

# Vocationalism and the Plight of the Humanities

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AMONG OTHER THINGS, I will argue in this paper that the phrase “vocational education” is an oxymoron. In order to do this, I will take a brief look at the present state of higher education and the relation between the liberal and the useful arts, with particular concern for the current plight of the humanities.

To begin, let us imagine two young people, call them Ned and Nellie Little, who grew up on a small farm in northwestern Iowa. Long before they graduated from high school, their parents made it clear that they wanted the twins to attend college and get away from the farm, which they regarded as a losing proposition. Corporate farming was taking over family farms, prices were chronically low, and three years of dry weather had reduced their crop yields below profit levels. Ned and Nellie’s father and mother were convinced that their children needed a college education to get them off the farm and to help them make their way in the world. In their final year of high school they began to look at colleges and during that time both of their parents emphasized the need to find a college where they could get a degree that would guarantee them a good job after they gradu-

ated. Ned and Nellie’s friends, high school teachers, and counselors also emphasized that imperative, as did practically everything they heard and read in the media. The message was loud and clear as evidenced by the fact that, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, at present 75 percent of the students in colleges across America are there, they insist, to get a good job. Ned and Nellie enrolled in a nearby state school where, after conferring with several faculty members, Ned decided to major in business while Nellie chose nursing. Indeed, they decided on their academic major before they even entered college, based on the information provided them during their visit. They can now look forward to a life of financial security and peace of mind. Or can they?

There are at least two problems with this scenario. To begin with, no one can predict what the job market will be like in five years when Ned and Nellie graduate from college. Thus, as high school seniors, they are buying a pig in a poke, and college officials are dishonest to lead the two students to believe they can foretell the future. Secondly, statistics show that people will change jobs four or five times before they reach the age of forty. This suggests dissatisfaction rather than peace of mind. Putting these young people on a narrow job-track at the age of seventeen or eighteen reduces their options should

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they decide to make significant changes in their career paths later in their lives. Job-training is job-specific with little or no carry-over value, which is to say, job-tracks are based on short-term thinking. Why did Ned and Nellie make their choices?

Even from the brief scenario sketched above, we can see the social pressures that operate on young people to think of college as a place that guarantees them a good job upon graduation. Largely because of the anti-intellectualism rampant in the 1950s, which was driving students away from school, educators since then have been insisting that continued schooling translates into higher lifetime earnings. There are data that support this, of course, and they are frequently referred to in an attempt to convince young people to stay in school. Thus educators themselves have planted the seed: stay in school because you will make more money in the long run. College means better-paying jobs. In addition, Ned and Nellie live in a society that equates success and happiness with wealth—and quality of life with standard of living. As a consequence, young people growing up in America in the twenty-first century naturally associate the ideas of jobs and college. In this regard, Ned and Nellie are typical American college students: they gravitate toward the useful arts and try to avoid the liberal arts, which they consider a waste of their time. Accordingly, the useful arts are growing by leaps and bounds in American colleges and universities while the humanities and natural sciences are failing.

Specifically, between 1966 and 1986 the number of bachelors degrees in America increased by 86 percent while the number of degrees in the humanities decreased by 33 percent.<sup>1</sup> There was a comparable drop in the number of degrees in the natural sciences, while the social sciences remained relatively steady. This makes sense, of course, be-

cause the humanities and natural sciences are regarded by many young people today as not only irrelevant but even a bit esoteric, whereas the social sciences seem, somehow, more practical. But the main growth in college enrollments during this period has been in the useful arts, which lead directly to employment after graduation in areas such as computer science, business, nursing, and teaching. I would like to examine this phenomenon a bit more closely, but first, I would like to consider the question why students are avoiding the humanities, in particular. And then, I would like to expose the notion that education has anything whatever to do with job preparation.

There are a number of reasons why young people avoid the humanities these days. To begin with, for all intents and purposes, many college students cannot read. Data show that enrollments among freshmen in remedial English courses in many public four-year colleges and universities are as high as 55 percent. Even in private four-year colleges the percentage is an astonishing 13 percent. And these statistics must be considered in light of the fact that many current freshman courses would have been considered “remedial” forty or fifty years ago.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the vocabulary of the average college student today has shrunk by 72 percent when compared with the average vocabulary of college students in the 1950s. Books have been replaced by computers, TV, video games, and movies. Many college students in today’s world grow up in households where parents also do not read. It is, therefore, difficult to get students to read, and when they do they often cannot grasp the basic ideas on the printed page. Because of what E.D. Hirsch calls a lack of shared schemata necessary for reading and writing, a number of studies suggest that reading comprehension has dropped precipitously in the past thirty or forty years, along with basic math skills. In research compiled for the

