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Liberal Education: “Learning to Learn”

DALE KNOBEL

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When Sam Schuman and Anne Ponder recruited Chris Dahl and me to join them in developing an “Undergraduate Summit” which might bring together representatives of the major higher education associations, they billed our roles as “conversation starters.” I hope our remarks do just that, not offering fixed conclusions but sparking conversation among those who’ve joined us at the table in Chicago and among those who might become acquainted with the Summit later on. It is more than the accident of friendship that brought us together to get a larger conversation underway. Though all four of us are now leading college and university campuses of different kinds, we came from Honors program backgrounds, and this has colored our thoughts and perhaps even explains why we believe that a broader conversation about undergraduate education today is important. Ostensibly, Honors programs (or, increasingly, “colleges”) are meant to enrich, to challenge, and to meet the differing needs for intellectual stimulation among the members of diverse student bodies. But I think that few of us who have been involved in Honors education have failed to observe that in too many instances they seem intended to “salvage” the quality of an undergraduate degree for a fortunate minority—to provide (for at least those chosen and electing to take part) engaged, participatory learning, close interaction with “real” professors, intellectual community, and opportunities to try a hand at independent scholarship. Where this is, in fact, the case, it is a sad commentary on the state of a baccalaureate education—where it takes a “special” program to deliver to some students what ought to be in the experience of all. To note this takes nothing away from the dedicated Honors program administrators and faculty who conduct the programs. It only recognizes that in such settings they are swimming against the tide in their home institutions rather than with it, beating against the current for the best of reasons.

Those of us who have been active in the National Collegiate Honors Council can also attest that, over the last fifteen years or so, the most rapid generation of new Honors programs has been within the ranks of two-year and community colleges offering not the Bachelor’s but the Associate’s degree. Typically, these programs take the form of something like an enriched “track” for those students bound for ultimate transfer to a four-year college or university, inadvertently implying that the general curriculum is not equipped to get one to a Bachelor’s degree. Acknowledging that it is not always the intent of two year programs to send their graduates beyond the Associate’s diploma, I know I am not alone in wondering what statement it makes that aspirants to a Bachelor’s degree should get on the “Honors” track. But if “Honors” is what is required to pursue a baccalaureate education, then thanks, again, to the hard-working faculty and staff that make it possible.

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While there are many exceptions to the objects of the foregoing observations, there is far too much evidence that the proliferation of Honors programs is, in some respects, an index of how far the attention—and, most importantly, the resources—of the higher education community have strayed from excellence in undergraduate education for all. My point is that “Honors” has too often become substitutive rather than additive.

Who can help being made aware of the undervaluing of the baccalaureate learning experience by much of the media hype surrounding the application of information technology to undergraduate teaching and learning? We all know that technology can fruitfully—though not as easily as some of the earliest enthusiasts assumed—enhance excellence in undergraduate education. But so much of the literature and at least public conversation is not about excellence at all but about how to employ technology to make undergraduate education less costly for an institution to deliver (which is not entirely the same thing as less expensive for a student to receive). To the extent that information technology is treated in the popular media as useful to the student, it is all too frequently discussed as a matter of speed. How can technology help a student complete a degree more quickly? How can a student take advantage of technology to complete a degree with less time in the classroom? The focus on speed is often thinly disguised as an enhancement in access. But access to what? And at what qualitative cost? Fortunately, the conversation on campus, as opposed to that in the public press, is increasingly about how technology can be most usefully integrated into the college classroom rather than how technology can replace the classroom and campus experience.

