**Service-Learning, Business Education, and the Civically Engaged Professional**

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***Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education***

In *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession*, Colby, Sullivan, Ehrlich, and Dolle (2011), researchers at the Carnegie foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, point out that business is now the largest undergraduate major in the United States. This fact, they maintain, suggests that what happens in undergraduate business programs is of more than parochial interest. Because business has become such a powerful force in the contemporary world, how students are prepared for it is, or should be, of concern to all of us. If, as Colby et al. maintain, undergraduate business programs are delivered in a way that does not lead students to ask how market-based thinking relates to other important social perspectives and cultural values, we run the risk of entrusting a powerful social sector to individuals not qualified to run it wisely.

The primary strategy Colby et al. (2011) recommend to ensure that this does not happen is the deliberate cultivation of what they call “liberal learning.” Liberal learning, they tell us in chapter 4, represents a *way* of learning, not a particular set of disciplines. It is learning that prioritizes 1. Analytical Thinking, 2. Multiple Framing, and 3. The Reflective Exploration of Meaning. Ideally it is complemented and enriched by forms by Practical Reasoning, which allows it to be embodied in real-world practice (60).

But if liberal learning does not actually belong to any particular set of disciplines, Colby et al. (2011) make it clear that in their view it naturally resides in the arts and sciences, at least in comparison with the business disciplines. Thus, the best way to ensure that the latter do not operate in an overly narrow, exclusively market-focused context is to take steps to bring them into closer proximity with the arts and sciences. Central to the book’s argument is the proposition that if the business disciplines and the arts and sciences were positioned less as the weights at the ends of a barbell and more as the intertwined strands of a double helix (6-7), much of what ails undergraduate business education could be effectively addressed.

This is an attractive strategy, in part because it seems to draw upon resources already at hand. Since most business programs have arts and sciences counterparts, linking these already established curricular areas should be less daunting than creating something entirely new. Furthermore, the linkage can take many forms: paired disciplinary courses, cross-disciplinary readings, interdisciplinary team-taught courses, integrated capstones, assignments requiring integrative thinking and writing. But the strategy also raises questions. Indeed, it makes a number of claims and assumptions that deserve further examination.

For example, the authors pay relatively little attention to strategies for broadening the business disciplines from within. Towards the end of the chapter in which they articulate their understanding of liberal learning they assert that if students “gain experience with…liberal learning exclusively within a business context, their college experience will be impoverished and they are unlikely to graduate with a deep understanding of the world and their place in it” (69). This certainly has been the assumption behind the widespread requirement of general education courses not just for business students but for all undergraduates at most colleges and universities. However, as many critics have pointed out, this requirement often results in little serious engagement, either academic (Erickson et al. 2006) or civic (Schneider 2000). On its face, a broad-based education would seem to be desirable, but curricular breath may be less important than the way in which a given disciplinary area is itself intellectually, culturally, and civically positioned. Many business faculty members have undergraduate degrees in the humanities and the social sciences. Surely this is a circumstance to be valued and explored. Relatedly, the last decade has seen the rise of many initiatives from within business education that have challenged the prevailing market-dominated paradigm on social and ethical as well as economic grounds. Why are the intellectual resources generated by, to take but one example, Conscious Capitalism ([www.consciouscapitalism.org](http://www.consciouscapitalism.org)) less important in opening up the undergraduate business curriculum than a link to, for example, literary studies?

Indeed, from a purely practical standpoint, can we realistically expect business educators to be open to significant influences from without? Are they likely to accept the idea that they “need” their non-business colleagues to get business education “right”? How open, in turn, are those non-business colleagues to weaving business cases and texts into their own teaching – even when the majority of their students are business majors?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is not at all clear that the liberal arts as taught today are as suitable as Colby et al. (2011) assume for promoting the liberal learning they recommend. Clearly what is driving their conviction that undergraduate business education needs to be reformed is a belief that the perspectives and values that dominate market-based thinking must be put in a context that includes not just other academic disciplines but, far more importantly, perspectives and values that lead to civic engagement. As they explain in their first chapter, “[college education] means, in the American tradition of liberal education, that students need to be prepared for their futures as citizens…” (3). But over the last few decades, we have seen the humanities in particular slide into a miasma of impenetrable critical jargon and self-referentiality that is no less destructive of “liberal learning” than the most narrowly vocational business program. As the intellectual historian Thomas Bender (1993) has observed: “Academe is threatened by the twin dangers of fossilization and scholasticism (of three types: tedium, high tech, and radical chic. The agenda of the next decade, at least as I see it, ought to be the opening up of the disciplines, the ventilating of professional communities that have come to share too much and that have become too self-referential” (143).

