

Liberal Education for Our Life's Work

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"We all long for something we can do that brings us deep joy and meets some significant need beyond ourselves." Mary Sue Gast

The Association for General and Liberal Studies is nearly forty years old, and I believe that every one of those forty years could be noted for the significant issues you have addressed at your national conferences. Today, the challenges are indeed greater as public confidence in liberal education continues to ebb at the very time that we have record numbers of students seeking a college education. I want to salute the members of the Association for General and Liberal Studies for the depth of your commitment to insuring that the benefits of a liberal education are broadly available. And I want to urge you to continue to expand the opportunities for liberal learning in both traditional and innovative ways.

In this paper, I want to share with you my thoughts on how today's students differ from those of the past and why those differences, which some may at first see as negative, can actually lead to the enrichment of liberal learning for everyone. First, I will describe how a changing work world is altering the position of education in people's lives. Then, I will consider the implications of the changing workforce for higher education. Next, I will cite research that examines how liberal education can be a leader at this time: through becoming more available, personalized, contextualized, and connection-based. All these points lead to a discussion of the relevance of liberal learning today and the importance of helping students (and ourselves) create meaningful life's work. Finally, I will end with an invitation to begin productive dialogue across our campuses about the new opportunities and renewed purposes for liberal learning.

The drivers of change in education are often said to include: emerging technologies, increasing public dissatisfaction, proliferating alternative providers, and demanding new expectations regarding accountability. I believe the real drivers of change in American higher education are the students who are coming through our real and electronic portals. These students are arriving with far different expectations than many of us who are in senior positions brought to college in the sixties and seventies. They are seeking a different kind of relationship with their college or university than the one we prized during our undergraduate years. Levine and Cureton observed in an article in *Change* last year that today's students are much more career-focused and much more demanding that

colleges be organized to serve them.ⁱ Today, only one in six undergraduates fits the traditional image of a recent high school graduate attending college full-time. For most students, their studies are simply one of many commitments, often including full time work and family responsibilities.

Some educators dismiss students' attention to career preparation and advancement as a "new vocationalism," while others exploit the phenomenon by invoking today's mantra of "learn to earn." Either way, our students bring a sophistication about the extrinsic importance of a college degree and a naivete about the intrinsic value of the learning that a degree should represent. AGLS members confront the challenge of demonstrating for students that liberal education is indeed important to them in terms of both supporting successful careers and fostering productive, rewarding lives.

Although more students are continuing their education than ever before, we worry that this new vocationalism is narrowing the educational opportunity for students and diminishing the perceived importance of liberal learning. My argument is that it is our own too-narrow thinking about this so-called vocationalism that may be the problem. It is possible that our assumptions about what makes liberal education valuable or when in a person's life liberal education is most valuable diminish its potential impact. A closer look at what is happening in the work place -- at least in the American work place -- suggests that there are more, rather than fewer, opportunities to extend the benefits of liberal education. I believe it is essential, in fact, for the continuing building of a democratic society that we find ways to respond to the hunger people are expressing for deeper meaning and purposefulness in their lives, especially in their work lives. This may mean that more liberal education is needed. That does not necessarily mean we need more of the same.

Dismissing students' interest in their careers as "vocationalism" focused on materialism is short-sighted and quite likely wrong. Respecting them for caring about developing productive careers as their *life's work* puts a whole new meaning on their quest for learning. It changes the focus from work lives to life's work.

I invite you to reconsider how we have used the term "vocation" relative to education. The label vocational education is usually applied to technical and trades training. But if we think of vocation in the way that Frederick Buechner has described it, as "where your heart's deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet,"ⁱⁱⁱ then we lift up our own hearts and our own work to a purpose perhaps even greater than pursuing learning for the sake of learning. Higher education, and liberal learning in particular, could be about providing learners of any age the opportunity to reflect on the purpose and meaning they create with their lives and the contribution to the world they can make with their gifts. That, to me, is the highest calling of the academy.

Work World Changes Open New Opportunities

The changes that are happening in today's work place are providing new opportunities for many workers to create work lives of deeper meaning and purpose. The era of the computer, roughly from mid-century to the early nineties, has generated totally unanticipated changes. While corporations downsize, rightsize, and then again upsize, the work of the people in those corporations is undergoing dramatic transformation. Jobs that seemed secure a decade ago no longer exist today. Other jobs carry the same title, but have wholly new tasks and responsibilities. One need look no further than the role of the secretary to see how work has changed. Few people even use the word secretary any more, referring to a colleague's "assistant" because they recognize that "secretary" carries too narrow an interpretation of the person's level of responsibility.