All of this is ironic because a baccalaureate degree—or, more importantly, the learning that goes into it—has never been more relevant to the world beyond the college or university than today. The lives that today’s (and very likely tomorrow’s) adults are leading in this country have never in recent memory been less “tracked” and predictable. The likelihood that a college graduate will be able to spend an entire career with a particular employer or even in a particular career line is growing more and more remote. Changes in travel and communications technology, in international production and trade, and in the organization of public and private enterprises alike means that the old saw of liberal education—“learning to learn”—has an unmatched immediacy. Teaching to promote breadth, adaptability, and learning “process” is the focus neither of graduate and professional education nor of the terminal Associate’s degree. It has been the special province of the baccalaureate degree. In an information-rich world, many of the important issues in education surround not the acquisition of information so much as the ability to sift, evaluate, choose, and communicate information. All but the narrowest of baccalaureate degree programs acknowledge this by including considerable “general education” in their curricula, providing some breadth of exposure to the humanities, social and natural sciences, and, perhaps, the arts and mathematics, along with special attention to communication skills. Above all, such breadth is calculated to encourage a better understanding of oneself and, especially, of others. Our “shrinking” world places a premium upon such knowledge, which, at its best, produces empathy. Whatever else they do, neither sub- or pre-baccalaureate educational programs nor post- have breadth and empathy among their special goals.

Undergraduate education is, in fact, alive and well in many quarters of American higher education. And where it is flourishing, it is because of its *length* and its *breadth*,

not its speed or its specificity. At its best, an undergraduate liberal education provides an unmatched opportunity over a period of several years for students to explore, to experiment, and to try things out within a community of other learners.

For all the incompleteness of our efforts in higher education to achieve diverse student bodies that reasonably reflect our society, it is in undergraduate study that young people (and, sometimes, not so young people) are likely to have sustained interaction with others who have had life experiences that are different from their own. This is not only on account of being brought together in classrooms, residence halls, and student organizations with people of other races or ethnic backgrounds but also by being joined by those of different socio-economic backgrounds, by persons arriving on campus nurtured by different family structures and parental careers, by those who have come from different kinds of communities and secondary schools, and especially by those who bring with them unique and personal interests. That exposure—if reflected upon in any serious way and reinforced by curriculum—is a source of knowledge that is central to becoming an educated woman or man.

On many campuses, the residential character of the undergraduate experience is an important part of learning—whether shared residence is on a campus or in a college or university community. And it may even be an important part of the experience for “com-puter” students who, nonetheless, spend a big chunk of their learning hours on a campus living with others. It is no wonder that an undergraduate education is one of the best venues available to us for teaching about living in a civil society. The interior lives of residence halls, of student organizations and interest groups, and of campus governance are all about learning to negotiate one’s own interests and points of view with those of others. I am inclined to think that one of the very best things that can come out of an undergraduate experience is “integrity” between what one is learning about world, self, and others in the classroom and life lived on the campus and in the community outside of it.

Without trying in any way to be exhaustive, I am convinced that there is much to feel good about in undergraduate education as it is practiced in colleges and universities across the land today. “Participatory learning” is more than a buzzword as faculty try to find more ways to transfer responsibility for learning from the teacher to the active learner. “Collaborative research” is, on many campuses, far from using students as test-tube washers or library go-fers and has become a real partnership between teacher-scholars and student scholars. Students are voting with their feet by stepping off campus in droves to engage in community service that is “hands-on,” and resourceful professors have found ways to meaningfully relate these opportunities to classroom instruction in the best examples of service-learning. Technology *is* being used effectively not to replace face-to-face interaction in college classrooms but to enrich it by placing the information resources of virtually the world in the hands of students and teachers, not just to be viewed but to be evaluated, manipulated, and discussed. Internships and off-campus study which are more extensive than the study-abroad of an earlier age (though international experience is still an important component of off-campus study) have brought experiential learning to a larger and larger proportion of students. And consortial relationships between colleges and universities—whether promoting shared technology, shared libraries and information resources, shared teachers, or shared programs (including the sharing that takes place

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through the National Collegiate Honors Council)—have helped ensure that productive innovations spread widely and quickly.

There is much to celebrate in contemporary undergraduate liberal education. And there is good reason to think that a baccalaureate degree is more relevant to the world in which we live—and to the world that we project—than ever before. As we think about the challenges undergraduate education faces, we also need to be mindful of its successes and contributions.

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