

THE FORUM

Abstract

In the early and mid 1960s in the United States when most college graduates had a choice of many jobs, teaching students immediately marketable skills did not seem all that important. Today, with a tighter job market the university has to re-examine what it is presently doing and what its purpose should be.

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Liberal Education and Marketability

Introduction

The university must continue to provide and support the tradition of true liberal education as this is central to the continuing development and freedom in our society. This article will discuss the meaning of liberal education in its historical context, and the implications for today's university education will be examined in this context.

Liberal, Marketable and Vocational Education

Briefly defined, liberal education is an education that develops the whole person. It seeks to develop a free person who understands and can function well in the world. It will be shown that historically an education with these goals has also, by design, been a marketable education. It will also be shown that many university programs, even though currently not perceived as liberal education, are nevertheless in the historical mainstream of liberal education.

In a marketable education the sequence of courses is directed to give *general* preparation for a career or profession. Marketable education should be distinguished from vocational education which is a course or sequence of courses which teach a specific skill or technical process. A course "Repair of Ford Transmissions, Model Years 1975-77" is vocational in that the student learns the process of repairing these particular transmissions, but nothing more. If changes take place in Ford transmissions, the student will have to take another course in order to repair the new ones. A course in "The Transmission" or "The Engine" in teaching the basic principles of transmission or engine function might conceivably be part of both a liberal and marketable education in so far as it allows the student to better understand the function in our motor age world. Vocational education is normally intended to be marketable but often fails to be so in the long run because it tends to teach special and specific skills rather than concepts which allow one to adapt to change.

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History of Liberal Education

With a few disastrous exceptions liberal education throughout history has always been marketable although this has not always been admitted by the supporters of traditional liberal education. Let's take a look at history.

Roman education concentrated on the education of statesmen, warriors, farmers, merchants. It was concerned with developing skills that would be useful and marketable in society. As a result of this market orientation in education classic Rome was a strong society. The Romans created the largest empire ever, and this empire began to fall only when education turned away from the responsibility to society and practical use in society, when rhetoric became an art in itself rather than a tool to be used in the Senate.

In the urban schools of twelfth century Europe the study of theoretical, practical, logical, and mechanical philosophy followed the study of seven liberal arts. For example, the study of mechanical philosophy included the processing of wool, navigation, medicine, and agriculture. These subjects were obviously considered very important to functioning in the practical world and, therefore, considered part of higher liberal education in the cities. All those skills were highly marketable.

The Renaissance ideal was to educate the whole man, someone who can do many things well, who can handle his private *and* public affairs with competence. Palmieri, an educational thinker in the Italian Renaissance, stresses the practical aspects of education. The Spaniard Juan Luis Vives too sees as the purpose of education the cultivation of the mind *and* the study of what is useful. All of these men insisted that knowledge should be acquired to be used for the common good. Erasmus — as concerned as he was about pure scholarship — nevertheless gives very detailed and practical advice of how the Prince should be educated to conduct his office well. The Prince has to receive a liberal but “marketable” education.

Some advocates of liberal education insist that because liberal education educates the mind, it never has been, is not now, and never should be marketable. Yet, from an examination of mid-19th century, American university curricula, for example that of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, it is quite obvious that the liberal education given was not all that detached from the practical aspirations of the students. Many students became ministers, lawyers, and doctors, and to be employable in these professions they needed Greek, Latin, philosophy which, therefore, was the curriculum at that time.

Liberal learning has to concentrate on lasting values and at the same time be meaningful for the here and now. To those who argue that teaching for the here and now is a watering down of standards and giving up of the ideals of liberal education one can answer that the curriculum of liberal education through the centuries has never been rigid, that it has always changed and always adapted to the changing conditions of life, and that this change has always been denounced by traditionalists. If the truly educated man is the one who can run his affairs well and think and function in today's world, he has to be able to master more than the traditional humanistic curriculum which may have been liberal for past generations. A person in our society has to make decisions about whom to vote for, how to handle his income, in what to invest, how to evaluate government actions. We simply cannot make educated and valid decisions on these questions without a knowledge of management, accounting, finance, law, and economics. The study of business is, therefore, an integral part of being able to manage one's own affairs wisely. Liberal education is at the same time marketable. Some critics seem to suggest that liberal education improves with decreasing practicality, marketability, and increasing detachment from real life. It is interesting that any newcomers to the field of liberal education have always been considered unworthy of