Bender’s critique is pointedly *not* a critique of business education alone. As Eugene Lang (2000), Chairman of the Board of Managers Emeritus of Swarthmore College, has written about the commitment of America’s most prestigious liberal arts institutions to civic engagement:

Today, unlike their forebears, liberal arts colleges do not as a general rule feel impelled to exercise a proactive role in preparing students for service in their communities. Contemporary liberal arts curricula are seldom designed to implement that civic dimension of their missions by reaching beyond the campus environment. Rather, conscious of their established prestige and historic role in higher education, they are substantially consumed by internal academic agendas….Qualities of responsible citizenship as demonstrated by student engagements with social issues are applauded; but rarely do colleges engage these issues in ways that meaningfully prepare students for active roles as citizens in recognizing, understanding, and responding to them. (135)

It was for this reason that in 2001 Lang founded Project Pericles, a “not-for-profit organization that encourages and facilitates commitments by colleges and universities to include social responsibility and participatory citizenship as essential elements of their educational programs” (<http://www.projectpericles.org/projectpericles/>).

Thus, even the “double helix” model Colby et al. recommend may well lead to a string of juxtaposed courses *all* of which fail to develop liberal learning in any meaningful civic sense. As Matthew Fisher, Associate Professor of Chemistry at St. Vincent’s College in Pennsylvania, notes in a chapter he wrote for *Citizenship Across the Curriculum* (2011), “Undergraduate science education assumes that majors who have a basic understanding of the scientific concepts will automatically make the connections between those concepts and global challenges…this, however, is unlikely unless the connections be made explicit” (113). Or, as Carol Schneider (2000), President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), has observed of the academy’s poor record of civic preparedness:

…there emerged across the academy two fundamental disconnections between the undergraduate curriculum and concepts of citizen engagement and responsibility. The first disconnect was between the departmental programs…and the marginalized “civic” content of the general education curriculum….The second disconnect was that between the actual content of Western Civilization courses and the students’ self-identification as American citizens responsible for the policies and practices of a particular set of communities…in these courses most directly tied to issues of civic values and participation…instructors left it to the students’ own determination how the study of Western Civilization related to either the immediate problems or the constitutive practices of American democracy” (104-105).

In short, it is difficult to be optimistic that even *academically* rigorous liberal arts programs have themselves the kind of commitment to *civic* engagement that would allow them to play the pivotal role the authors of *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession* would like to see them play. What would seem to be needed are strategies that allow the full range of academic disciplines to rediscover their social utility and public purposes.

**Experiential Resources**

Considerations and reservations such as those just expressed call into question neither the value of *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education* nor the potential benefit of linking the business disciplines with the liberal arts. Rather, they suggest that this linkage will not be by itself sufficient to bring about a rethinking of undergraduate business education. For that to happen, other factors will have to be brought into play, especially the natural inclination of business faculty to value educational experiences outside the classroom. As Colby et al. (2011) point out on several occasions, one significant lesson the liberal arts can learn from the business disciplines is the importance of including real-world practice in a discipline’s pedagogical strategy:

…we set out to examine programs that explicitly announced the intent to provide their undergraduate business majors with the benefits of liberal learning…[these efforts] also provide an opportunity for liberal arts disciplines to learn from business education, especially about strategies that help students practice and refine their knowledge in real-world circumstances. (3)

Indeed, Schneider (2009), speaking from her perspective as president of the country’s most important liberal arts association, would seem to endorse this view when she suggests that the future of the liberal arts depends to no small extent on our ability to not only “erase the distinction between ‘practical’ or career studies and the ‘true liberal arts’” but also link liberal learning with “real-world practice” ([www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa09/le-fa09\_president.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa09/le-fa09_president.cfm)).

