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LIBERAL EDUCATION, CAREERISM, AND THE WORLD OF WORK

BY RICHARD WARCH

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION

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As anyone who has followed the public preoccupation with higher education in recent years knows, a number of issues have converged to confront us: unfavorable demographic trends and diminished public funding get most of the attention. But two others seem to me to strike more tellingly at the core of this college and others like it. I refer, of course, to the seemingly acute vocationalism and careerism among today's college students on the one hand and the (perhaps attendant) criticism of or indifference to the value of an education in the liberal arts and sciences on the other. In the past year I have spoken to these issues in several off-campus settings; this morning, I would like to reflect on them with you. And while I recognize that the faculty and students of Lawrence do not fit the general mold of opinion I will describe here and know that they share many of the values and aspirations I will forward, I nonetheless think it fitting to take this occasion, as we begin a new academic year, to assess the situation in which we exist and to assert what Lawrence stands for and why.

I suspect that I speak for a number of people in my generation in noting a change in the intensity of vocational consciousness over the past few decades. I was in college in the latter years of the decade now best remembered for the birth

of rock 'n roll, those happy days of the Eisenhower years, memorialized and celebrated in "American Graffiti" and other emanations of the popular culture. As with all recollections of some bygone era, I suppose I now consider that time simpler than it was, free from much of the cant and concerns that seems to afflict us today. The 1950s had their own cant and concerns, to be sure, but I remember them as more benign, less compelling.

But whatever else may have been true about the 1950s--at least from my perspective--I sense that it was a time less preoccupied with "career" than is the case now. Indeed, as I think back, I'm not sure that the word career had the power that it possesses today. We certainly thought about jobs. We obviously considered what we might do when we left the hallowed halls. And we frequently held long and impassioned discussions--bull sessions better captures the flavor here--about the ethical efficacy of various forms of employment. At its best, or at its worst too, the theme of these conversations revolved around the question of whether or not one could work for General Motors and still possess a social conscience. There was some overall agreement that making the world a better place was the first priority any of us should own, but that it would be wrong for those of us with these highminded instincts to eschew big business on the grounds that then only the s.o.b.s would be in charge. When we weren't debating the meaning of life in these terms, of course, we were considering whether or not to adopt the philosophy of Camus or Sartre and chuck the whole thing.

Pretentious? Sophomoric? Naive? You bet. At times, I recall those days and those conversations with a sort of bemused

bewilderment. Were we really that idealistic? Probably not. Were we really that relaxed? Well, to a considerable extent, yes. And if we had any confusions--and we surely did--they tended to be our doubts about the attractiveness of the vocational marketplace generally, not whether or not we were prepared to undertake this or that occupation. It is perhaps symbolic of that time, and of my thoughts about that time, that it was my classmate Chuck Webb who wrote THE GRADUATE. And if you remember Dustin Hoffmann's response to the word "plastics," better yet, if that moment sets off in you a shock of recognition, you know what I'm trying to evoke here. Some of my classmates, no doubt, made an appointment or two at the job placement office. But there was precious little of anything even remotely connected to career planning going on anywhere.

Skip ahead ten years, to the late 1960s. I began my gainful employment as a college professor in 1968 and reminded myself at the time, and still remind myself today, that college students and college teaching were not always as they were then. If I grew up with Bill Haley and the Everly Brothers, I began my working life to the reverberations of Woodstock. The students I confronted probably didn't know what a malt shop was. When they talked about a trip, I knew they would never leave campus. If, perchance, I made some particularly scintillating comment in a seminar, one of them would get up, snap his fingers, and circle his chair before resuming the seated posture.

To deal with college students in those days was to be caught up in the fervor and ferment of a dramatic social movement.

Peace marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, teach-ins, and other forms of social commentary and protest were ongoing activities.