admittance. This has been true for English literature, modern languages, sciences, and now for business. Somehow the new has always been suspect in the halls of liberal education gods. It is also interesting to observe that those who finally were admitted have always tried to close the doors behind them so that from then on the realm would be clean and uncontaminated by new "trivialities". Since one of the main arguments against business as part of liberal education seems to be that it is marketable and has practical applicability, it is necessary to look deeper into the use of the more traditional liberal education subjects. As was pointed out above, the education at many universities in the 19th century provided background for careers in the ministry, law, and medicine. For those professions the liberal education provided was very relevant and preparation for a career. What today appears to have been pure liberal education in the sense that it was not marketable was in fact direct career preparation. This is still true today. The person who studies, for example, literature, philosophy, anthropology, often teaches afterwards and, therefore, the course of study is intensely career oriented. For example, foreign language departments until recently had been able to advise students to study language because of the highly marketable nature of the degree — one could get a job as a high school language teacher. This perception of the use of the language degree is an example of a vocational rather than a liberal outlook on education as the terms were defined above. A language degree could become liberal if the focus would widen from grammar and literature to the total environment of the language studies. This liberal degree could also be a marketable one when combined with a field such as business. And yet, according to traditionalists the currently established ways hold the exclusive key to enlightenment, wholeness, self-fulfillment, and liberality.

Let us turn now to the results of an education that is not marketability oriented. Humboldt, the German philosopher and father of the "modern" German education system, follows Plato's separation of body and soul and rejects the Renaissance ideal of the educated man as somebody who is concerned not only about his own development, but also about the welfare of society. Education in the Humboldt tradition loses its market orientation and tends to concentrate completely on the fulfillment of the individual and so-called pure scholarship. This education results in an intellectual who pursues his interest in a vacuum and is ill equipped to deal with reality even if he wants to. The intellectual in the Third Reich is one of the disastrous outcomes of the education. Education without the goal of marketability easily develops into a system that separates people according to whether they work with their hands or heads, and those who work with their heads are obviously superior. For this reason many who favor this tradition recommend a philosopher as the political leader. Plato developed this concept in his work. *The Republic*, however; when given the opportunity to develop it in reality in Sicily, it failed miserably.

Marcuse, the philosopher and sociologist who became popular with the student movements in the 60s because he supported the concept of a society where all people are liberated under the leadership of an elite intelligentsia, is a modern example of this attempt. Marcuse is a product of the German educational system.

Another illustration of the effects of nonmarketable education is taking place in Quebec, Canada today. Education of the French Canadians has been controlled by the Catholic Church which is very conservative in French speaking Quebec. The curriculum is oriented toward training in religion and philosophy, but tends to neglect business. As a result, the English Canadians, who receive a more marketable education, tend to hold the economically important positions even in Montreal where the French language predominates. Many French feel like second class citizens in their own country in great part because the education they received does not prepare them to function in the world as a liberal education should.

The outcome of the education system of Germany was predictable. In Germany the

professors were given tenure, academic freedom, and could train and choose their successors. Generation after generation of professors were given freedom with very few responsibilities. Is it any wonder that they failed to account for the needs of society or that their inquiry lacked any relation to the world? Academic freedom is, of course, very important, but if it operates without restraint for generations the university will fail to turn out marketable graduates as it should do. In a large midwestern university the Ph.D. program in German requires the student to learn Gothic and Middle High German, both languages from which modern German comes. There is only one work surviving in Gothic and that is a translation of the Bible. The Ph.D. program neither requires nor offers courses in German history, politics, geography, sociology, or business. Germany is a nation of 90 million wealthy persons in Central Europe divided between East and West. It is important, liberal, and marketable to gain knowledge of this area of the world whereas Gothic is of minimal importance and preserved by a system which has ceased to keep up to date.

Gothic and other courses like Old English or Latin should not be abolished because they fail to provide marketable skills. These subjects are part of our Western cultural heritage and a student should have some knowledge of these subjects to be an educated person, but they should not be the centre of the curriculum. The Philosophy Department at Illinois State University, for example, has printed up a number of recommendations to students and potential students. The Department asserts that a philosophy major is good general education and training of the mind, but should be seen as only part of total education. It should be combined with professional education in law, medicine, business or with additional undergraduate education in business or some other more direct skills.

Cardinal Newman said liberal education should "educate a man who could fill any post with credit, and could master any subject with facility." A person needs skills as well as a knowledge of the world in which he lives. It should be seen that a true liberal education must be dynamic and draw from many disciplines. It should be seen that liberal education is marketable education.

Dans les années 1960-1965, alors qu'aux Etats-Unis la plupart des étudiants qui obtenaient un diplôme avaient le choix entre plusieurs possibilités d'emploi la préparation des étudiants en éducation pour un débouché immédiat sur le marché du travail ne semblait guère importante. Aujourd'hui, alors que les possibilités d'emploi sont plus restreintes, les universités doivent réexaminer ce qu'elles font et quels devraient être leurs objectifs.