

A Question of Values: Community Engagement, Altruism, and Liberal
Education

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On a number of occasions during the past year, I have spoken of three aspects of a Lawrence education that, I believe, are truly distinctive. In my first Matriculation Convocation address last September, I spoke of the unusual frequency of individualized instruction and one-on-one learning at Lawrence. Individualized instruction, through tutorials, independent study, and faculty-student research and artistic collaboration, is pervasive at Lawrence and can be said to be a defining characteristic of the education we provide.

Last May, in my Inaugural Address, I spoke about a second distinguishing characteristic of Lawrence — the unusual qualities that arise from having a nationally recognized conservatory of music housed within a college of the liberal arts and sciences. I shared my belief that Lawrence is uniquely positioned to support courses, programs, and creative or research projects that promote what I referred to as a holistic, humanistic construct of liberal education, in which each student is potentially a Renaissance man or Renaissance woman.

Today, I would like to address a third distinguishing attribute of Lawrence, and that is community engagement — learning experiences that extend beyond the classroom.

Research has clearly shown the value of what has been called the “hidden curriculum” of community involvement and the interrelationship between academic learning and the learning that takes place in real world situations.

There is, however, another aspect of community engagement that is of equal merit —and that is its role in the development of character and the refinement of personal values.

Nathan Pusey, president of Lawrence from 1944 to 1953 before leaving to become president of Harvard, spoke and wrote eloquently on the educational importance of character development. In his book *The Age of the Scholar*, Pusey wrote that humanistic qualities “must be self-developed if they are to be had; or perhaps we should say rather, such qualities can and may grow in a person in a favorable environment if the heart is set upon them.” Liberal arts colleges have a responsibility, according to Pusey, to provide students with such favorable environments for self-development, to augment intellectual growth.

It is worth noting that such opportunities are, in fact, abundant at Lawrence. This past summer, for example, Lawrentians were actively involved

in community projects in various locations throughout the world.

Lawrence student Freya D’Almeida spent her summer working with the Center for Communication and Training in Sri Lanka, interviewing and assisting children of the tsunami-affected regions of the country. Kenneth Alvord participated in Hearts for Haiti, organizing activities for and tutoring local children, helping to construct a medical facility in the area and conducting interviews on political questions. Laura Milewski traveled to South Africa to volunteer at the Klipkop Wildlife Sanctuary, assisting with anti-poaching practices and bird field studies in support of her personal values and her Environmental Studies major.

In reflecting on these types of experiences, it is important to recall Pusey’s words: humanistic values are not imparted as are other kinds of knowledge, through instruction and reading. They are subject to “self-development” by each of us, supported through environments for learning that require us, in Pusey’s words, to “both care and do.”

In a 1981 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching essay, titled *Higher Learning in the Nation’s Service*, Ernest Boyer and Fred Hechinger argued that liberal arts colleges must “create a climate in which the values of the individual and the ethical and moral choices confronting society can be thoughtfully examined,” in practice that can in turn inform the classroom.

The word “examined” in the Boyer/Hechinger position is critical regarding the place of engaged learning within the liberal arts curriculum. Beyond volunteering in order to do good, liberal learning, as Nathan Pusey explained, should promote “self-development.” It is reflection upon the experience--the meta-analysis of what it means to be both teacher and learner in Haiti, of what personal beliefs need to be amended to work effectively with people of different backgrounds, of the obligations of world citizenship to wildlife in South Africa or children in Sri Lanka--it is the cognitive and emotional reflection by students on their experiences that greatly enhances their learning. An imbedded goal of liberal arts education is that we graduate young people who can in Pusey’s words “think for themselves, exercise judgment and act upon that judgment, and deeply care.” If our students fail to develop independence of thought, to have a range of experiences that enable them to reach informed judgments, to build incrementally the confidence to act upon their reasoned beliefs, and to feel deeply about that which they value, they may graduate full of factual information, but perhaps not as individuals capable of lives of full humanity.

If we accept Pusey’s as well as Boyer’s and Hechinger’s claims that self-development and the cultivation of values are a proper role for liberal education, how then do we best proceed? Moreover, what are the values on which we at Lawrence can universally agree?

Recently, in response to national concerns, the Annapolis Group, an association of the nation's leading liberal arts colleges, posed this question to its member presidents: "Should secular liberal arts institutions teach values?" Values, after all, were historically a core objective of liberal arts institutions, since most were founded on the basis of moral education and to prepare theologians. But what about today?

Several of the replies suggested what I have long suspected, that many liberal arts colleges today routinely support moral understanding only in that they provide "great books" and other forms of text in which morally relevant actions are available for interpretation and criticism. While these discipline-based inquiries are critically important and of undoubted validity, I question whether liberal arts colleges can teach moral values through literature and discussion alone.

My own reply to the Annapolis Group was that "Liberal education has long embraced the notion that the cultivation of judgment and values should proceed hand-in-hand with the acquisition of knowledge. To strengthen the ability of its students to make informed ethical choices and develop empathy, learning opportunities outside the classroom that promote altruism and civic engagement as moral values and practice should be actively encouraged. Programs that engage students in partnerships with the community facilitate the refinement of knowledge obtained through formal education and enable

students to challenge themselves as they develop a moral framework for their lives.”