If you talked careers or vocations with that generation of students, you were not speaking their language. Confronted by what they took to be a corrupt system, what they wanted to talk about was dropping out--even if a relatively small number of them did so. These young men and women were, as Kenneth Kenniston said, the "alienated." The movement they portended, wrote Charles Reich, was The Greening of America. I suspect that if corporate recruiting ever experienced a nadir on college campuses, it occurred 15 years ago. Civil Rights, Viet Nam, and Watergate, after all, were heady stuff. Why worry about working for the system when you could change it--reverse age-old discrimination patterns, halt a foreign engagement, bring down a president. I don't know much about the career office at Yale in those days, but I have a suspicion that students snuck in for appointments surreptitiously. And while this impulse did not last--witness THE BIG CHILL--it was powerful in its time.

I suppose what I have been talking about here is something like the culture of careerism, knowing full well that the reality of twenty-five or fifteen years ago may not have mirrored that culture in every respect. But it is fair to say, I think, that a quarter century ago, college students were more relaxed about careers than is the case today: the world of work was, or appeared, more open and fluid, and options and opportunities seemed greater and more varied. And I think that a decade ago, college students were more hostile about careers than is the case today: the world of work was, or appeared, more unattractive and

unfulfilling, and alternative lifestyles and choices seemed plentiful and more hospitable.

In some respects, it is convenient to think of college students today being more akin to their predecessors of the fifties than of those of the sixties. As far as it goes--which usually is not very far--the point has some merits. If one characterizes the fifties as the so-called "silent generation" and the sixties as "the radicals and hippies," the eighties conform more to the former than the latter. For many, particularly older alumni and members of the business community, this analogy is comforting. No longer, think the alumni, are the inmates running the asylum; no longer, think the business executives, are our future employees a bunch of subversives. Rather, you students appear to them a more-or-less serious and hard-working lot, less interested in overthrowing the system or reapportioning the pie than in becoming part of the system and getting your slice. If students are behaving like students, well, at least you are behaving like the kind of students these folks can understand. You drink beer and, on some campuses, protest the closing of fraternity houses. Furthermore, you frequent offices of career planning and placement and seek job interviews with a purpose. You seem, to those who observe and comment on you, a group of young people preoccupied with vocation and with earning a living. You are--and here I refer to you as a collective generation, not as the individuals gathered here this morning--consumers who are demanding that higher education get you ready for jobs. Yours is the generation, to put it in a

nutshell, which has made business administration programs the fastest growing item in higher education--programs which one unhappy corporate executive has called the "fast food vendors of academia."

The change in attitudes in the course of less than twenty years has been remarkable. Whereas in 1967, according to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, over 80 percent of freshmen entering college aspired to develop a meaningful philosophy of life, last year only 44 percent had that objective. And whereas in 1967 about 45 percent stated that they wanted to be very well-off financially, today almost 70 percent make that claim. In fact, by far the most prevalent reason why young people in 1983 said they decided to go to college is to "get a better job." And in the search for better jobs, last year's entering freshmen looked not to careers in education (which appealed to only 5 percent), but to business (which 24 percent planned to enter), engineering (which attracted 11 percent), and computing (which captured almost 9 percent).

Happily for us and, I think, for you, Lawrence freshmen differed from the norm in significant respects. Sixty-four percent of the current sophomores indicated that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was important and only 50 percent indicated that being very well off financially was important in assessing their principal reasons for entering college. Of equal interest here are two other data: that 23 percent of Lawrentians thought they would change their major field (the national average was 12 percent) and that 32 percent of you thought you would change your career choice (the national average here was 11

percent). In short, Lawrentians are more open to change and more committed to the larger purposes of higher education than the norm.