National Education Progress Report in 1985, for example, 56 percent fewer students scored above 600 on the SATs than in 1972 and 73 percent fewer scored above 650. It is not difficult to understand, then, why these students find reading a chore. The recent flood of films in the humanities notwithstanding, the humanities center around the reading of books. Consequently, students avoid these areas if at all possible. In fact, in 1985 only 8 percent of entering college freshmen indicated that they planned to major in the arts and humanities—as contrasted with 21 percent only fifteen years before.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, in a growing number of disciplines within the humanities, especially in the so-called prestige colleges and universities, what is referred to as “New Theory” is replacing the reading of primary texts, and the books that are read are chosen for political rather than educational reasons. The culture wars are being fought in our nation’s classrooms, and authors are selected because they represent minority viewpoints, not because they write well. On many campuses, new theory and culture studies have replaced the close reading of seminal texts. For many students, however, theory is opaque and irrelevant and culture studies are often superficial and do not engender real thought. As Roger Kimball notes in this regard, “[colleges and universities] have abandoned the study of great works of the Western tradition in order to lavish attention on material that is secondary, trivial, or of dubious intellectual importance.”<sup>4</sup> We know from a recent study conducted by the National Association of Scholars that since 1997 only two of twenty-five prestigious liberal arts colleges in this country require a course in Shakespeare of their English majors! It is, therefore, safe to say that fewer and fewer teachers in the future will be in a position to know whether books such as these are truly worth reading. This is disquieting to those of us who think that

some books are better than others.

As things now stand, decisions are being made by growing numbers of professors that the Western classics are riddled with sexism, racism, and nonsense about “objective truth” and “value.” As one student from Williams College asked Kimball after one of his speeches at the college, “You are telling us, Mr. Kimball, that we undergraduates ought to focus our attention on the monuments of Western civilization. But you don’t seem to understand that Western civilization is responsible for most of the world’s ills.”<sup>5</sup> This is absurd on the face of it, but in any event this is a judgment one must make *after* reading the “monuments of Western civilization”: it should not be a conclusion based on hearsay.

The movement away from the seminal works of Western culture would not be nearly as disturbing as it is if students were better informed about their own civilization and culture. But American college students are increasingly ignorant of their own heritage and, to make matters worse, increasingly disinterested. U.C.L.A.’s Higher Education Research Institute concluded after a prolonged study that these students are increasingly disengaged from the academic experience.<sup>6</sup> Anecdotes abound regarding the depth of our students’ ignorance of fundamental facts about their world, anecdotes about students who confuse a Greek poet with Bart Simpson’s father, or students who think larger states have more senators than smaller states, do not know where Toronto is, or cannot recognize the Bill of Rights. These anecdotes are reflected in the data that show an 11 percent drop in general knowledge among college students between 1966 and 1976, according to the report “Nation At Risk,” published in 1985. American students do not compare favorably with students in other industrialized nations of the world, failing to come in first or second on *any* of the 19 academic tests taken in common,

and coming in last seven times. That report also indicated that many of the 17 year-olds who plan to go to college do not possess the higher order intellectual skills necessary to write a persuasive essay or solve a mathematical problem requiring several steps.

It will be a challenge to get these students to read and to think about good books, but it is a challenge we must meet, and until that happens, the humanities will flounder. Much of the energy spent in the last thirty years fighting the culture wars has diverted attention from the two major problems facing those who care about humanistic studies. The first problem is the lack of preparedness of students to do serious college-level work, and the second problem is the fact of creeping vocationalism.

The goal of empowerment can only be achieved if students are asked to read challenging material. We must resist the temptation to dumb-down the curriculum because students are disengaged. That is to say, the books students read, whether great or merely good, must be worthy of serious attention and capable of engendering serious thought, and not merely a smug critical stance toward the students' own culture, which admittedly has its flaws. Whatever we select for our students to read should not be selected because we agree with what the author says, but because the author writes well and has something important to say, regardless of cultural perspective. All reading should contribute to a critical attitude toward *any* culture that indulges in dehumanizing practices, for example. To quote Professor Denis Donoghue, "What we fear is that our students are losing the ability to read, or giving up that ability in favor of an easier one, the capacity of being spontaneously righteous, indignant, or otherwise exasperated."<sup>7</sup> In this substitution the student's mind does not grow and expand, he or she does not become empowered. If we are to engen-

der intellectual growth in students, they need to read carefully exceptional books that present a variety of perspectives commanding their attention and exciting their imagination. These books should include a solid core of classics from the Western canon, though I can find no good reason why we should not include exceptional books from diverse cultures as well, bearing in mind that we are playing a zero-sum game here: every book added demands that another be removed.

