

Liberal Education and Professional Preparation: The Foundation for Prepared Professionals

AT FIRST GLANCE, the subject of liberal education might appear far removed from the world of the parks and recreation professional. With paperwork and "please return call" messages mounting on cluttered desktops, with spreadsheets and quarterly reports crammed into briefcases for evening review, with decisions demanding precision in the midst of uncertainty crowding lengthy agendas, time seems too precious for considering such apparently esoteric subjects as the liberal education of aspiring parks and recreation professionals. Nothing, however, is farther from the truth.

Among other things, we live in a society where an increasing demand for services is met by a diminishing supply of resources. Our communities reflect complex value systems and blurred distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad. Nonetheless, critical decisions must be made rapidly and confidently. As a result, the profession needs graduates with the vision and flexibility to solve problems and improve the quality of community life. Professional preparation grounded in a liberal education is the basis for

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developing such individuals.

Since a liberal education is so important to future recreation and parks professionals, it is first necessary to understand what a liberal education is—and is not. Liberal education does not refer to the slant of one's politics. Instead, a liberal education is an education that enables persons to live fully, freely, and responsibly. It is an education that challenges individuals to seek and to realize their potential as parents, partners, learners, players, and workers. In fact, before it prepares competent professionals, liberal education aims to cultivate virtuous persons—intelligent, broadminded, humane, and ethical. A life-long journey, not easily travelled—this is the ideal upon which professional preparation is pursued.

When Joseph Wood Krutch observed that "know how" is a questionable attribute without at the

same time understanding "what," "why," and "whether," he captured the essence of a liberal education. "Know how," or technical skills, constitute the brick and mortar of our profession and are necessary for the creation and delivery of services. By themselves, however, these skills do not assist professionals in determining the ends to which they should be directed and the conditions of their use. This is the difference between the technician and the professional. Technicians know "how." Liberally educated professionals not only understand "how," they also know "why," "whether," and "when." Consequently, they can apply technical skills in a broader framework of aims and values.

According to Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, a student grounded in a liberal education will be capable of: (1) thinking or reasoning well, (2) communicating effectively, (3) making value-based decisions, and (4) situating or, in other words, creating a sense of identity and place in a constantly changing and ambiguous world. Upon this liberal foundation, the technical skills required of any profession are acquired.

One way of linking liberal education and technical training is the *phase system* used in the undergraduate recreation and parks curriculum at Western Washington University. The curriculum is divided into four phases or blocks of courses. Three phases are devoted exclusively to parks and recreation courses and a fourth is a full-time internship. Approximately 40 students enter the phase system after completing most of their general college requirements which comprise courses in communication, the humanities, natural and social sciences, minority and cultural studies, and mathematics. Students continue through the phases as a group, progressively evolving into a community of learners.

Having the academic lives of 40 students completely available allows the faculty to implement an integrated curriculum. Virtually nothing is independent; objectives, assignments, courses—all relate as much as possible to the inclusive concerns and commitments of liberal education. The accent is on questions and discovery, as well as answers and techniques. The result for students is that they use their skills to do more than a good job; they learn to create the good community.

Hesburgh's model provides the guiding framework for the phase curriculum. First, because the world runs on ideas, careful attention is devoted to helping students apply the reasoning skills they have obtained through their general education. Second, oral and written skills are stressed with the goal of clear and precise communication. Together, reasoning and communication are the tools for maximizing the two remaining elements of the model—valuing and situating.

Values are one of the cornerstones of human behavior. Without a sense of values the most talented professional may be harmful and corrupt. The successful professional must be skilled in dealing with values, knowing how to clarify, assess, and implement them. Managing values is especially difficult for administrators since personal, social, and organizational values are often implicit,

unclear, or in conflict. Unless students have grappled with value dilemmas, they will be poorly prepared for administrative challenges. It is significant, then, that of 21 universities responding to a recent Indiana University survey regarding undergraduate administration courses, only four identified the consideration of values as an aspect of course content.