Despite the more cheerful findings from our students, the national pattern has shifted dramatically in the last few decades. And that shift has affected us all, But the changes that these statistics and observations suggest are not the only ones that have taken place in the last quarter century or so. Of equal significance, I think, are the alterations and modifications that have occurred across the board in higher education, particularly in recent years. In the main, what has transpired has been that colleges and universities have reacted and responded to the shifts in student interests by creating programs of study designed to serve only their vocational objectives rather than their personal or intellectual needs. This strategy--predicated on the notion that if students behave like consumers then colleges ought to behave like providers--has created a situation in which students are invited to line up their occupational interests with curricular versions of those occupations. Put in its least attractive form, one might argue that education has preyed on the fears of the young and tried to assure them that this or the other program of study would lead them to the promised land of employment--thereby reinforcing the ill-conceived notion that that aim represents higher education's highest good.

In this climate, vocational education flourished, not only in the so-called voc-tech sector, but in other institutions as

well. Schools, programs, majors, and courses came into being that derived their rationale and signals not from any disciplinary or intellectual base, but from an occupational and practical orientation. The result, of course, has been that education has given way to training in many instances. Now there is nothing new here: higher education has long offered programs of study that led to particular fields of employment. The difference is one of degree, but of such a large degree that it has almost become a difference of kind.

There is at work here a larger set of problems, of which those I've touched on just now are but manifestations. Broadly stated, we have gotten into educational trouble in this country to the extent that we have tried to load on education a series of objectives and projected outcomes that give it not so much a liberating as a restricting quality. It has been said that you can tell you are being educated when your options increase, and that you can be sure the opposite is occurring when your options diminish. Too much of what passes for education these days falls into the latter camp: it is not education in the true sense at all, but merely careerism disguised as curriculum.

Where we have gone wrong is that we have tended increasingly to identify the student/graduate's degree or major with his or her skills, talents, and potential--including vocational potential. The Rockefeller Foundation Panel report *Prospects for America* spoke to this issue 22 years ago when it noted that "a degree is not education, and confusion on this point is perhaps the gravest weakness in American thinking about education." It is a grave weakness still, and educators betray the weakness as

much as anyone. - Even T. H. Bell, the former and present educational czar, has shown the same tendency to confuse education with training and to mistake the nature of intellectual endeavor for the vocational preparation of students. A few years ago he warned that "the college that devotes itself totally and unequivocally to the liberal arts today is just kidding itself. To send young men and women into today's world armed only with Aristotle, Freud, and Hemingway is like sending a lamb into the lion's den." What young people need, Mr. Bell asserted, are "useful, salable skills" so that they can earn "a good living."

Now this, I would argue, is nonsense bordering on madness. I do not for a moment dispute the need for students to develop useful skills and do not in the slightest denigrate the importance of earning a living. But this view of the way the world wags is simply silly, both as it pertains to the purposes of liberal education and as it relates to the nature of preparing for vocations. It confuses means and ends almost hopelessly and makes the fatal error of assuming that the only education which prepares one for the workplace is an education that derives its justification directly from the workplace. Finally, it assumes that the sole value of education is its occupational consequence, a form of economic determinism that seems somewhat deadly and deadening. In all fairness to Mr. Bell, even he has seen the folly of his earlier statement. About a year ago, he changed his tune.

Since I like the new Mr. Bell, let me share his words with

you here. Speaking at a joint U.S./Canadian educational conference, Bell condemned the "pragmatic vocationalism and careerism" in higher education which is turning our colleges and universities into "glorified work-preparation institutes." Furthermore, he expressed his concern "about the trend toward the earlier and ever earlier entry of college students into job-related specialization" and condemned the "virtual obsession" of some institutions with "turning out what Walter Lippmann called 'efficient careerists.'" In sum, Bell said, the preoccupation with job-related education "might well lead to a decline in literacy, general civility, and intellectual competence in higher education," a situation that higher education should resist by insisting on "a solid liberal-arts education that includes healthy doses of philosophy, literature, history, theology, math, and science." If I read the new Mr. Bell correctly, he is calling for sending students forth armed with Aristotle, Freud, and Hemingway with the expectation that they will enter the lion's den not like a lamb, but like Daniel.

