

General Education: The Challenge of Competing Values

Albert Einstein, best known for his theories of the universe, also wrote profound words about education. In a letter to *The New York Times*, published October 5, 1952, he said:

It is not enough to teach man a specialty. Through it he may become a useful machine but not a harmoniously developed personality. It is essential that the student acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for value. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and the morally good. Otherwise, he with his specialized knowledge more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person.... This is what I have in mind when I recommend the "humanities" as an important, not just dry, specialized knowledge in the field of history and philosophy. Overemphasis on the competitive system and the premature specialization on the grounds of immediate usefulness skills kill the spirit on which all cultural life depends, specialized knowledge included. It is also vital to educate so that independent critical thinking be developed in the young human being, a development that is greatly jeopardized by overburdening him with too much varied subjects. Overburdening necessarily leads to superficiality.

I quote Einstein because of his authority, which derives from his genius, and because his words are more eloquent about general education than anything I've read on the subject by professional educators, an observation which itself affirms the "informed" general over the "utilitarian" specialized. In short, Einstein proclaimed that knowledge has intrinsic value over and beyond its practical application to specific areas such as, for example, commerce or technology, and that this value partakes of aesthetic and moral good. As such, general education, in Einstein's terms--and ours--is that which makes us truly human.

However, as educational institutions in the twenty-first century, we must be mindful of certain imperatives at the same time that we preserve the spirit of Einstein's tenets. Yes, we must teach our students:

- a) to learn how to learn,
- b) to learn to think rationally, independently, and critically,
- c) to identify and solve problems that are complex and varied in nature,
- d) to cope with the ambiguity characteristic of modern life,
- e) to appreciate the shared values, beliefs, and rituals of our culture, and the history of our cultural heritage,
- f) to integrate knowledge from the various disciplines of thought to achieve an understanding of the connectedness of human ideas, beliefs, and experiences,
- g) to instill the value of individual responsibility for our behavior and the consequences of our choices,
- h) to cultivate a respect for and an understanding of the cultures of other nations and of minority groups within this nation, and
- i) to foster an understanding of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship to enrich participation in a democratic society.

But we must also take care:

- a) to develop measurable outcomes that are expressed in behavior,
- b) to prepare students to transfer to other educational institutions for advanced degrees,
- c) to prepare students to develop marketable skills for employment in a variety of vocational and professional careers,
- d) to offer instruction for people who wish to be retrained for new occupations to advance in their present occupations,
- e) to encourage students to apply knowledge in new and effective ways, and
- f) to provide co-curricular activities as an integral part of the learning experience.

The challenge for colleges today, particularly community colleges which are frequently perceived to be training grounds for work almost exclusively, is never to forget that our primary purpose is to make students more fully human by providing them with knowledge for its own sake, which then expands their free will to make informed choices to enrich their lives in every way. At the same time, we must prepare them to succeed in the world of commerce so that they can enjoy the fruits of their education, and so that the culture itself in which they live is more alive with the possibilities of material, aesthetic, intellectual, and even spiritual accomplishment.

How we yoke together these sometimes competing interests to constitute an empowering general education program for our students is the challenge we face today. More than ever we are pressured to become what some would say are appendages to corporate needs. I believe that we perform a service to both the students, whose interests should be paramount to us, and to the commercial world outside of our campuses, if we prepare them to think for themselves, to learn to learn on their own, as particular skills and bodies of knowledge are increasing becoming ephemeral, and to make informed decisions and solve complex problems independently. In summary, general education can be consistent with Einstein's vision of the humanities, and yet serve Caesar as well. In fact, Caesar is best served when the humanities serve best the student.

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