

# CAREER EDUCATION: A Legitimate Emphasis? (2)

*by Donald Doezema*

In the March, 1978, issue of this magazine we introduced the topic of Career Education by examining what its proponents and opponents have been saying about it. We'd like now to consider what we believe to be the advantages of a liberal arts education.

There are, surely, other, more important concerns for what we believe to be a proper emphasis on a strong liberal arts education; but, lest it appear that the Career Education people hold the edge as far as preparation for one's *life's work* is concerned, let's look for a minute at the strictly utilitarian advantages of the liberal arts. I'd like to quote, in this connection, from an article written by the chairman of the industrial arts department of a New Jersey school district. In a 1975 issue of *Industrial Education*, Peter J. Kelley writes as follows: "In an advanced technological society like ours the most important job skills which a high school graduate can possess are those provided by general education. These are not only the most salable skills, but they are the most transferable to a wide variety of occupations." And he went on to make the following remarkable assertion: "With few exceptions, employers place little weight upon specialized job skills learned in high school...." Kelley believes, in other words, that an employer is going to be more favorably impressed by the credentials of an applicant who has a strong liberal arts background than he is by that of one who opted instead for the job skills. I had occasion once, incidentally, to question the production manager of Lear Seigler about that. I asked him which of two young men would likely get the nod from his personnel department: one who was fresh out of an 18-month program at an electronics training school, or one with an A.B.

from a liberal arts college who admittedly did not have as thorough a training in the field of electronics. Without any hesitation at all he indicated that, all other things being equal, the latter would be considered by industry to be the more attractive. It seems that employers are convinced that a basic liberal arts education contributes importantly to the long range success of a prospective employee.

Why would that be? Why would a prospective employee's background in literature, history, English, etc., ever be of interest to a personnel manager who is interviewing applicants for a technician's job? A couple of reasons suggest themselves. For one thing, there is the fact that job mobility is an essential part of the world of work today. A basic education, though it does not so much prepare a person to perform specific tasks, cultivates in him the capacity to learn to perform those tasks, whether they be of the intellectual or the physical kind. Besides, there's more involved in the success of an employee than the skill with which he performs the technical details of his job. Gordon F. Culver addressed himself to this matter in the March 1978 issue of "The Balance Sheet." It happens that this man is the president of the National Business Association. From his perspective he suggested that the recent overemphasis on the vocational aspects of business education programs has in fact had damaging results. He writes, "Recent Labor Department statistics indicate (that) our graduates (i.e., from the schools' business programs) have no difficulty securing employment, but they are being discharged with increasing frequency because of their inability to contribute to a harmonious and productive work environment."

I understand, too, that some professional schools, in their evaluation of applicants, are becoming increasingly interested in the non-technical background of those who apply. I read, for example, of a medical school dean who insisted that he would rather have a student whose work was in *English*, than one who had concentrated on the *life sciences*. Can you imagine that! "There is a growing recognition," writes Dr. McMurrin, "that a liberal education not only tends to produce a happier, more informed, and better citizen but also produces a better doctor, lawyer, mechanic, or executive."

I ought not to belabor the mundane considerations, but the fact is that there is on the part of some students a kind of resistance to the intellectual discipline of the academic courses;

and that resistance comes to expression often in the complaint that as a bricklayer or a carpenter or whatever, my knowledge of English literature, or world history will never be of any "use." So I want to emphasize that there are in actual fact practical benefits to the liberal arts emphasis, even as far as one's occupation is concerned. The conclusions drawn by those who have made it their business to study the success of high school students in obtaining and retaining jobs is that "more jobs are lost through inability to relate effectively to other people than through lack of technical competence"; and, "most employers' complaints about new employees, high school graduates, came about not because these graduates lack specific job skills, but because they lack elementary literacy."

It's our conviction, at any rate, that a strong background in the academics pays dividends in the economic world. We ought not to think of the purpose of education, however, in the purely economic terms suggested by the proponents of Career Education who contend that "all educational experiences should be geared to the world of work." By "we" I mean those who hold to the Reformed conception of education. But I'd like to point out that there are supporters of basic education who, though they care not at all for *Christian* instruction, nevertheless oppose the direction taken by the vocational enthusiasts. James D. Koerner, for example, writes, "What a commentary it would be on universal education if after a century and more of experience with public schooling on the scale that we have attempted it, the nation were to accept the proposition that the greatest aim of its schools, their highest goal and ultimate purpose, was not to lead people toward a worthy and examined life, not to provide them with some grasp of the long cultural, esthetic, and intellectual tradition of which they are a part—but that the highest goal is just to get people into jobs and to condition them to a life in the marketplace."