Bell's remarks--what I prefer to think of as his recantation and conversion--are but one among a wide array that have been uttered on this theme in the recent past. Indeed, liberal education and the liberal arts college are reasserting their historical and future place in our higher educational network and their primacy as offering the right kind of preparation for the world of work is finding support--statistical and testimonial--from many quarters.

In the examples that I will recite in a moment, the world of work will be identified primarily with business. I use these

illustrations in large measure because they are the most prevalent and prominent and because business-related concerns have been forwarded persistently and passionately in the debate about liberal arts education. I do not use these examples because I believe they tell the whole story. When it comes to career choices, liberal arts graduates--and Lawrentians in particular--engage a broad spectrum of vocations and professions. That breadth, in fact, reveals one of the geniuses of the liberal arts and sciences: they expand options, they do not restrict them.

Among those options, of course, are business-related fields of employment. And as it turns out, the evidence shows that liberal arts learning pays off in and for these careers. A 1980 study of liberal arts graduates from the classes of 1955, 1960, and 1965, for example, compared their career paths with specialists in various fields over a fifteen to twenty-five year period. While the liberal arts graduates had started at lower salaries, the report noted, "over a period of time ranging from three to fourteen years, they outdistanced the field in every one of those occupations in salaries and presumably in value to their organizations."

Perhaps the most widely-cited of these analyses was the twenty-year longitudinal research project undertaken by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. It found "that the Bell System's liberal arts graduates were promoted faster, were rated higher in administrative skills and were found to have more management potential than technical graduates." Specifically,

after twenty years, 43 percent of the humanities graduates had achieved the fourth level of management, as compared to 32 percent of the business majors and 23 percent of the engineers. As Chairman of the Board Charles L. Brown noted, in reviewing these findings: "There is a place--and a central place--for the humanities and liberal arts graduate in business. That is the good news. The bad news is that the good news is not better known."

The news has become known at Chase Manhattan. It compared the track records of its new employees with liberal arts baccalaureate degrees with the performance of its new employees with M.B.A.s. "Comparing job performance with educational background, Chase found that the majority (about 60 percent) of the most successful managers had only bachelor's degrees, while a similar percentage of the least successful managers [again, about 60 percent] had M.B.A.s. As a group, the B.A.s had a higher average success index than that of the group with M.B.A.s." The message underlying this result was captured somewhat flippantly by a senior vice president for the First Atlanta Corporation. "If I could choose one degree for the people I hire, it would be English," he said; "You can teach a group of Cub Scouts to do portfolio analysis."

The message is clear: the liberal arts are back in vogue and the liberal arts graduate has an edge in the workplace. Many folks may be surprised by this reemergence and perhaps some may feel threatened by it. But as the evidence mounts, it may be well to consider that this is not only a radical departure from recent practice and principle but is also a return to time-tested

practice and principle. Writing in 1925, Alfred North Whitehead said that "The fixed person for the fixed duties, who in older societies was such a godsend, in the future will be a public danger." We have forgotten Whitehead's warning. We have been seduced, in education and in employment, to place too much confidence in and emphasis on creating fixed persons for fixed duties. If the young person expresses a vocational interest, we have pointed him or her toward a curricular version of that vocation. We have capitulated to what Henry Wriston--surely the upperclassmen did not expect a speech without a quotation from Wriston--called "the premature certainty of the eighteen year old" by thinking it wise and prudent to translate his or her early considerations of career into a course of study and training.

We have, in short, invited a kind of short-term, quick-fix mindset among our students and future employees. That they may change their career interests is a factor too infrequently imagined. That the jobs for which we are preparing them may disappear is an outcome we rarely admit. That the jobs available to them in five or ten years may not now exist is something we have not squarely confronted.