A liberal approach recognizes values as the basis for all administrative decisions. As Peters and Waterman state in *In Search of Excellence*, "We are struck by the explicit attention (the excellent companies) pay to values . . . (p. 279)." Students should be encouraged, therefore, to assess and apply values to situations mirroring those they will encounter professionally. They should investigate the fit between personal and organizational values systems and the resolution of conflicts between the two. They should further contend with discrepancies between professed and operational values, seeking congruence between what they say and how they behave.

Situating, the final element of Hesburgh's model, is more difficult to define and address. Nonetheless, students must struggle to discover personal meaning in the face of ambiguity and paradox. The phase system is uniquely designed to help students establish their roots as they mature toward professional status. Examples of situating and valuing may help to explain this process.

During a recent quarter, students in the administration course were presented with the concept of professed versus operational values or the congruence between what they said and how they actually behaved. At the same time, in a programming class, they were placed in competition to obtain a contract to operate summer community recreation programs. In carrying out the assignment, many students became painfully aware that values they professed in one course were inconsistent with values they practiced in the other course. In administration, students espoused cooperation, only to withhold information from or

purposefully misinform each other in the programming course. The experience was later processed through class lectures, small group discussions and individual conversations with faculty advisors. Highlighted was the importance of carefully considered values and the necessary connection between values and action. The learning experience was in the valuing process, not in revealing who was absolutely "right" or "wrong."

In another situation a student was examining the relationship between recreation and education. A prominent issue for her was how her Christian values could be appropriately expressed as a professional working in settings comprising various value systems. She was encouraged to explore this matter with her instructor who happened to believe in secular humanism. Committed to understanding rather than persuasion, they openly explored each others beliefs and values. As a result, they discovered common ground and appreciation instead of conflict and opposition. As a result, they have grown in their ability to work constructively within a plurality of values and world views.

In another case, two students responding to a class discussion of the power of semantics began to question calling a university sponsored aquatics program for persons with disabilities the "Therapeutic Swim Program." They struggled with how the language of helping can be devaluing, as in the case where the term "therapeutic" implies illness and disease where neither may exist. This led to an examination and a sharper understanding of the goal of ennobling humans in spite of apparent disabilities. This illustrates how their liberal education provided these students with the skills to begin molding professional roles that positively influence people.

As a final example, a group of students in a programming and leadership class presented a values clarification exercise on world hunger. Class members discussed hunger from various perspectives, sharing views on its causes and effects. Opinions ranged widely, but

most students were emotionally and intellectually provoked by the presentation. At the conclusion of the session the question was asked: Where do recreation, play, and leisure fit in a world pervaded by hunger and poverty? Most students contended that this was an important issue to be considered, although they found it difficult to articulate. Most importantly, their social conscience was stirred, lending strength to the faculty's hope that these future practitioners will continue to see their professional responsibilities in the broadest social context.

While the above examples demonstrate the academic side of the curriculum, liberal education cannot be conducted in a vacuum. Within the phase system practitioners are a vital link between theory and practice. Like many university programs, Western has solicited the support of parks and recreation professionals in numerous ways. In fact, practitioners are viewed as far more than adjunct faculty. They also serve as liberal educators, whether critiquing student presentations in the classroom or guiding them through their internships. As a result, students are constantly exposed to the same realities encountered by professionals. Through involvement with the liberal partnership between the educator and the practitioner, students discover that the opposition between theory and practice is artificial.

Above all, the advice of practitioners is sought regarding the development of a viable undergraduate curriculum. The practitioner helps situate the curriculum, keeping theory in touch with the nature and demands of the social environment, further enriching and broadening classroom experiences. This role of program advisor takes many forms, including serving on departmental advisory committees, engaging faculty in community functions, or meeting informally with students and faculty to discuss the curriculum.

As faculty and professionals work to create the context and fabric of liberal education, prospective

employers reap long-term benefits. They gain staff members skilled in the art of thinking and communicating, responsive to the needs of their communities, grounded in their values, capable of meaningful action, and flexible enough to adapt skills to the changing demands and interests of constituents. Unlike narrowly prepared specialists, these students will not wear out or become obsolete. They will not require constant direction or the explanation of minor changes in routine. The work they produce and the relationships they establish will be aimed at worthy ends. They will be liberally educated persons, capable of growing, adapting, responding, and contributing within their personal, social, and professional lives.