

# Why It Matters

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## **Symposium on Work and Learning in Higher Education**

*31 May 2009*

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About a decade ago I left Berea and higher education, both an ardent believer in and a pungent critic of the academy. I will not traumatize you with my critique of higher education. What I will say is that one thing I never questioned, and still feel passionately about, is the powerful combination of work and learning, especially when the dimension of service is part of the equation. I cannot think of a single reason why skillfully combining labor, learning, and service is not the answer to so many of the pressing challenges we face—for students, as a nation and world, and for higher education itself.

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Tonight I want to offer some perspectives on the WHY of work, learning, and service, on outcomes, effects, and results—on campus and after our students graduate. These are perspectives based on observation and experience—not research—and I offer them reflectively, not definitively. Perhaps there are research projects that might support or challenge some of the assumptions presented here tonight.

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So...What are the effects of work and learning on students and the campus environment? It seems clear to me that when it meshes up well—which is not a given—this confluence affects students and the campus environment in positive ways.

Work functions as a kind of connective tissue on campus, and when students work the campus environment is a more egalitarian place. This levels the playing field not only for students. Students also work right alongside faculty and staff. With everyone working for the good of the whole a strong sense of shared community is encouraged, and that is something we all know the world needs more of.

Work also functions as an important anchor for students during the transitional and often tumultuous years of college. Certainly it was for many of my students. And although it is not always true, students who develop solid work skills also tend towards academic effort and achievement. It's a funny thing, but students who work hard also seem to study hard. We already know they're likely to play hard.

We also know that when work is thoughtfully tied to academic disciplines—an English major tutoring others, a biology student doing stream monitoring, a young sociologist working with a community center—that both work and learning are

enriched. I suspect those of you here tonight will agree with Leonardo da Vinci who said that, *“Knowing is not enough; we must apply.”*

Add the dimension of service, as we do in various ways, both informally through reflection and more formally through service learning, and deepening values are developed. Everyone here knows that when work is performed with an attitude of service it becomes something more than a job. Which is true not just for students, but for ourselves.

In short, when work, learning, and service collide in a meaningful way, students, faculty, staff and the campus climate are better for it. Students find education more meaningful and are learning valuable career skills, which makes them happy. Students are better anchored and self-manage more effectively, which makes administrators happy. They are more engaged in class, which makes faculty happy. The whole campus is a better place. Personally, I know that working with students to integrate labor, learning, and service at Berea was as transformative for me as it was for them. And I hope the same is true for you too.

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And then they graduate. What happens then? Did this integration of work, learning, and service accomplish the mission of sending students into the world prepared for life, work, citizenship, and love? Prepared for happy, meaningful lives? Here’s what I think.

One might say that our graduates move into their lives in four dimensions. 1) Into the domains of family and intimacy, 2), into work and career, 3), into citizenship and community, and 4), into what we might call the inner dimension—the emotional, mental, and for some the spiritual dimension of life.

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Regarding the effects on **family and intimacy**, certainly the extra and varied experiences, the chance to meet and work with many types of people in many types of ways outside the standard fare of dorm, sports, party, and classroom life would seem to enhance preparation for the rigors of marriage and parenting. Certainly couldn’t hurt. I’m guessing that the metabolic rate of maturity churns at a higher rate for students who work, and learn to balance the competing demands of adult life while still involved in formal education.

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Regarding **work and career**, from which we will hear much more from Bill Coplin, the anecdotal evidence at least seems pretty conclusive. I have heard many times from many people that students from labor colleges are better prepared to enter the work force, to enter meaningful careers, that they seem years ahead of their peers. That they have a stronger work ethic. That they are better prepared for the dynamic team environments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That they have superior problem solving skills. That they take independent initiative. That

they seem remarkably mature. The CEO of a major corporation had this to say about the ideal employee in the modern era:

*It's not just education and experience. It's education, experience and the human factor. We're looking for a really strong set of values...for a really good work ethic...for really good communication skills. It's a whole series of intangibles.*

When a student is managing a complex operation on campus, at levels 4, 5 or 6 in a system like the one at Berea, they have already had a serious professional experience before ever leaving college. Not a small thing for an undergraduate. Yes, not every student reaches this level, but we can thoughtfully design the work experience in a way that maximizes the potential for the higher order analysis and choice-making that marks professional competence.