Such a stress on moving beyond the classroom as the only important locus of learning, regardless of the disciplinary area in question, should not be surprising given the volume of educational research that supports this position (see, for example, Abbott 1996 and Ewell 1997 for summary statements). Still, many faculty members – including some business faculty members – continue to resist course-based real-world experience for a variety of personal and cultural reasons, and real-world experience plays a surprisingly small role in *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education* (2011). To be sure, one of the staples of experiential education in business programs, the corporate internship, has little to contribute to the book’s emphasis on broadening, not reinforcing, an already narrow focus on market values. Still, corporate internships represent only one kind of experiential education and not the one that has most recently received the most public attention. That would be service-learning, the deliberate linking of course objectives and academic rigor to projects that strengthen community-based organizations and/or further the common good. Ironically, at least five of the ten schools Colby and her colleagues feature have major service-learning programs. Perhaps some of these programs contribute little to undergraduate *business* education at their institutions? Theoretically, this should not be so.

Even a quick review of service-learning’s key features will make clear why it should be seen as central, not peripheral, to efforts broaden business students’ perspectives and to help create an educational context in which all students – business and liberal arts alike – are able to appreciate the civic relevance of their disciplines. Let us imagine service-learning as the product of two intersecting axes, each of which embodies a productive tension. A horizontal axis spans the need to connect discipline-specific skills and concepts to an awareness of their civic utility and social implications. A vertical axis links traditional campus-based activities and assignments to field-based work designed to respond to community needs and interests. In any given service-learning initiative the emphasis can fall more on academic skills development or social and civic awareness, can stress the campus or community as worksite. However, in every instance all four factors will be present. Neither academic gain nor social/civic awareness can be left out of consideration, nor can faculty guidance or community voice.

Such a pedagogical design ensures that academic learning – regardless of the discipline – is always a vehicle of social and civic awareness, and vice versa. It also ensures that academic courses, in the words of Ernest Boyer (1996), are viewed “not as isolated islands, but as staging grounds for action” (20). The campus functions as a site for citizenship even as the community functions as a site for learning. In this way “contact” complements “concepts” (Kolvenbach 2000), and the educational process becomes far more naturally holistic. Indeed, it is not just the educational process itself that becomes more naturally holistic; so does student understanding of how problems must be framed and addressed. Business-focused projects take place in a context of organizations dealing with significant social issues. Projects based in the liberal arts expose students to questions of implementation and organizational capacity. Thus, the inherent multi-disciplinarity of real-world problem-solving works to break down, or at least to render more porous, academic silos. Bender’s (1993) agenda of “the opening up of the disciplines, the ventilating of professional communities that have come to share too much and that have become too self-referential” (143) receives a tangible assist.

Colby et al.’s (2011) suggestion of the intertwined strands of a double helix (6-7) as a useful way to conceptualize the relationship that should prevail between the business disciplines and the arts and sciences also receives an assist. Community-based projects that raise questions related to social purpose as well as resource utilization and organizational efficiencies are the sugar and phosphate molecules that naturally bind the two stands of the double helix. To address a social issue adequately one simply cannot ignore questions of implementation; to design and implement a resource well one simply cannot ignore questions of social purpose. There is here no need to create artificial structures to link the two stands. As a matter of fact, it would be artificial to separate them.

**The Bentley Service-Learning Center (BSLC)**

As we have stressed, service-learning is not the only effective way to strengthen liberal learning in business education and/or to link that education to the kinds of benefits associated with the liberal arts. Institutions need a variety of strategies to accomplish this goal, and many of them are described elsewhere in this volume. Furthermore, service-learning can contribute to a business-liberal arts dialogue only if its design possesses genuine integrity. Such integrity demands that one carefully attend to all four of the key factors identified above. If, for example, projects arising in the business disciplines fail to make room for an examination of relevant social issues and content themselves with some kind of technical “fix,” the power of service-learning to generate multiple perspectives will have been squandered. If projects arising in the liberal arts do not ask students to take seriously the real-world circumstances in which social and cultural issues play themselves out, students will not learn to use practice to test theory and generate new knowledge. Lack of sufficient faculty investment will result in academically questionable work; lack of a strong community voice will result in disrespect for the importance of “lived” expertise.

