This type of formation can occur in ethics classes but also via novels, film and exposure to a wide variety of disciplines and approaches. The current movements to expand service learning, community-based research, and internships, practica, and clinicals are to be hailed as opportunities for students to engage the world, to be guided by mentors and to yoke expertise with service and social responsibility. I would also argue that general education, by its very nature, should be understood as moral education.

In teaching critical thinking skills and breadth of knowledge, we empower students to evaluate traditions and arguments, to understand the world and others; we foster creativity, problem-solving and imagination; and we challenge students to consider the inter-relatedness of issues.

Church-related liberal arts colleges have a distinctive advantage in this approach to higher education and have the opportunity to provide leadership in a way not available previously recognized. Whereas before it seemed that we were at a disadvantage because we could never provide the expertise of research universities, I say we now have the advantage because of our theological grounding, our emphasis on moral formation, our attention to good teaching, and our continued emphasis on calling and vocation. From the founding of our institutions we have told our students that their education is not just about them, the information they will learn, and the skills they will require. It is about what they can do for their neighbors and for their communities. It is about how they will serve their God in word, deed, and example.

Vocation and Culture

But more is needed. Moral formation is needed that can withstand the powerful allure and force of cultural values as well as the values of the many organizational sub-cultures in which our graduates will live and work. As countless authors have now written, an organization's culture (and the various subcultures within it) creates an identity and value system. We are often forced to choose between organizational and other identities since the values inherent in them are incompatible. Even more, loyalty to an organization can blind individuals to the ethical issues that confront them (Rion 542).

To understand this further, a sociological distinction is helpful. When an immigrant is described as "assimilated," this means she has accepted the new group's values, and it also indicates her full acceptance by the new group. Not only is acceptance by the new group required, but the assimilated individual actually has a new reference group by which her identity is determined. Identity is transferred, and the old identity is lost (Teske and Nelson 359, 365). When an immigrant is described as "acculturated," the individual seeks or finds it necessary and advantageous to assume a shared identity with the new group. This may or may not include adoption of the group's values and ends, but it almost always includes adopting their means and methods. If values are adopted, in acculturation the person may adapt and re-orient those values in a new way, giving them new meaning (Teske and Nelson 355-56). An example of acculturation may be an immigrant who learns the values and ways of

life in a new region without fully adopting those values or being completely socialized into the new society. With other members of her community of origin, she may still speak her native language and practice her native culture's tradition, and her native culture will continue to affect how she approaches issues and problems in her new society.

While comparing our students and graduates to immigrants may sound strange, the distinction between acculturation and assimilation is very useful. All previous identity is lost with assimilation, but in contrast, acculturation requires the individual to maintain the original values and the new cultural values without value separation and switching. Successful acculturation requires understanding the values of a new culture (or subculture). But being able to appreciate and operate within a corporate culture is not the same as complete acceptance and accommodation to that culture. On a smaller scale and in a more specific context, acculturation corresponds to the ideal that Christian should be in the world but not of it. It also reflects the incarnational character of Christian vocation; to deny value to the corporate culture is a vocational version of docetism.³

To ensure that a concern for the larger public good continues, we need graduates who are acculturated but not assimilated. A degree of marginality is needed for all who live and work within diverse organizational cultures. The greatest challenge in professional ethics may be the ability to recognize that you are in the middle of a moral dilemma, and this is something that no ethics code can tell you. It is very easy to be so caught up in the organizational culture that problems appear to be in need of only technical solutions. They are seen as accounting problems or legal problems or finance problems or insurance problems because this is how the organizational culture interprets them. For this reason, a position of marginality provides one of the most powerful ethical resources for the profession. In fact, as I tell my students, ninety percent of the issue is whether you recognize the moral dilemma at all, or whether it goes sweeping past you in the guise of a technical concern.

In the book *Common Fire*, the authors, including Sharon Daloz Parks and Laurent Parks Daloz, interviewed one hundred people who they believed modeled a commitment to the public good in their life and work (Daloz et al. 5). One of the most important commonalities among these extraordinary people was a sense of marginality. In fact, the authors refer to it as the "gift" of marginality. For some, the marginality was not chosen but was based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or family background. But for another group, the marginality was based on values. Sometimes this value-based marginality was tied to religion and sometimes it was not. The authors conclude that the "central gift of marginality...is its power to promote

both empathy with the other and a critical perspective on one's own tribe" (Daloz et al. 76). The marginality was a "gift" because it enabled them to see the world differently, to see the world in a way that those around them were unable to see it. When marginality was combined with courage, these people were able to respond in powerful and creative ways that served the common good. Writing recently in *The Cresset*, Samuel Torvend of Pacific Lutheran University, advocated the need for Lutheran colleges to be "centers of vigorous public engagement" where students learn to do more than "fit in" to the existing social order (Torvend 16-17). What *Common Fire* calls "marginality," Torvend names as a "reforming vocation" that our colleges ought to foster, form and inspire in our students (18-19).

As I hope that I have made clear, the ultimate source for realizing that "reforming vocation" will come not through debates about the supposed opposition between liberal arts and professional education but through a deep engagement with the epistemological division that plagues them both. Too much has been written and said about a divide in higher education that does not really matter. While the subjects we teach and study—whether they be the liberal arts or professions—are important, they have been our exclusive concern for far too long. Today we must recognize that what we teach and study is not the issue as much as how we teach, learn and discover. Purpose, epistemology and pedagogy ultimately should define the identity of Lutheran colleges, and this will certainly lead us to focusing on education for vocation over education for expertise and technique.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Edith Waldstein, my colleague at Wartburg College, for this insight.
2. Thank you to Kathryn Kleinhans, another Wartburg colleague, for this quip as well as her editorial suggestions and comments on the whole manuscript. Dan Kittle was a helpful reader as well.
3. In early Christianity, Docetism was the theological position that Jesus had only a spiritual being and only appeared to be human. It was condemned as a heresy. Although not directly cited, the logic of this argument is indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

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