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Samuel Schuman

University of Minnesota - Morris

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Labors of Love

Samuel Schuman

The University of Minnesota, Morris

I want to speculate a bit about some of the connections between liberal learning and work. This might, at first, seem what those of us in early English literature would call a metaphysical conceit—the yoking together by violence of two seemingly unconnected concepts; an odd connection, in other words. I've been thinking about “work” a lot these days—as I get closer to retirement—because it is a notion which seems to link together a number of things happening in higher education generally, in my college in particular, and in my personal responses to both.

Certainly since my student days in the early '60's, the American work ethic has been taking its lumps. Who better to revisit and defend what is often seen as a remnant of our colonial Puritanism and our dominant Protestant ethic than the grandson of an immigrant Russian Jew!

Actually, what has obsessed me about work and college has been living in rural Minnesota. I'll return to this specific theme in a while.

On the national scene, post secondary education is in the midst of a frenzy of rediscovery of the virtues of combining work and learning. As most of you know better than I, these combinations come in several flavors and have different names. For example “**internships**.” As I understand this term, it means students working, in a kind of apprentice role, often off campus (sometimes on campus), in for- or not-for-profit institutions, for payment and/or academic credit. So, a student can do an internship in sports medicine in the training room down at the gym for 2 credits, or she can do an internship for a semester at a bank across the country for course credit AND salary. Generally, internships seem to involve doing actual useful employable work, but doing it, in effect, with one's eyes open, so that at the same time you are taping ankles or attending board meetings, you are learning about overuse injuries or corporate decision-making. For years organizations like Campus Compact and CAEL have emphasized the back and forth interplay of doing something, then reflecting on what was discovered by doing it. That's why internships almost always involve writing a paper or making a presentation, or somehow demonstrating organized cogitation inspired by and on the actual work experience. Internships are often seen as excellent career preparation, and I suspect they are. (Indeed, in some fields, internships are required for advancement in professional education—e.g., in social work.) They are also seen, by students and by instructors, as an effective way to bridge the distance between the worlds of adult employment and collegiate, classroom instruction. It would be interesting to do some sort of national assessment to discover over, say, a 10 year period, how many students actually end up devoting a significant portion of their mature working lives to laboring in the field

in which they did an internship. My guess would be that it would be a fairly small proportion, but that if you asked the former internship-taking students if their experience had been “worth it,” a huge majority would respond with enthusiastic affirmation.

Closely related to internships, sometimes bafflingly close, is the hottest current trend, **service learning**. It seems to me that the major difference between these two activities is that service learning involves placement in a work setting in which the emphasis is on advancing some common good—enriching the lives of senior citizens or planting trees or teaching American language and culture to recent arrivals or big brother/big sister programs with kids with disabilities, and the like. Such “good works” are coupled with overt curricular aims. A freshman English class “adopted” a Senior Citizens center, paid several visits, did lots of useful activities, then used those experiences as a basis for their writing assignments. The students were very heavily invested in the service activities, which made their writing far more engaged and passionate, and made them want to communicate effectively about something about which they came to care a great deal. That’s service learning. I suspect that if the same students had worked in the nursing home’s administrator’s office, learning about the business practices of elder-care, and written papers about that, for an economics or management class, that would have been an internship.

Then, of course, there’s **volunteerism**, which could be described by the cynic as service learning, without the learning. Actually, my guess would be that most students learn every bit as much in their volunteer activities as in most any other, but it is less planned, less curricularly based, far more individualized and idiosyncratic, and often not overtly articulated. Students have always volunteered to do good works in their college communities; today’s students seem quite energetic and eager in this realm, and many of our small college towns, like mine, benefit measurably from this virtuous dedication. I volunteer. It makes me feel good. It makes the lives of others happier or more comfortable. Who knows, I may be surprised to discover that, contrary to my impression, I really do have an immortal soul, and quite by accident in such activities I’m promoting its salvation or mitigating its damnation.

A fourth kind of **work program** is that embedded in the culture of a Warren Wilson or Blackburn or Deep Springs College: students, by requirement, actually do a significant amount of the work of keeping the physical campus going. At Warren Wilson, they tend the buildings and grounds and run a farm; at Blackburn they even build the buildings. At Deep Springs, the college subsists as a working ranch, with the students the hands. I am drawn to this ethos. It suggests to students that they are the owners and stewards of their college, not pampered aristocrats who are indulged in their intellectual endeavors by a cadre of lesser mortals who clean their bathrooms, erase their graffiti, cook their meals, cut the grass, sweep the halls and paint the woodwork. In my limited experience, students with that feeling of proprietorship have something of the same sense of control, empowerment and engagement with the studies they pursue in such colleges, and that’s a good thing for learning.

Of course, there’s also “**work-study**”—students who have campus jobs to help pay for their financial aid. Often, those jobs actually involve learning some useful things, even the jobs washing dishes in the dining hall or socks in the gym. At my school, we actually have a kind of employment called an Administrative Internship

where students get paid to help keep the college running. Such an assignment might involve processing gifts in the Development Office, or doing the accounting in a faculty Division headquarters, or doing a survey of the economic impact of the college on the local community for the Chancellor.

