

Position Paper: The Opportunity of Undergraduate Education♦

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I particularly value the opportunity to work with undergraduate students. When I was an undergraduate, I was in a teacher education program on track to become a secondary school social science teacher. I worked on curriculum design, studied administration, considered ethical questions, and advised and taught students from Kindergarten through grade 12. I have known since my first year in college that I wanted to teach. Where I wanted to teach, however, has changed. By the end of my college years, I knew that I was not interested in teaching (at least as a career) at the high school level. Those are important years for social development, but I feel that it is when the student has moved on to college that things start getting really interesting. Those years are a remarkable time, not only of outward discovery, but also inward exploration. Any one who has shipped off for college knows what I am talking about. Although in the beginning it may not seem this way, over time life begins to make more sense as students engage, often for the first time, with the broad diversity of people, ideas, and opportunities that comes with their undergraduate education. I knew that I wanted to be a part of this critical transitional period as a teacher and mentor.

My first thoughts for wanting to teach at the college level were in large part restricted to my own desire for becoming a scholar in a particular field and contributing to the development of that area of intellectual pursuit. This is what led to obtaining my doctorate. Now that I have achieved my degree aspirations, I see my project as being much larger than making "contributions to the field." While furthering the meaningful pursuit of knowledge continues to be an important part of my overall responsibilities, the most significant contribution that any of us can make as scholars may be investing in our undergraduates. My desire to teach undergraduates is an expression of my desire to serve with more immediate real world impact by being a mentor to students at a critical juncture in their lives as they make decisions about what paths to take in life, whether they be continuing in academia or entering into work life directly.

Only a generation ago, most recipients of bachelor's degrees - particularly those from more "elite" institutions - opted to continue their higher education by going straight into graduate school. One can also point to the fact that until the years following World War II, and even more recently, most of these institutions did not have to serve the diversity of students that they do today. Today's students exhibit an ever-increasing range of backgrounds, interests, and abilities. While continuing on to graduate school may have been the norm before, today these schools are sending most of their graduates directly into the "real" world where they must make their way on the job market within a world of work ever more uncertain as the economy itself is transformed by new models of flexibility and contingency. Not surprisingly, we can point to a shift in undergraduate enrollment toward fields that have the most explicit programs of preparation for the immediate challenges of the workplace. As a consequence, in recent years the numbers of undergraduate degrees in fields with more technical or professional focus have greatly outpaced

♦ This Position Paper is part of a larger Teaching Portfolio available on-line at the following URL:
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those in the liberal arts and sciences. As consumers, students have spoken loudly and clearly. As institutions, different places are responding in different ways and with greater and lesser degrees of success.

In my research with life-style migrants, people who used physical relocation away from high stress jobs and crowded metropolitan environments to rural places of perceived refuge in order to redefine their work and family lives through choice of life-style, I found that they did not want to have to choose between investing in themselves either as workers or as persons. It was often difficult for them to do both given impact on personal life of what has been called the "time bind." With students, we see a similar thing. Students may find themselves in a situation where they are torn between feeling the need to choose the so-called practical subjects, which seem to clearly help them prepare for the workplace, and wanting to also choose those areas of study that enrich the mind and spirit. At its base, it is again a choice between the practical or material needs of the world of work and the spiritual, artistic, or moral needs of the person. It is a choice that nobody should be forced to make in their fundamental quality of life.

Applying this concern to the question of undergraduate education, a potential solution lies in providing students with ways of integrating both aspects by learning in an institutional setting where the basic liberal arts mission of providing a reflective, tolerant and engaged environment for the critical exchange of ideas is allied with organized and dynamic program of practical engagement with real world problems. Learning with proactive mentorship, or even a kind of apprenticeship, in such an environment may lead students to challenge each other to explore, understand and improve themselves, society and the world. There can be no greater contribution, no more substantial act of scholarly service, than that.

I believe that being involved in shaping the learning environment and experiences of undergraduates provides a unique opportunity wholly distinct from that of work with graduate students. While this too is a serious and important commitment for a fully credentialed scholar in his or her field, the contribution in this case tends to be focused on mentorship for the purpose of establishing the independent profession of another scholar. I value this tremendously. However, I feel very strongly about working with undergraduates. Although some of my peers may argue with my stand, I would assert that the stakes are higher at this level. So, what are some practical considerations of this position? I have already alluded to the fact that in order for such an integrated approach to undergraduate education to be truly successful, there needs to be an institutional commitment. For many smaller colleges, such a commitment may already exist. For larger places, these initiatives may come from points lower in the hierarchy and be restricted to limited areas with more bureaucratic obstacles to realizing greater integration. In any case, there needs to be active institutional support to create organized programs that make it easier for students to combine areas of study such as through offering double and dual majors enhanced by faculty willing and able to teach across disciplinary boundaries. Students should also clearly understand their opportunities for applying knowledge in real world situations through co-op programs, internships, and fieldwork of different kinds where they are involved in the "doing" of work within their particular area of study.

Ultimately, however, simply having the structures in place is not enough. There needs to be a commitment on the part of faculty as well to teach in ways that reinforce connections between ideas and between different fields as well as between the presumed Ivory Tower and the application of theory in the pursuit of solutions to both intellectual and practical problems with

immediate relevance to students. Many faculty have no doubt long been dedicated to doing this kind of work in and outside the classroom. Their approach may flow from a personal commitment to being scholars engaged in work not only for the "sake of knowledge" but also for the part they may play in informing public debate on important issues. Being able to act on this personal orientation within a more broadly supportive institutional setting can be very liberating and promote further development not only in such programs of integrated study but also unique opportunities for collaborative research. With a mandate to further these connections, faculty are in a better position to seek opportunities for collaboration in teaching and research.

Team teaching is one way that faculty can provide students with an important experience in how practical problems may be worked out through the application of ideas. Both in and outside the classroom, the dynamic interaction between colleagues, especially those from different disciplines, can express the way that learned people translate different meanings, approaches, and experiences and find common ground in order understand each other and to make something work. This is a skill that all students will need in order to achieve personal success in the world. Collaborations can also come in the form of team learning. Students may be given problems to solve as teams which require the coordinated efforts of several engaged researchers applying their knowledge and relying on their ability to identify not only common areas of interest and concern but also unique capacities within a group and how these can best be utilized to develop the project and find their own solution. If these kinds of experiences take place within the context of a well-defined purpose at a higher institutional level rather than the odd, isolated classroom or instructor, then the benefits to students are greatly enhanced.

It is an exciting time to be at the beginning of a career in college education and scholarship. These are also uncertain times. It seems excitement and uncertainty often arrive together. The uncertainty here is not limited to students as would be workers in the post-industrial world of the new economy; it extends to the schools that would prepare them for that world. At the very center of this, we should not forget, is the teacher/mentor. Institutions can empower both students and teachers by making a clear commitment to an integrated approach that combines the work of the more abstract concerns of traditional liberal arts education with that of practical engagement. My own experience as an undergraduate in a school no larger than 200 students gave me a sense for the power of being small for promoting innovation and evoking clear purpose. I have also seen much larger places struggle to find ways to do the same thing. Ultimately, the success of any school or program will depend on maintaining relevancy in a rapidly changing world. I am confident that I have the personal and professional experience to do my part in contributing to the critical need to provide meaningful, integrated, and relevant education to undergraduates.

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