

1988

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Recommended Citation

Allen, Patrick, "The Small Christian College - Best Hope for the Liberal Arts?" (1988). *Faculty Publications - School of Education*. 66.
https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/66

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The Small Christian College: Best Hope for the Liberal Arts?

A. PATRICK ALLEN

As a faculty member in the College of Business, one of my favorite activities is advising new students during registration time. After looking over the course-schedule book and deflecting questions concerning the identity of the easiest professor in Writing I, I like to talk with students about their personal goals and dreams for the future. I have heard many strange and wonderful responses, but the answer that most troubles me (and the answer I hear all too often) is, "I want to be a millionaire before I am thirty-five." That is it. No dreams for a better world. No desires for a fulfilling future. No thoughts for their fellow man. They just want to make it big, and make it quick.

And this preoccupation with personal success is not exclusive to business majors. We are facing an entire generation of college students whose values are a reflection of the society in which they live. The "good life" has been glamorized to such an extent that a simple, thoughtful, purposeful life will no longer do. Now, a college education is expected to enable a student "to yank big bucks." Is it any wonder that our students are troubled when they find out that they have to take such irrelevant things as history, philosophy, and literature? They want to know what you can do with "this stuff." Are not general education courses simply a way of keeping other departments open, and something to "get out of the way" so that you can give your full attention to the major field of study? After all, is not a liberal education really a thing of the past? Who needs it in today's world?

The Liberal Arts

It is true that the idea of a liberal education is very old. For the Greeks, *encyclios paideia* referred a lifelong learning process, an acculturation of the central values of the society in order to become an effective, participating member (Pfnister 1985,

p. 6). The Greeks knew that a liberal education was the best preparation for authentic citizenship. This type of education, however, was reserved for freemen: slaves could receive vocational training, but not a classical education. It is interesting to note that the idea that a liberal arts education should be reserved for the "ruling class" has remained with us until recent times. In the first part of this century, many state legislatures in the South were unwilling to permit liberal arts courses to be taught in black state universities. These institutions were to provide vocational training. In the 1930s, one black state college was not even allowed to teach Latin. Later, it was "smuggled into the curriculum by offering it under the title *Agricultural Latin*" (Brubacher 1976, p. 76).

In the medieval universities, the curriculum consisted of the *trivium* (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music). You see, in the first universities, faculties had the odd notion that the proper foundation for professional life and advanced study was the ability to read, write, speak, think, and manipulate symbols. In retrospect, it was not an odd idea at all: in fact, this is still the foundation (the basic skills) necessary for a liberal education today.

But where can you get a liberal education? How is it different from vocational education? Should a university provide vocational training? Can a university provide both liberal arts instruction and vocational training? I believe the answer to the last two questions is yes: in fact, in my opinion, universities today have no choice. The problem is not to choose between liberal and vocational education, but to do both. Jose Ortega y Gasset, the great Spanish philosopher, argued that the university must prepare people to enter the professions (they have to eat), but the people must also possess the power to make their lives "a vital influence, in harmony with the height of their times. Hence it is imperative to set up once more, in the university, the teaching of the

culture, the system of vital ideas, which the age has attained. This is the basic function of the university. This is what the university must be, above all else" (Ortega y Gasset 1944, p. 40).

A liberal education, then, involves the transmission of culture and our cultural heritage. It prepares students to become vital participants in their world, and to shape the future. It requires the ability to read, write, speak, and think. It demands a critical mind, a historical perspective, and a sense of purpose and values. This is the business of the university.

The Christian College

Is a Christian college a good place to get a liberal education? I believe it is, but before I defend my position, let me explain what I mean when I speak of a Christian college. It is not a college that hires only Christian professors or admits only Christian students. It is not a college whose mission is to teach biblical studies or to provide training for Christian vocations. And it is not simply an organization with religious, social, and extracurricular benefits. A Christian college is, first of all, a learning community: that is, it is a college. What makes it a Christian college is the commitment to the *integration* of faith and learning, of faith and culture. This goes beyond the mere interaction of faith and learning (you must take several religion courses). The Christian college is a learning community where the integration of faith and learning is a fundamental value (Holmes 1975, pp. 14–18).

There are at least five reasons why a Christian college is a good place to secure a liberal education. The first reason is its size. Christian colleges are generally quite small, especially when compared to most state universities. Institutions with 20,000 to 35,000 students are not uncommon among state universities. A small campus permits many opportunities for personal attention and interaction: a student can stop by after class and talk to a professor. This is hard to do when there are hundreds of students in a lecture class. A small campus also permits diversity without isolation. Larger campuses realize that smaller groups must be formed if education is to be meaningful, but the smaller groups are usually formed by discipline: all the accounting majors over here and all the chemistry majors over there. This leads to isolation and invites a mini-version of C.P. Snow's "two cultures" problem. A smaller college permits a student to know and interact with other students from a variety of disciplines.