Of course at most institutions, **students work for a living** or to help cover expenses off campus. Some places are populated almost exclusively by students who have full time jobs. The mixed and multiple demands of family, work, and school can be a source of stress and complication for some students, but it also seems to me, anecdotally, that students who are holding down outside jobs often bring more zeal and commitment to their classwork than do their full-time student colleagues.

Then there are **the rest of us** who actually work for our livings in colleges and universities. While I have never been much of a fan of faculty unionism, it has also struck me on occasion that it might be a good thing if we acknowledged that what we are doing when we are on campus is “working.” Is it possible that one reason that, at every time and in every place, “faculty morale is at an all time low” is because somehow it seems wrong to us to acknowledge that in some ways what we do to earn our salaries has some things in common with what everyone else who works does? Some Monday mornings we don’t want to get up and go in to work. Some days we try hard, and things don’t turn out as we hoped they would in spite of our best labors. Sometimes we want to make more money. [Parenthetically, it has been fascinating to me, in 20 years in academic administration, how universally people who are asking for more money for themselves swear that they aren’t really asking for more money. Whenever a conversation begins, “It’s not really the money I’m talking about...” I know it is.] We long, occasionally, for vacations and retirement, just like steamfitters and lawyers and roofing contractors and priests. Our work is often hard, and it is usually wonderfully rewarding. But it’s work. Maybe if we saw it that way, we’d be happier.

Here’s what I’m most fascinated by, though. In Morris, Minnesota, on the wind-blasted great plains not all that far from Catherine Cater’s Fargo, students work at learning. Oh, they play sometimes; they work at McDonald’s sometimes, but mostly they work very hard and very effectively at the labor of learning. I like to tell prospective faculty at our college this story: soon after I came to the University of Minnesota’s Morris campus, I taught a Chaucer course in which 27 students enrolled. That in itself surprised me a bit, since the class wasn’t really required for anything. At the end of the term, I scanned my grade record book, looked across all the rows of students’ names and down the columns of papers and quizzes and tests, and realized that all of the students in that class had done every single recordable thing I had given them to do, when they were supposed to do it. Not one test missed, not one paper late. This had not happened to me before. I began to ambush colleagues in the hallways, like some modern ancient mariner, and tell them about my wonderful class. The standard reaction was: “Oh, that won’t happen ALL the time.” In other words, while this sort of performance from a class is not universal, there’s nothing particularly rare or remarkable about it. The commentators were, as it happens, right. It doesn’t happen all the time. It does happen often, most recently in the course I taught last year. The University of Minnesota Morris is the kind of place where, when I offered students in an introduction to poetry class extra credit if they were prepared to memorize and recite a poem of at least 14 lines, every single

student in the class did it. It is the kind of place where if a Professor slacks off and lightens up the syllabus too much, the students blast her or him on their end-of-term evaluations. Occasionally all this is irritating. Sometimes students seem so intent upon intellectual consumption that they seem unwilling to discuss things, and prefer to digest great gobs of unchewed truth. I learned very quickly at UMM not to begin classes with my customary query, "What do YOU want to talk about today?" On the other hand, if I start with a question like "So, why do you think the play is called *Midsummer-Night's Dream*?" or "What do you think the Wife of Bath thinks would be an ideal marriage?" or "Would someone remind us why it is that King Henry thinks he needs to make a pilgrimage to the holy land?" I'll be greeted with a sea of hands.

I'm bragging. And I don't want to suggest I'm at a perfect school, nor one with perfect students. There are plenty of folks who run screaming from Morris, Minnesota after one winter.

But our students do come to our campus with the assumption that being a college student means working hard at collegiate learning. The average student on our campus enrolls for MORE than a full time load, and occasionally our calculated FTE exceeds our head count. We have to keep telling students that triple majors might not always be a great idea. This makes an incredible difference. It makes a difference in the classroom and it makes a difference in campus culture. At Morris, nobody worries that when you put students on campus committees, they will shirk their work. Rather, we worry that they will shame the rest of us by doing their homework so thoroughly they make the non-students look lazy.

Let me make the linkage between this sort of student work ethic and liberal learning, because I believe it is a powerful one.

E. M. Forester said, famously, "only connect." Making connections is, it seems to many, the quintessence of a liberal education. At liberal arts colleges, and in colleges of Arts and Sciences and, indeed, in the liberal arts requirements of almost all schools, curricular structures and sequences, graduation requirements, the whole fabric of learning, is based on the premise that understanding the relationships between different fields of knowledge, and different methodologies of learning, is intellectually liberating. The core of true intellectual freedom is not knowing something about poetry and something about mathematics, it is understanding something about the ways those two systems of symbol manipulation are similar and different; it is connecting that freshman calculus course with the junior class in 17th century British writers that makes the difference. When we understand not just that this is a mountain, and that a river, but the way in which the entire landscape is connected, we can move about in it in a purposeful and effective manner. So, proposition #1 is that the central act of liberating learning is grasping the connections between things.