It is certainly true that the reading skills of young people have diminished in the past fifty years. But it is also true that by presenting them with exceptional books that engage their imaginations, as well as their intellects, and asking the best teachers to read these books with them in an exercise in mutual exploration, one can hope to see the humanities regain some of their lost strength and universal appeal.

If it is objected that such a course of study would turn off students, I would reply that they are already turned off; and we will not know until we try. We can take heart from the Clemente experiment in the liberal arts conducted several years ago in New York City in which a number of social outcasts and high school dropouts were given a yearlong opportunity to undergo a rigorous course of study centering around primary texts. "One year after the completion of that course ten of the first sixteen...graduates were attending four-year colleges or going to nursing school; four of them had received full scholarships to Bard College. The other graduates were attending community colleges or working full time—except for one: she had been fired from her job at a fast-food restaurant for trying to start a union."<sup>8</sup> I would only add my own experience of teaching great books to marginal students for the past thirty-five years. It takes work, and a careful selection of texts, but it can be done.

It is possible, however, to understand

why young people have turned away from the humanities. And I have suggested why they have, at the same time, turned to the useful arts where the promise of jobs is alluring. It is time now to ask some fundamental questions about the confusion that has arisen in the academy between education and job-training, a confusion that reduces education to mere instruction, the preservation of culture and the empowerment of young people to mere know-how.

Young people are practical, self-absorbed, and for the most part anti-intellectual. So it is not surprising that they are preoccupied with the here and now and ask at every turn: What does this have to do with me? What is surprising is that institutions of higher education have bought into this self-indulgent anti-intellectualism as they scramble to give students what they want rather than what they need. We seem to have forgotten the wisdom contained in Frederick Schiller's adage to "live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise." All students *need* to learn how to use their minds. Putting young people in possession of their own minds is the central purpose of higher education. Preparing them for work is secondary, at best.

Institutions of higher education cannot ignore the fact that their graduates also need to earn a living. This is a given. Jobs are hard to come by and students are more concerned today about finding a good job than they were thirty or forty years ago. But this does not mean that these institutions should transform themselves into glorified vo-techs. This trend has been especially strong in state-supported schools, and Richard Weaver had some harsh words to say about this more than fifty years ago when he insisted that "In state institutions...the movement toward specialism and vocationalism has been irresistible. They have never been

able to say that they will do what they will with their own because their own is not private. It seems fair to say that [in this case] the opposite of private is the prostitute."<sup>9</sup> These words are hard to swallow, though they have the ring of truth to them. Until or unless university faculties have the courage of their convictions and demand and maintain total control of the curriculum—which is their own—the trend will continue.

To be sure, educated people need to work. If they are well-educated, however, they will benefit from their work and be a benefit to those companies that hire them. Regardless of what the particular job happens to be, the best workers are those who can use their minds, who can speak persuasively, write clearly, and figure accurately. These are the people who will be able to adapt to changing circumstances and rise most quickly to the top of their chosen fields of endeavor. We know this for a fact, since business professionals have been telling us for years: give us young people who can understand an inner-office memo, who can add and subtract, and who can speak and write coherently and clearly. We will teach them to do their job. The best preparation for the real world of work is a liberal education, since the only thing we know for certain is that the world will change and a liberal education is the best possible preparation for change. And a liberal education should center around the reading of primary texts that exemplify the best that has been known and thought in the world, in Matthew Arnold's well-worn phrase. Consider some of the traps and pitfalls connected with the notion that education is all about job-preparation:

- (1) Job-preparation is shortsighted and educational institutions that are geared toward job-training are always playing catch-up. They cannot possibly keep up with the rapid changes in the job market.



(2) Job-preparation is task-oriented, it does not lead to an understanding of what it is that one does in the context of a full life in a complex world. This is the fundamental difference between *training* and *education*: the former places intellectual blinders on the student to enable him or her to focus attention on the task at hand; the latter removes the blinders so that the student can see more of the world. And this is why the phrase “vocational education” is an oxymoron. Young people are not merely employees; they are also citizens of a democratic society in an increasingly complex world and as such responsible for making political decisions that have increasingly broad ramifications. They need to have their intellectual blinders removed.

(3) Because of its narrow focus, job-preparation leads to tunnel vision that makes adaptability to future change difficult if not impossible. Students who expect little more than glorified job-training from a four-year degree are, therefore, cheating themselves without realizing it. And those of us who do realize it should not let it happen; not if we really care about our students and their future.