For this reason it is highly desirable that colleges and universities develop effective service-learning centers that can assist all constituencies – faculty members, students, community partners, and the administration – in maximizing both the academic and the social benefits of such work. At Bentley, the Bentley Service-Learning Center (BSLC) has been playing such a role for over two decades, and annually facilitates connections between approximately 50 community partners, over 1,000 students, and 100 faculty members. Central to the Center’s success has been its organizational structure, which not only allows staff members to develop and sustain relationships with each of the four key constituencies but also to create and constantly renew academic, social, and civic resources. Thus, the Center’s faculty director focuses on the role of service-learning in the institution as a whole and the ways in which community-based work can contribute to the University’s core objectives as well as its national reputation. The director reports directly to the Dean of Arts and Sciences but also has ready access to the entire Deans’ Council, the Provost, the President and the directors of other campus-wide initiatives such as the Center for Business Ethics, the Center for the Arts and Sciences, and the Center for Women and Business. Whenever possible, the director seeks not only to facilitate collaboration on a programmatic level but also to articulate areas of shared concern.

Working with the faculty director are three professional staff members: a senior associate director, an associate director, and an administrative assistant. While the first of these focuses primarily on the recruitment, training, and monitoring of the BSLCs student leaders as well as the health of key community relationships, the second focuses on the faculty: their recruitment, development, and support. The third not only runs the Center office but also oversees a service-learning certificate program and some non-academic service opportunities.

However, as important as the professional staff are to achieving the program’s objectives, it would difficult to underestimate the student role in everything the Center does. From the very beginning, the BSLC has deliberately fostered a culture of strong student leadership and ownership. Students, trained to function as project managers, provide a reliable and sustainable link between courses and most community partners. They identify project opportunities for faculty and fellow students, monitor the quality of face-to-face community work, and provide faculty with both feedback on their students and suggestions for strengthening the academic as well as the social value of ongoing initiatives. In some cases they may even work with individual instructors as “teaching assistants,” leading in-class reflection sessions and critiquing some assignments. Especially over the past year, their responsibility for ensuring that faculty fully appreciate the importance of academic rigor in community-based work and that their student peers process their experiences from a civic as well as an academic perspective has significantly increased. Naturally, this heightened responsibility has entailed still more training, including a set of professional development opportunities designed to make project managers more comfortable functioning as faculty colleagues.

In short, the prominent role played by student leaders in making community-based work a powerful and inclusive learning opportunity for the entire undergraduate student body points to still another way in which service-learning, at least at Bentley, functions as a vehicle of liberal learning. Drawing upon both business-related organizational skills and a set of broad social commitments, the BSLC’s project managers – comprising approximately 2.3% the undergraduate population – represent precisely the kind of “creative, ethical and socially responsible organizational leaders” (<http://www.bentley.edu/about/mission-and-vision>) the University seeks to graduate. It is here, if anywhere, that Bentley comes closest to closing the gap between mission statement and educational experience.

**Conclusion**

American higher education has entered a period of major change. Everywhere inherited certainties are losing their power to convince. At one time we assumed that the liberal arts prepared on not just for lifelong personal development but civic engagement. Documents like “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future” (AAC&U 2012), a national report on the failure of colleges and universities in all academic sectors to prepare students for citizenship, calls at least the second part of that assumption into question. At one time we believed that exemplary business education meant teaching students to worship shareholder value. *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education* (2011) and the Aspen Institute’s Center for Business Education have forcefully challenged that claim. At one time we thought the “true” liberal arts and career studies had nothing in common. No less than the president of the country’s leading liberal arts association has challenged that certainty (Schneider 2009). When Richard Light (2001), Professor of Education and Public Policy at Harvard, set out to discover “what choices…students themselves [can] make to get the most out of college” and “what are effective ways for faculty members and campus leaders to translate good intentions into practice” (2-3), some of his research results surprised him. His very first “finding” included the following:

…I assumed that most important and memorable academic learning goes on inside the classroom, while outside activities provide a useful but modest supplement. The evidence shows that the opposite is true…When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation or event outside of the classroom. (8)

Hence, it is not surprising that “Those students who make connections between what goes on outside and inside the classroom report a more satisfying college experience” (14).

Whether or not Einstein actually said that “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them,” it is clear that the academy cannot hope to address the challenges of this new educational era by limiting itself to the pedagogical strategies of the past. How many of the “high-impact practices” identified by George Kuh, founding director of the National Survey of Student Engagement, would have been so designated even 30 years ago: first-year seminars, learning communities, global learning, internships, service-learning (<http://www.aacu.org/leap/hip.cfm>)? As more and more students make business their major of choice, we cannot help but choose to use every resource we have to make that choice a wise one for all of us.

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