My response set the goal of supporting the development of students’ altruism, but directed the challenge to students themselves to participate in their own learning and development of values. The college’s responsibility is to provide community-based opportunities and formal coursework as contexts for enhancing moral cultivation, such as when Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald integrates community-based activities into his course on business ethics and social responsibility.

A primary purpose of the liberal arts college is not only to help students understand what is virtuous but to enable the practice of virtue, that is, to be good, and, in being good, to reflect on changes to self and others in order to consolidate lessons learned and achieve gains in moral character. Altruism is a value that is morally relevant and accepted by all major world religions and secular moral theories alike. I suggest that altruism is a value that we at Lawrence should examine to determine if it should apply more consciously to our institutional identity.

What, then, is Altruism?

Formally conceptualized first by the philosopher Auguste Comte, altruism referred to individual self-sacrifice on behalf of others. Integrating a

principle found in all prominent religions, the idea of altruism has expanded to mean acts that entail loving others as oneself.

Biomedical ethicist S. G. Post points out that *agape*, a Greek word meaning an overwhelming sense of other-regarding love, is central to the meaning of altruism. Post also states that among other emotions: “Altruistic love is closely linked to *care*, which is love in response to the other in need . . . [and] *compassion*, which is love in response to the other in suffering.”

Altruism is, therefore, a complex mixture of helping action and love on behalf of others in need.

Strict altruism theory urges that altruistic action should involve self-sacrifice to the provider. However, philosopher Thomas Nagel disagreed: “By altruism I mean not abject self-sacrifice, but merely a willingness to act in consideration of the interests of other persons, without the need of ulterior motives.” Other views contribute additional criteria. Psychologist Jerome Kagan argues that critical to altruism is the “helping agent’s awareness of the need of another and the intention to be of assistance.” He believes that the motive for altruism is a personal ethical standard and/or love and that the altruistic act is accompanied by a feeling of enhanced virtue through vicarious identification with the recipient’s increased happiness. Kagan, therefore, supports the idea that the altruist may indeed benefit from his altruism. Post

concurr that the altruist may undergo moral improvement and, therefore, such action is in his or her self-interest.

Altruism is usually contrasted with egoism, that is, behaviors that are always carried out in self-interest. “Egoism holds that each individual’s reasons for acting and possible motivations for acting must arise from his own interests and desires, however those interests may be defined.”

That all behavior is self-interested is grounded in English political philosophy (notably Hobbes, *The Leviathan*), economic theories of competitiveness (Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*) and evolutionary theories (as in Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*). The pure moral egoist claims that “we always prefer ourselves and our own” and we should admit the “significant limits to human compassion and reject the ridiculously idealistic standards that can never be met by the advocates of altruism, let alone by most members of the human race.”

Whether moral egoism or moral altruism is the view that should prevail is a matter of philosophical debate. However, the supposition that in altruistic behavior some degree of self-satisfaction and, hence, self-interest may obtain, at least after the fact, seems unassailable. Therefore, the focus for us today in an educational context, is to determine how some self-interest may combine with the development of personal altruism.

Let us consider Heroic vs. Ordinary Altruism. Altruism may typically refer to heroic action intended to save another as a fundamental motive, that is, to prevent harm in extreme circumstances. In political scientist Kristen Monroe's study of altruists, she selected individuals who had performed feats of heroism such as rescuing Jews from the Nazis. While such acts are indisputably altruistic, it is unclear how liberal arts colleges or any educational institution could prepare students to become heroes. Rather, a reasonable goal is to support extended and persistent altruistic behavior.

How can a liberal arts college help students become altruistic? First of all, to perform altruistic acts requires opportunities for our students' potential inner altruist to emerge in actions primarily motivated by the intention of helping others. The typical method of educational institutions, of course, is to program some activity, such as a course, lecture or fieldwork that is intended to provide such opportunities. Again, the contrast to heroic altruism is clear: it would be impossible for colleges to organize opportunities for acts in which people were rescued from perilous situations.

Let us, therefore, restrict ourselves to the prototypical case of altruism in which the would-be altruist's intention is to help an individual or small group *develop*. I would suggest that helping others who are disadvantaged educationally presents a useful environment to support altruistic growth. The most common example of educational helping is volunteering one's time to

tutor children in local schools. The tutoring relationship can be a model social situation and primary opportunity for studying and developing altruism.

The objection may be raised that tutoring demeans the concept of altruism by being too narrowly defined and involving less profound motives and emotions. But consider that educational volunteering meets several criteria of altruism: (1) the tutor gives to and otherwise helps a child or young person, a natural human object of love or generosity; (2) it may frequently be the case that the recipient is disadvantaged and “suffering” in terms of educational opportunity, certainly in comparison with the donor, and volunteering, therefore, represents a charitable activity; (3) in helping the child, the tutor gives of her or his time and therefore undergoes a degree of self-sacrifice; (4) while tutoring, the tutor may help her/himself to grow as an adult or prospective teacher, and this self-benefit may lead to increased self-confidence which, in turn, may lead to greater rewards for future recipients.