In addition, being small permits a college the

flexibility to respond quickly to the needs of the campus community. The small size permits the college to assess needs quickly and move to meet those needs without waiting for permission from different legislative bodies. Size, then, is one reason why a Christian college is a good place to receive a liberal education.

A Christian college also has the capability of building a special kind of learning climate because of the unique nature of community on a Christian campus—because it is a community of faith as well as a community of learning. Christians are comfortable with the idea of building community: it is one of our central values. We understand that being a member of a community involves a commitment to shared values and to each other. Learning, the central task of any college, is more effective in an academic *community*, and the commitment to a community of faith reinforces and affirms the learning community. As Arthur Holmes writes, "faith gives direction and meaning to learning. The goal is still educational, and membership in a Christian college community presupposes commitment to that end" (p. 97).

A third reason is a commitment to teaching: the Christian college is a teaching college. While our professors do conduct research, the primary activity is teaching. At a teaching institution, research and public service are important activities, but only to the extent that they reinforce and enrich the teaching process. With very few exceptions, the faculty is made up of teachers. I believe that the best place to receive a liberal education is from an institution where its faculty are committed to and rewarded for teaching rather than research.

A fourth reason is our concept of vocation. We understand vocation as a calling, an act of ministry. Ministry is not the exclusive domain of the clergy, and developing vocational skills is a part of the necessary preparation for a lifetime of ministry. This tends to obscure the distinction between liberal and vocational education. Rather than an "either-or" situation, this concept of vocation permits a blending of the two. I believe that the successful liberal arts institutions in the 1990s will be those who provide necessary job skills within the context of a liberal education. We can do both, and must do both to be effective.

The last reason why I believe a Christian college is a good place to receive a liberal education is that we ascribe to a set of integrative values. Universities have been criticized for falling down on the job of teaching values. The problem is that with the exception of academic honesty, the modern university cannot come to an agreement about what values to

teach. So, colleges and universities "impart values under the guise of imparting none" (Billington 1984, p. 69). At a Christian college, we do share a set of core values and make no apologies for teaching them. James Bryant Conant, one of the great Harvard presidents, put it this way: "The student . . . in college and in graduate school must be concerned, in part at least, with the words 'right' and 'wrong' in both the ethical and the mathematical sense. Unless he feels the import of those general ideas and aspirations which have been a deep moving force in the lives of men, he runs the risk of partial blindness" (1945, p. viii).

The Best Hope for the Liberal Arts?

The Christian college, as I have said, is in my opinion the best place to get a liberal education. At a time when the modern university is caught between the career interests of its students and the research interests of its faculty, the Christian college may be the best hope for sustaining a meaningful liberal arts tradition. But are we prepared and willing to do it? You see, it is far easier to say we are a liberal arts college than to be one. It is easier to copy the latest curricular trends and academic programs from a nearby state university than to carefully develop programs that are in the best interest of our students and in keeping with our fundamental mission. It is easier to say that we are just as purposeful as the next college down the road than to develop and articulate a distinctive vision for the college. We say that we provide a liberal arts education, but do we really deliver? Could we be guilty of putting designer labels on off-the-rack goods?

This is our challenge as a Christian college. We may be the best hope for the liberal arts, but we have to deliver. To do this, we must maintain a clear sense of mission and purpose. It is not enough to be "just as good as" or to be "just like" the next college. Emulation is not necessarily the way to achieve excellence. We must have a clear sense of what business we are in, and why we are in business. We must be sensitive to the needs of our constituents, but we must never become a slave to the market. The fundamental mission and core values of the institution can not be made subject to the laws of supply and demand. Some things are simply not for sale.

It is also important to articulate our values. The things that are important must be constantly repeated and reinforced. The entire academic community must understand and be committed to the

central values of the institution. This is why I believe so strongly in convocation. It is a time when the entire academic community comes together. It is the best time to build community and to articulate the values of the institution. Small colleges that no longer meet together in convocation have sacrificed one of their greatest educational opportunities.

Finally, it is important to maintain a vital general education program. General education is at the heart of a liberal arts program. Its purpose is to provide to students the knowledge, skills, and values common to all graduates without regard to the major field of study. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of copying the general education program of another college. Each institution is unique, and must develop its own curriculum and delivery system. As the recent Carnegie Report argues, "General education is not a single set of courses. It is a program with a clear objective, one that can be achieved in a variety of ways. And while there is great flexibility in the process, it is the clarity of purpose that is critical" (Boyer 1987, p. 101).

Closing Comments

A liberal education involves the transmission of culture and the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values which enables a student to live at the height of the times. The best place to receive a liberal education is a Christian college because of its size, an orientation toward community, a set of integrative values, a concept of vocation as ministry, and a commitment to teaching as the central activity.

The challenge for the Christian college is to deliver the product. It is easier for a college to call itself a liberal arts institution than to be one. Colleges must maintain a clear sense of mission and purpose, constantly articulate the central values of the institution, and promote an energetic and integrative general education program.

This calling will take a great deal of time and effort, but that the benefits far outweigh the costs. In my opinion, it is better to tend the flame than to guard the ashes.

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