Koerner describes that sort of Career Education as a "meanness of vision." And I'm sure that Henry Zylstra, once a professor of English Literature at Calvin College, would have readily agreed. "Some equipment, some skills, some tools for the better making of a livelihood," he once said, "(all) that has a little, but only a very little to do with the Christian in education, and it has very little to do with education. And it is justified in our schools at all only if it is a subsidiary part of a major program of studies in what we call the cultural subjects." That was a

statement made nearly thirty years ago. It is no doubt true that the need for trained people in today's rapidly growing and increasingly technological occupational fields is placing different demands on young people preparing to enter the job market, but it's nevertheless still true, as Zylstra held in another article, that acquiring a job skill is decidedly not "tantamount to becoming educated." It was his firm conviction that a "general education" should be vocationally *disinterested*. "A general education," he wrote, "does not aim at competence. Competence is not now the word. It aims at developing your capability for responsible living. The responsibility it helps to develop is not the responsibility for doing a job well, for that is competence, but responsibility for human living under God in a human society and a natural environment. Plainly such an education addresses itself to you as something more than bread-winner, wage-earner, worker, or professional man." And he added that, "for responsibility in this larger sense, vocational and even professional training have only a little to offer, but a general education has much.... It can cultivate the feelings, enlarge and exercise the imagination, discipline the mind, train the judgment, provide historical perspectives, and shed light on the nature of reality." It was his opinion that "wishing school only to help you make a living, you miss, without even touching on it, what is at bottom the main purpose of (education)."

Seems to me that Zylstra, in this regard at least, agrees very well with Martin Luther, who, in a sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School, used a bit more colorful language than did Zylstra in urging the necessity of a liberal arts education, as opposed to mere training for an occupation. The latter he insisted was to "strengthen (young people) only in the service of appetite and avarice, teaching them nothing but to provide for the stomach, like a hog with its nose always in filth." He decried, further, "the contempt which the ordinary devotee of Mammon manifests for culture, so that he says: 'Well, if my son can read, write and cipher, that is enough; for I am going to make a merchant out of him.' " Parents, Luther taught, should be concerned "to provide not alone for the bodies of our children, but also for their souls." In a Letter to the Mayors and Alderman of All Cities of Germany in Behalf of Christian Schools, he argued that, through instruction in "the languages, other arts, and history...pupils would hear the history and maxims of the world,

and see how things went with each city, kingdom, prince, man, and woman; and thus, in a short time, they would be able to comprehend, as in a mirror, the character, life, counsels, undertakings, successes, and failures, of the whole world from the beginning. From this knowledge they could regulate their views, and order their course of life in the fear of God, having become wise in judging what is to be sought and what avoided in this outward life, and capable of advising and directing others." Little wonder is it that, holding to this view of education, Luther should write that "the devil prefers blockheads and drones, that men may have more abundant trials and sorrows in the world."

Perhaps we could draw attention also to what Rev. David Engelsma proposes as the goal of Reformed Education, in his book by that name. "We have a goal," he writes. "Our goal is a mature man, or woman, of God who lives in this world, in every area of life, with all his powers, as God's friend-servant, loving God and serving God in all of his earthly life with all his abilities, and who lives in the world to come as a king under Christ, ruling creation to the praise of God, His Maker and Redeemer." And, in another connection: "A Reformed school teaches the children the antithesis of the two cultures. It points out the two, great, opposing ways of life — in literature, in music, in history, and other courses. It teaches discrimination between them. It instructs the covenant child to pursue the one way and to reject the other."

It ought to be evident by this time that we are inclined to advise students, regardless of what may be their career choices, to concentrate on the academics during their stay in high school. It's no secret either, I guess, that there's often a certain amount of resistance to that advice. To the student who is not, as we say, "academically inclined," the academic class often looms as a threat. He prefers a more "meaningful" educational experience. Teachers hear it repeatedly: "What? Not diagramming of sentences again!" Or: "Why do we have to remember those dates? And, what do we care who fought who (sic) and when?" Or: "Book reports—do we have to go through that again?" Many students, if they were given a free hand in their course selection, would be perfectly content to limit their classes, as much as possible, to shop, to home economics, to industrial arts...and never touch a literature course. And then there are questions about credit-hour requirements: "How many hours do I have?"

Will I have enough to graduate if I leave school after 5th hour every day, in order to earn money to run my car?" A few shekels earned pumping gas, you see, are more important than the English Literature course which could have been elected during 6th hour. "Education" comes to be equated with "200 hours" — why pursue it, after it's caught?

We like to think that a good liberal arts education is indeed worthy of pursuing. It is that because, properly pursued, it has some very important benefits. Among them are the following: 1.) It assures a higher level of literacy — which enables one to communicate ideas more effectively in writing and in speech, and to understand and interpret the ideas of others in both the written and spoken forms; 2.) It teaches one where to go for information — which provides the basis for life-long learning; 3.) It develops one's ability to think reflectively — which enables one to identify problems and to consider a variety of possible solutions and probable consequences before arriving at a judgment; 4.) It prepares one for an occupation — either by laying the foundation for a job which requires a high level of literacy, or by providing one with a good grasp of the basic skills, which enable him to adapt easily in an everchanging world of work.

We believe that there are benefits which accrue from a study of the academic subjects which cannot be derived from the manual arts. It's by the former in particular that the goal of education is reached, namely that "the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:17).

It might appear from all of the foregoing that this writer sees no place for vocational training in the K-12 curriculum. But that isn't the case at all. The primary emphasis must surely be on the academic courses; but we do not believe that this must be to the *exclusion* of everything which smacks of vocational training or the manual arts. There's room for both — as long as the role of the latter remains strictly a subordinate one. We'd like to elaborate on that a bit; but that will have to wait, again, till the next issue.

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"For parents to connive at their children's disrespect for any teacher, much more to foster disrespect, is for parents to assist in making rebels whom God will cut off from the land and is for parents to cut their own throats (it is the parents' own authority - in the teacher - that they are undermining)."

Reformed Education, "The Protestant Reformed Teacher," p. 60  
Rev. David Engelsma