But that is not all. We probably have been paying too little heed to the simple and singular fact that the best preparation for the future--as opposed to the past or present--is an education that imparts and nurtures basic and transferable skills of inquiry, analysis, and communication. Henry Adams, who lamented in his autobiography that he was an eighteenth-century

child born into a twentieth-century world, said it well: "What a man knows as a youth is of little moment; he knows best who has learned how to learn." Or, as Adams put it in another context, education must be able to teach you how to jump--how to respond, adapt, change. And if that was true in 1907, it is certainly true today.

Perhaps a more recent example will be more telling. The Yale Class of 1957, at its twenty-fifth reunion two years ago, found that 75 percent of the graduates held jobs that did not exist when they graduated from college. And if that was true for the Class of 1957, it will be true in spades, doubled and redoubled for the classes of the 1980s. They will need to know how to jump. We need to provide them with an education that will help them learn how to jump. What too many institutions have been about instead, at least in the recent past, is concocting educational training programs designed to produce the next generation's unemployed.

The testimony on this front is, I think, fairly impressive. John Naisbitt, author of MEGATRENDS, concludes that "today's graduate is entering a society where the specialist is often soon obsolete, but where the adaptable generalist is highly welcome." In a recent issue of his Trend Letter, Naisbitt picked up on this theme: "An interesting phenomenon is occurring. There's an increasing demand for liberal arts graduates. Especially by businesses that offer management-training programs. Why the demand? Because liberal arts students have learned how to learn." Shades of Henry Adams indeed! Naisbitt practically offers a direct quotation.

Again, the argument favors breadth and reach in education, it values general education, it supports that tradition of learning that we call the liberal arts and sciences. I do not claim that the consequence of this argument is for everyone to attend a liberal arts college. I do not argue that those who do not attend such a college will somehow fall off the sled. But I do put forward the strong assertion that it is no longer fashionable--indeed, according to these studies and assessments it is no longer appropriate or prudent--to demean liberal education. And this evidence also suggests that it is shortsighted, to say the least, for students to doubt the long-run validity of their liberal learning. The convenient argument--even the occasional suspicion--that liberal education is impractical, does not pave the way for employment, is somehow antithetical to successful entry and advancement in the rest of the real world--all these are refuted. They simply do not comport with the facts.

There is a seductive temptation here, of course, one that I intend personally and institutionally to avoid. As much as the evidence regarding the vocational efficacy of liberal education may strengthen our case in meeting the concern about careers felt by students, and as much as the record refutes the charges of the critics of our undertaking, we must not identify the mission of the college with these particular outcomes. While I believe we can and should be bullish and confident in asserting and demonstrating that liberal education is utilitarian in the long run--that we are educating marathoners, not sprinters--we must

also recognize that this is not our sole reason for being. There are other aspects of our educational agenda that are primary and that are meritorious and significant.

In short, even though liberal education claims an impressive and enduring record on the vocational front, that record must not then become the principal justification for liberal education. In the first place, education in the liberal arts and sciences is not only aimed at the acquisition of skills to be utilized in the workplace; exploring and mastering various subject matters and disciplines are important and engaging on their own merits too, even in the absence of ulterior consequences. Second, we know that Lawrence graduates successfully enter many fields of employment besides business. A substantial fraction--about half--for example, pursue graduate and professional degrees. With or without further study, Lawrentians go on to become many things: doctors, lawyers, teachers, public servants, artists, musicians, and more. Our record here extends far beyond the corporate realm and will continue to do so in the future. And third and finally, Lawrence has ambitions and purposes besides that of preparing young men and women for lives of meaningful work.

One of the charms of liberal education is that it develops and hones modes of thought, analysis, and expression through the study of inherently interesting subjects. The disciplines of the arts and sciences represent and reflect important areas of human investigation and achievement. And learning in this context is exciting, stretching, moving--not tedious, conventional, static.

To confront, say, Dostoevsky is simply more stimulating and challenging than to address, say, techniques of marketing. Graph theory offers more fascination and fun than bookkeeping. And so on. At Lawrence, we strive not only to nurture skills, but to impart knowledge and to spur inquiry into matters of enduring import and principle. Above all, we believe that there is more enduring worth to achieving excellence in a field of study one finds attractive and compelling than in almost any other kind of educational endeavor.