Proposition #2 is that institutions can't really perform that act for learners. Even in colleges with a starkly unitary curriculum, like, say St. John's of Annapolis and New Mexico, my guess is that this doesn't happen as much as desirable, and for the rest of us, it is impossible. At St. John's, at least if one is teaching a third year class, one knows what every single student has had for the first two years, and they know it of each other. If I don't know in my 17th century poetry class who has taken freshman calculus and who has taken statistics instead, and who has yet to meet her math requirement, there is only so far I can go. Most students, in most colleges,

will take something like 30-50 courses as undergraduates, and at many schools Student A's 32 courses may have no overlap with Student B's. How do we make this smorgasbord coherent? Well, we often suggest that you need something from the salad table, some main course, then a bit of desert. We even suggest that the offerings should be sampled in order. But rarely, if I may beat this gastronomic metaphor into the ground, do we notice how the tart dressing on that particular salad complements the sauce on that fish and contrasts with the sweetness of this cake (in Minnesota, it would be Jello). When it comes to making the essential connections which bind together an undergraduate career into a liberating experience, we lead students to water; if we are good, we tell them to drink; then we leave them on their own.

The conclusion I draw from these two propositions is that it is the students who are in the habit of self-generated working on their educations who actually do drink, who put things together. The final task in liberal learning, the one which pulls the whole enterprise together and makes it make sense, will only be done by those willing to do the hard work of doing it themselves. If it is the job of liberal education to build liberated minds, this is a construction job which requires hard labor, and it must be done one hard working individual mind at a time. Sometimes, one hears about active learners and passive learners, but I would argue that what we want our students to learn can only be acquired by action and activity, and moreover, those acts are guaranteed to be arduous, long, trying. Liberal learning is not for the lazy.

How do we cultivate this work ethic? It is nice to be living and working in a region where it is a dominant trait of the culture. The rural upper Midwest has heaps of flaws, ranging from an inability to make a decent cup of coffee to an often humorless view of the world (remember, Minnesota was settled by folks who were too dour to make it as farmers in Norway!), but there is certainly a pervasive belief that the route to salvation is one of unremitting work. It is my suspicion that this is less likely in, say, Santa Barbara.

I can think of a couple of mechanisms for building this kind of student culture:

1. One is those sorts of other work options I mentioned earlier: internships, service learning, campus work programs. People get in the habit of working hard, and experiences in attractive, rewarding, challenging collegiate work activities, it seems to me, have to help build that habit.
2. Secondly, I think we need to tell students about all this—from the beginnings of their careers to the end. If we are expecting them to do the intellectual labor of exploring and understanding the connections which make their educations meaningful, it is a good idea to clue them in. I don't think this is a message which cannot be framed in a manner which is easily grasped by bright college freshmen, and certainly it better be something they can understand before they graduate. We need to take and make a few opportunities to be explicit about our expectations along the way.
3. We can model in our own lives exemplary patterns of hard intellectual work. Few of us are shirkers, in spite of the occasional bad press. It is probably valuable to tackle, periodically, some new project which really challenges us to

break new ground—the rather obvious awkward laboriousness of such endeavors is useful. Moreover, I don't mind students seeing me do physical work: it is a good emblem of cerebral labors.

In our words and in our lives, we can propose, in an era of television zombies and computer game addicts, that there is joy in work. I can think of no person I know who better exemplifies that link than the one we honor in this volume, Catherine Cater. No one has worked longer or harder for the NCHC than Catherine. No one has served our organization more effectively. No one has thrown herself into that work with more glee than Catherine. Catherine's obvious joy in much of her work in no way diminishes her toughness: anyone who thinks Catherine Cater is just a cute little old lady is in for an astonishing and quick awakening.

Let me finish my work here with an image of Catherine which I cherish. It is one of many. A year or so ago, I had the opportunity to spend a bit of time on Catherine's fairly nearby campus, and during my visit I went to a rather nice dinner with her and with two of her colleagues, two guys around my age or younger, who, as it happens, succeeded her, sequentially, as Director of the Honors Program at NDSU. We emerged from dinner after dark, but on a rather balmy North Dakota evening. There was a full or nearly full moon. As we meandered across the parking lot, after a good dinner after a good day's work, in the soft air, and in the light of the moon, Catherine raised her arms and twirled around once or twice and said in the voice of wonder of a ten year old girl, "Oh, isn't it beautiful!" It was a great moment: three middle aged guys in ties, standing flat-footed in a parking lot on the outskirts of Fargo, North Dakota, bewitched, enchanted, caught up in the magic of this ever-lively woman, dancing in the moonlight. I think I'm still just a bit spellbound. For that gift, and for so many more, for myself and for all of us, thanks, Catherine.