What is apparent is that volunteering in schools differs from heroic altruism in several ways, but there are advantages both for undergraduates’ personal altruistic development and for research on the value of altruistic experiences in liberal arts education. First, educational altruism is provided over a period of time, and therefore provides a longitudinal context in which altruistic development may occur and be researched. Second, the educational altruistic action may deliberately be provided to a socially disadvantaged

person or group, whereas an act of heroism, such as saving someone in the path of a speeding car, is a random event. Third, intended outcomes of educational altruism may be established, while heroic altruism, by definition, is not subject to such planned outcomes. Lastly, however, heroic and educational altruism are similar in that the donor does not begin from an expectation of benefiting from the activity, or, at least does not think of him or herself as the primary beneficiary, and, therefore, neither is generated as a self-interested activity.

If Lawrence, as an exemplary liberal arts college, decided to develop more specificity about the meaning of its stated mission to prepare “students for lives of service, achievement, leadership and personal fulfillment,” we might wish to articulate which values are entailed in attaining these goals. I have spoken at some length about altruism, but would like to mention another value, and that is, empathy.

Most experimental research in altruism has examined levels of empathy as one of the outcomes. “Simply defined, empathy is the ability to identify with and understand the situations, motives, and feelings of another.” Although empathy is defined as an ability to take the perspective of others, it is also a feeling for others as individuals in a particular situation of need. “Recognition of the other person’s reality, and the possibility of putting yourself in his place is essential,” wrote Nagel. For Nagel, altruism results

from a rational judgment that you would not like being in the state of the other and if circumstances were reversed, would want others to help you.

It has been theorized that altruism must involve empathic feelings of love for others. This is usually cited as the Golden Rule or some variation thereof: “so whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” or, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” By connecting altruism to *agape*, love for others, even enemies, and *caritas*, caring for others, theorists describe altruism as emanating from feeling. Therefore, a liberal arts education that would develop altruism through immersion in situations that elicit responses of *agape* and *caritas* could not neglect developing empathic emotions. This brings to mind the emotional intelligence that former Lawrence president Henry Wriston defined as a necessary complement to intellectual development. Wriston wrote that students’ “emotional responses may be sensitized and made more deep and true.” It was surprising to him to find “the emotional life treated with neglect and suspicion; yet of that skepticism and disregard there seems to be no doubt whatever,” he wrote.

There are many questions before us. Should Lawrence specifically embrace altruism and empathy as two means to achieve its stated mission to prepare students for lives including leadership and personal fulfillment? Do we unequivocally believe in these values as a scholarly and artistic community? Are there other values in which we believe? In our classrooms, should we

concentrate on theoretical understanding and the intellectual development of our students above all, leaving action for a more appropriate, later time in our graduates' lives? Or are the words of Nathan Pusey still relevant, that “we are not presented with a choice between alternatives but are confronted with an urgent necessity in our educational practices to find ways to modulate and fuse things that have been too often held apart”?

There clearly is no doubt that fostering altruism and empathy as a part of students' self-development is already widely present here at Lawrence. It also is readily apparent that many Lawrentians have embraced and exemplified these values, both during and after their time at Lawrence.

One reflection of this is the fact that over the last 40 years, nearly 200 graduates of the college have postponed their individual career or study plans to serve as Peace Corps volunteers. There are seven Lawrentians currently serving in the Peace Corps and four more are now moving through the application process.

As the Peace Corps itself notes, this level of participation is extraordinary for an institution of our size. One reason, I suspect, is because Lawrence focuses to a rare extent on the individual. The college does not seek to graduate a class of students each year, but rather a collection of individuals prepared to find their own way to a self-fulfilling life. The education we

provide at Lawrence *does* prepare our graduates to take their place as what Pusey called “concerned citizens of a complicated human world.”

Yet, I submit, as educators, it behooves us to become even more conscious in our intent, and purposeful in our efforts. For the coming year, I have asked Professor Gerald Metalsky to work with Provost Dave Burrows and chair a small faculty task force to inventory the present state of community engagement at Lawrence. Where are such activities going on, with what results to the community and to liberal learning? What views do professors hold about the future of community engagement at Lawrence? For example, would Lawrence benefit from a Center for Community Engagement? Could such a Center support faculty connections between their classrooms and external groups, for those who are interested in this approach? Could it help to strengthen the academic and reflective aspects of student work outside the college’s classrooms? Could we create an additional place where our students could focus on self-development, particularly their belief systems and the values by which they conduct their lives?

Nathan Pusey wondered, “What can one life be--what can it mean among so many?” There should be ample time, places and contexts for our students to consider this very question. Pusey’s answer to what one life can be was that “No one can say, but each of us has a life to live, and we shall want to spend it as well as may be . . . as alert, fair, concerned citizens of a complicated

human world.” Pusey’s metaphysical question and our individual answers to it should not remain merely implicit in the pursuit of knowledge at Lawrence. We should actively consider values such as altruism and empathy, to prepare us for appropriate action when we have the chance to affect some portion of our day, our community, or our world.

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