In striving to fulfill these ambitions and embody that belief, the liberal arts college also seeks to enrich the civic and private lives of its students as well. Too frequently, I fear, the culture of careerism in the 1980s has at its core a kind of self-centeredness, a preoccupation with self rather than society, with personal ends in isolation from the public good. Liberal education resists that impulse.

When H.G. Wells said that human history is a race between education and catastrophe, he meant something more by education than vocational preparation and planning. He certainly meant something other than treating education as merely the means to wholly personal ends. He had in mind a social dimension of education, an element of learning that transcends career and encompasses our common life. He meant, I believe, that education should be a bastion against civic and global ignorance and indifference. Education should prepare us to live in and cope with our culture and our world; it should not only enable, it should promote, our willingness to come to terms with the pressing issues that vex our time: nuclear arms, international

accord, race relations, hunger, poverty--even the national deficit. When we grant diplomas at Lawrence, we admit our graduates to all of the "rights, privileges, and obligations" that attend their degree. We believe--we fervently hope--that even as we have not trained them for particular jobs, we have educated them to assume and to embrace these obligations.

Whitehead said that the fixed person for the fixed duties in the future will be a public danger. Like Wells, Whitehead was speaking of matters of the public good. He was not concerned solely with such a person becoming occupationally obsolete. He was concerned that such narrowness, such fixation, would ultimately prove socially dangerous. As citizens, we are not at our best if we confine our realm of interest to our fixed and private duties. We have social obligations that transcend our personal interests.

What is to be hoped for in the civic sphere has a parallel in our private lives as well. In some respects, the lament of Soren Kierkegaard in the middle of the last century may well be our own today. His contemporaries, he thought, knew or thought they would soon know the answer to just about every question except how to live a life. The present-day version of that lament is that our young people are so preoccupied with earning a living that they do not recognize that they also have to lead a life.

Last year I heard an Appleton businessman give his counsel to persons beginning their working lives: develop intellectual interests that will sustain and enliven you during and beyond

your employment. It is good advice, and simply confirms what John Henry Cardinal Newman said a century and a half ago in describing the advantages of liberal education. Education, he said, prepares a person to "fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. . . . He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class;... he can ask a question pertinently, and gain a lesson seasonably....He has the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad. He has a gift which serves him in public, and supports him in retirement, without which good fortune is but vulgar, and with which failure and disappointment have a charm."

That, too, is one of the purposes and hoped-for consequences of a liberal arts education. At Lawrence, we have chosen not to take part in what we take to be the drift toward shortsighted concessions to the current culture of careerism. We have confidence in our mission and in its results. More to the point, we believe, with Emerson, that "the true test of a civilization is not the census, not the size of the cities, nor the crops, but the kind of man [and woman] that the country turns out."

We know that our graduates will be employable--even those graduates who departed last June without knowing precisely what jobs awaited them. Our record and their promise are strong. But we want more for Lawrentians--and for us--than that. For our conviction is that if we insist to you that all that counts is that you get a job, we will have given the lie to all we stand for and invite you to share. We will have stunted your

humanity and distorted your citizenship. We will have denied our heritage and robbed you of the most abiding value of your college experience.

Like E.A. Housmann, we believe that even if education could guarantee that a person would secure perpetual and gainful employment, "even then the true business of life is not so much as begun. Existence is not itself a good thing, that we should spend a lifetime securing its necessities: a life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessities of life is no more than an elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come. Our business here is not to live, but to live happily." And, we would say, to live well, and to live responsibly. That aspiration--that vision if you will--drives Lawrence. And holding fast to that aspiration is, institutionally, what it means for us to be a liberal arts college, and, individually, what it means for you to be liberally educated men and women. We can do no better than wish that each of you will one day endorse and confess that ambition as your own. I urge you to use your days and years here to do so.