Let us indulge ourselves in a brief digression: why do we assume that a person is successful if and only if that person can find a high-paying job? Why is it not possible to imagine a happy and successful, well-educated person who drives a cab for a living? Or works on a farm? Or clerks at a Wal-mart? Why do we simply assume that empowerment equates with financial success, and why do we equate personal worth with status? Is it possible that none of us will ever again be able to understand what the Greeks knew so well, that is, what Aristotle was saying when he noted that we work for the sake of *leisure*? Are we doomed to live in the bind described by the German sociologist and historian Max Weber who likened work in the modern world to the be-all and end-all of human endeavor? In such a world,

Weber notes, “One does not only work in order to live, but one lives for the sake of one’s work, and if there is no more work to do then one suffers or goes to sleep.” In the best of all possible worlds, education would prepare young people for a life of leisure, properly understood as a life devoted to continued intellectual and spiritual growth. It would not prepare them simply for work. Perhaps the time has come to drive a wedge between education and job-training once and for all.

Imagine, if you will, a university that refuses to play the game, a university that believes that universities are beacons rather than mirrors. Such a university would refuse to give students what they want but would insist, rather, that students receive what they need in order to help them become free agents. Contrary to a popular misconception, college freshmen are not free persons. Not in a world where they can neither read nor write. This is a point that cannot be stressed too often, but one which has been somehow lost in the shuffle. Entering freshmen students are not stupid, but, for the most part, they are prisoners bound by heavy chains of ignorance, prejudice, short-term thinking, inadequate academic preparation, and the undue influence of others. If we do our jobs well, then students *begin* to free themselves as they approach graduation. But achieving positive human freedom is a task for a lifetime. The university truly committed to education can only hope to get the process started and this will not happen as long as education is confused with job-training. We must bear in mind that, if we stress education, students will also be able to find meaningful work; if we stress job-preparation, students will not receive the education they so desperately need. We do not have to make a choice between the two, but we must be clear which is of primary importance.

1. Statistics found in E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (New York, 1988). Subsequent data quoted from Hirsch or "Nation At Risk," unless otherwise noted. 2. Paul Trout, "Remediation and the Dumbing Down of Campus Standards," *Montana Professor*, Vol. I, II, No. 3, p. 4. 3. Ernest Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (New York, 1987), 105. 4. Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals* (Chicago, 1998), 53. 5. *Ibid.* 6. Paul Trout,

"Disengaged Students and the Decline of Academic Standards," *Academic Questions*, Spring 1997, 46. 7. "The Practice of Reading," *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton, 1997), 123. 8. Earl Shorris, "The Liberal Arts as a Weapon in the Hands of the Restless Poor," *Harper's Magazine*, Spring 1997. 9. *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948), 136.

# *Indestructible Islam*

*Jude P. Dougherty*

ONE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD Islam is likely to be determined by one's attitude to Roman Catholicism. Western culture is so bound up with its classical and Christian sources that, given a historical perspective, the two are inseparable. Romantic interpretations of Islam speak of its beneficent presence in the West, overlooking its history of conquest, subjugation, and intolerance. From its inception, that is, from the preaching of the prophet Mohammed, Islam has been willing to use the sword to accomplish its ends, subjecting conquered peoples either to accept Islam or to suffer penalties ranging from taxation to death.<sup>1</sup> A disposition to look upon Islam as just another religion somehow occupying a place in the West on a par with Christianity as a component of Western civilization ignores its adversarial character.

It is currently fashionable among the politically insouciant to distinguish between "Westernized moderate" Muslims and "radical" or "extreme" Muslims. The distinction may have some merit, but it blurs a fundamental truth. All Mohammedans subscribe to the principles enunciated in the Koran, principles which however interpreted unite them as broth-

ers in a common cause and which unify them into a spiritual force aimed at world domination, a spiritual force intrinsically hostile to the West and especially to the Christianity which formerly unified the West. One cannot ignore this *de facto* teaching of Islam throughout the world, nor can one easily overlook the failure of moderate Islam to condemn the rhetoric and violence of the extreme.

Apart from the terrorist actions of September 11, 2001, a contemporary view of Islam must acknowledge its militant character. Mohammedanism stands alone among world religions in sanctioning violence.<sup>2</sup> Only in Islam do we find a fanatical pursuit for converts coupled with a drive to world domination. In Sudan today, Christians are attacked, killed, and butchered in the name of Islam; women and children are sold into slavery. In Nigeria, Muslim majority communities attack Christian communities that resist the imposition of Islamic law. In Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, churches are not permitted, Christian symbols in every form are forbidden as is Christian literature. Christian artifacts are searched out and destroyed. During the Gulf War American troops were prevented from attending Mass; even the celebration of Thanksgiving Day on the occasion of a visit by the President of the United States was forbidden. During the Iran-Iraq

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