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To Help Students Succeed Professionally and Personally, Teach the Art of Being Human



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Lisa M. Dolling | MARCH 09, 2015

Among the many false dichotomies fostered by the continuing debates surrounding higher education, one that I find especially disconcerting is that which pits the professional against the personal. While it is expressed in a variety of ways, it boils down to this: Either you believe the purpose of going to college is to be able to

secure a (preferably high-paying) job, or you think there is something more intrinsically valuable to be gained from the years spent earning a degree. My question is: When did these become mutually exclusive?

Yet believing that they are is one of the unfortunate conclusions many people draw from the endless bickering about the value of a college education, a debate that many believe was ignited by Ronald Reagan's disparaging of "intellectual curiosity," and intensified with Scott Walker's recent proposal that the University of Wisconsin revise its mission statement to replace references to the "search for truth" or desire to "improve the human condition" with clear (read "practical") goals of meeting "the state's work-force needs." Politics aside, I doubt that either of these officials wanted to assert that professionals need not be thoughtful or reflective. However, that is precisely what this sort of sloppy rhetoric implies and what continues to drive the public's misconceptions about higher education and the "value" it holds for our society.

Education is first and foremost about learning; about developing the intellectual capacities needed to succeed as professionals *and* human beings. This was the belief that inspired W.E.B. Du Bois to declare in a 1949 essay, "Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental," for which "we should fight to the last ditch."

Few people would disagree. After all, how can we expect our society to flourish without a citizenry that values learning as among the highest of virtues or expect our nation to excel without providing for everyone the resources necessary to cultivate intellectual curiosities in new and innovative ways? Most important, how will we ever establish our moral credibility if

we do not encourage these pursuits with an eye to improving the human condition? The problem is that many people are able to maintain these beliefs while at the same time dismissing as "intellectual luxuries" such ideals as the "search for meaning" or "concern for the common good."

Of course, given the exorbitant cost of higher education, it is understandable that professional success would become the priority. Mounting student debt and the financial strain of paying for college are perils that deserve serious attention. As the mother of a high-school senior, I shudder at the prospect of having to pay more over the next four years than we originally paid for our house. And I too want to make sure my daughter learns everything necessary to have a successful career. But as an educator, I also know that this will involve much more than just training her for a profession. As I often remind my students, in the end it is not only a matter of what you do, it's how and why you do it; and the knowledge that this requires above all is knowledge of oneself.

Ironically, students are the ones who seem to understand this more readily than many of the "experts" weighing in on the debates. Students tend to recognize self-reflection and quest for meaning as instrumental to their future success and not just "frills" to be consigned to the dustbin of impracticality, as many would have it. Therefore, I would entreat everyone with a vested interest in higher education to take a moment to ask students directly what they find most valuable about the educational process. I am confident that as a result, the tide of the debates would soon start to turn.

I teach philosophy at a university known for engineering and science, where students are driven and focused, with just one goal in mind: getting that high-paying job. That is, until they set foot in their humanities classes; there something magical happens. Suddenly they are no longer engineering students, but just students, with a willingness to learn as much about themselves as about the material.

A favorite example involves a math major who enrolled in my aesthetics course a few years ago hoping to get his humanities requirements out of the way. One of the works we read is Plato's *Ion*, whose main character is a rhapsode devoted to the works of Homer. Ion describes how ecstatic he becomes at the mere mention of Homer's name, and how while reciting the poet's works he is literally taken out of his senses.

After discussing the dialogue, I ask students to identify a work of art that does to them what Homer's poetry does to Ion. In all the years I have been teaching aesthetics, I have never had a student unable to do this assignment—until that math major. He told me he didn't like poetry, had no interest in painting, and never listened to music, and therefore wanted to be excused from the assignment. I explained that it wasn't about the object per se, but rather the transformative experience. His response was that he never really got that excited about anything in life and therefore was at a loss.

I advised this student to take some time to think about it and get back to me. Much to my delight, a few days later he emailed me with an idea. He asked me if he could use a mathematical proof as an example of something he found to be inspirational.

I shall never forget the experience of sitting in the classroom with the other students as this young man explained the majesty of Euler's Theorem, swept away by his passion and enthusiasm. At one point it was as if he had forgotten where he was. Most remarkable was when he told us he had never explained the proof to anyone before; up until then he had merely used it.

After class the student thanked me for the opportunity to discover something about himself that he never knew; namely, that he was capable of becoming so absorbed in his work that he could appreciate it in entirely new ways. I'm pretty confident that is a realization that will benefit him professionally no less than personally.

Just the other day, a different student asked me why I included a selection from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* on the syllabus for my aesthetics course, a course intended to examine philosophies of art. I explained that in many respects, Aristotle's work is intended as a treatise on the "art of being human," a craft we need to hone no less than any other. The student's response was, "Wow, how interesting. That's an art we seem to have lost sight of these days." I had to hold myself back from replying, "Gee. I wonder why."

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