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I want to say a bit more about these next two areas. Regarding the third dimension, students move out not only into family and career but also into **citizenship and community**. The ancient Chinese had a saying: *“the hearts of the people are the foundation of the empire”*.

Not to oversimplify, but to me this much is clear: the basic building block of democracy is the individual citizen. But not just any citizen—the citizen who is educated and empowered. The citizen who understands what's going on, who grasps the issues—who is educated. And the citizen who is responsible, is willing and able to act, who applies—who is empowered. One can argue persuasively that service learning is in fact our essential educational tool, our pedagogy, for democracy. Because through learning we understand the issues and are educated. Through service, through active work, we develop the capacity to act and are empowered.

Those who decry the diminishment of our democracy are worried, and rightly so, about that building block. Personally I can't imagine a better way to shape that citizen than through the combination of work, learning, and service. Every one of you can think about an example of particular student who exemplifies this building block, the kind of student who makes you proud not only to be in higher education, but proud to be an American. Who understands that we're all responsible for our communities, our country, our environment, our world.

Could the stakes be any higher? UCLA professor Jared Diamond, in his book [Collapse](#), says that civilization is in a race between education and catastrophe. The kind of education that your life depends on. We're all learning a lot right now. Learning about new forms of energy, about variations in Islam, about continued inequities related to gender, race, and class, about melting ice sheets, about global economic markets and the reinvention of capitalism, about terrorism and nationalism, about dying songbirds and salamanders. The learning curve is

nearly vertical, and we need to get up that curve fast. Yeats famously said that *“Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.”* To borrow from the Fantastic Four: Flame on!

In thinking about our era, Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Management put it this way: *“We have entered the realm of what design theorists call ‘wicked problems’. Wicked problems are different because traditional processes can’t resolve them, and they exist in virtually every aspect of modern life. Varied as they are, these problems share some key characteristics: each is unique, difficult to define, and inextricably linked to other issues.”*

A world of wicked problems and the potential for collapse is the world that our graduates are moving into, and one thing that work colleges do—and maybe it is the best thing we do—is give students a variety of overlapping experiences that can develop the flexibility of mind and intention to deal with “wicked problems”. Fine, get an education at one of the elite schools. But personally I can’t imagine a college experience more powerful in developing future citizens than one where labor, learning, and service intersect.

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I was asked specifically to address what we might call the **inner dimension** of this confluence, not only the behavioral but the attitudinal developments that can occur in student’s lives, and in our lives too.

Whatever our beliefs, each of us has an inner dimension, an inner journey if you will—the world of our emotions, thoughts, hopes, dreams, fears, beliefs, of our evolving self. For some it is explicit and active, for others perhaps dormant, but for all it exists. We nourish that dimension through nature, literature, art, music, therapy, intimacy, self help, religion, spirituality, dreams and private reveries. Or fail to. In Portland we like to think that we nourish the inner dimension through great beer.

You also know that no matter how well things are going externally—with family, career, community—that you can be miserable on the inside. And conversely, even if things aren’t going so great on the outside, it’s possible to feel centered, even joyous on the inside. As Milton said: *“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”* Victor Frankel taught us that from a German concentration camp. The Dalai Lama embodies it in our own time.

It seems to me that colleges that combine work, learning, and service have a much better chance to support the development of this inner dimension in students. At the very least, we have more “touches” with students, more intersections across more variables, and get to see, know, and serve them in ways we might not in the classroom alone.

I still find it amazing that when I was in college—where I graduated with both academic and leadership honors, that I never once encountered a conversation about—much less an appreciation for—work. Something, by the way, I would spend the next 50 years of my life doing.

Luckily as a depressed junior in college, I did encounter the ideal of service by studying the lives of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. In a class taught by John Stephenson by the way, who later became President of Berea College. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that that class saved my life. It is no exaggeration to say that it changed me profoundly and set my feet on the path I am following to this day.

In Buddhism there is a concept called right livelihood. Right livelihood is the idea that your work ought to serve the world, and also serve you, serve your own character development and higher growth. Imagine two overlapping circles, the inner and the outer, with a nice almond shape in between. Right livelihood means that what you do in your outer journey enriches your inner journey. And that your inner life in turn enriches, deepens your work, your outer life. That almond in the middle is the sweet spot, which Greeks called the Majorca.

Earlier this year I was at a sleek restaurant in Silicon Valley sitting next to a table of guys having an animated conversation. I nearly laughed out loud when one of them said in all seriousness: *“No ostentatious displays of wealth for awhile.”* These guys were super jazzed about getting super rich. Not motivated, I fear, by right livelihood or service. I’m not against private wealth creation, and there is one man in the room—my father—who wishes I’d been rather more devoted to it.

I do not mean to imply that all Silicon Valley folks are like this. On the contrary, the prime directive of Apple’s Steve Jobs has been *“to make a dent in the universe”*. Look what Microsoft’s Bill Gates is doing with his time and money at the Gates Foundation, now the world’s largest. Famed venture capitalist John Doerr is dedicating billions in risky loans to develop new forms of energy for the future. That said, I think that being driven by wealth alone in a world when billions do not have access to the basics of food, water, and shelter is so last century.

Right livelihood has another, even deeper meaning. It also means that you can do practically anything with an attitude of service and thereby transform your work into something meaningful. A lot of the work our students are doing on campus is pretty basic, rather unglamorous. An attitude of service is the principle that creates the reality of right livelihood, whether you find the right work to do or just do your work right.

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Finally, I’d like to speak a bit about **work colleges in the context of higher education** as a whole.

Higher education faces its own wicked problems moving forward. I can't be the only one in the room who wonders where the academy will be 10, 20, or 50 years from now. More and more people are questioning the current model of higher education. College tuition in the US has risen more than the price of any other good or service, twice as fast as inflation. The dream of an education for every deserving young person is getting harder for families to afford. Endowments are on a roller coaster ride with Wall Street. Through technology, new and more affordable ways to deliver information threaten the traditional role of the academy as purveyor of knowledge. The student loan program seems to be in trouble.

I read a piece a month ago by Mark Taylor, Chair of religion at Columbia called End the University as We Know It. Andrew Delbanco has written a piece called The Universities in Trouble detailing the effects of the financial crisis and the growing class divide in education. On May 9 there was an editorial in the NY Times about renewed town/gown tensions and noted that communities around the country are asking for more money from colleges for basic services, perhaps in the form of taxes on dorm rooms or even on students.

Change comes slowly to higher education, but come it does. Community colleges are offering four year degrees. Universities, including elites, are cutting athletic programs. For-profit and corporate universities are on the rise. Millionaire Shai Reshef has just started the University of the People—a tuition free, online only, open source university with enrollment on five continents.

One can argue that a perfect storm awaits higher education in the decades to come. But it seems to me that work colleges might dodge these bullets and have the strongest chance of survival. When work colleges do it right, we develop in students a powerful work ethic. Develop a sense of shared community. Develop the connection between personal advancement and collective responsibility. Develop stronger citizens and stewards. Develop the team oriented abilities that are essential for the modern workplace. Develop servant-leaders for an uncertain future.

Thinking about this consortium of work colleges, it occurs to me there are branding opportunities here, a chance to further differentiate your institutions within higher education. One data point: Americorps—our domestic national service program—is expanding from 75 to 250,000 corps members, and many of them are passionate about the kind of education offered at work colleges.

So, I hope that colleges that are explicitly developing students in the ways we've discussed will see increased student enrollment, public approval, alumni gratitude, faculty excitement, and not least, financial sustainability. I bet you hope so too.

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Work, learning, and service. The effect of combining these forces on campus does not seem small to me. There is one last force I'd like to touch on. That force is love—not a word one mentions lightly in these circles. But doesn't love also motivate you? Love of learning and education, love of rolling up your sleeves and getting things done, love of your students and true colleagues, love of the freshness and constantly changing dynamism of campus life?

Bertrand Russell said that "*The good life is inspired by love and guided by knowledge*". That seems like a good motto for the combination of work and learning. This is the love that shapes our students on campus and after graduation. This is the love that shapes us too.

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