But how Americans work is changing just as dramatically as what we do. Flextime, telecommuting, "dot.com" companies, gain-sharing, flattened organizations, team work, and virtual firms all have shaped people's expectations of how they work and where they work, in addition to what they do. In *Jobshift*, author William Bridges notes that these kinds of changes are drawing very different reactions. There are those who are dazzled by the promise of the electronic age and impatient with people who have misgivings about change, and there are those who are alarmed by the growing gap between haves and have-nots and the impact we are making on the environment.ⁱⁱⁱ People with these differing perspectives, even on college campuses, rarely find themselves in the same place at the same time. When they do, they are more likely to argue than to engage in thoughtful exploration of the tradeoffs between the dazzle and the dangers of the new world we are encountering.

As jobs and organizations are restructuring, today's high employment rate is also giving people more opportunity to locate and even create the jobs they want rather than being subject to the dictates of their employers. In my home town of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul, with a current unemployment rate of 1.6%, we find ourselves not talking about full employment, but rather about "negative unemployment," that is, people working more than full time just to make sure that the necessary work gets done. For those of us who recall microeconomics courses that described 5% unemployment as "full employment," it's a whole new world, with new challenges for employers and new opportunities for workers.

"Working smarter," one of the phrases that is ubiquitous in this new era, will require employers to figure out how to get more output from fewer workers by increasing the skills of the labor force and stepping up the introduction of new technologies to aid the task. University of Minnesota Professor John Fossum has argued that, regardless of changes in technology and productivity, the demand for labor will rise rather than fall in the decades ahead because retirements are outpacing new entrants into the work force.

Fossum predicts that Japan and the West will face tremendous labor shortages over the next four to five decades.^{iv}

We are already seeing the impact of the labor shortage even on traditional-age students' thinking about work and learning. This year, reports are increasing of college-age students with programming skills signing on for "summer work" at \$20/hour. The pay is good, and they certainly feel valued by their employers. They are, in fact, so valued, that these employers are not likely to want to see these summer workers disappear in September. Already employers are offering these highly-skilled students without degrees permanent employment as well as full tuition payment if they will continue to work at least part-time during the academic year. It's certainly understandable that high school graduates who see the opportunity to negotiate new benefits such as full tuition in exchange for part-time work will take advantage of the situation. What's more, these young people have a keen awareness that they need to stay technologically abreast if they want to use these skills after their college graduation. This early work experience means that at graduation they are most likely to find themselves in career positions that have them making decisions at higher levels of impact on matters that combine practical, creative, social, and ethical issues.

While we have become accustomed to phrases like the "information economy" or the "knowledge economy," it's still hard for many of us to grasp all of the implications of these changes. Not long ago, a long time friend of mine who is today a college president, asked plaintively, "But, Monica, when is this change going to stop?" Rather than change stopping, it will in all likelihood continue to accelerate. We will continue to watch the miniaturization of computers, leading to the nanotechnology that is already building "smart chips" into common utensils and equipment in our environment.

In an insightful article in *Wired*, Kevin Kelly noted the significance of the change still ahead. He believes we have already exploited the major consequences of stand-alone computers. The promising techniques he cites for the future will be due to communications between computers. The focus is already shifting from computation to connections. He notes that communication is the basis of culture and that, as he says, "Fiddling at this level is indeed momentous."

Describing the consequence of this expanded ability for communication, Kelly argues that it is the new Network Economy that will have a more fundamental impact than we comprehend today. Based on our experience of this changed communication capacity, he describes the rules that will govern this global restructuring.

1. Wealth will flow from innovation, not optimization; rather than perfecting the known, imperfectly seizing the unknown will be the source of competitive advantage.

2. The ideal environment for this ability to cultivate the unknown requires nurturing the agility and nimbleness of networks.
3. The domestication of the unknown inevitably means abandoning the highly successful known -- undoing the perfection.
4. In the thickening web of the Network Economy, the cycle of "find, nurture, destroy" happens faster and more intensely than ever before.^v

We are already experiencing the depth and speed of change this new connectivity is causing -- leading employers to adjust their stance about the kinds of knowledge and skills employees need to be successful. We have evolved from the middle of the century, when a college degree of any sort was perceived as an advantage, through the eighties, when technical and business expertise were most prized, to the early nineties, when employers began to demand good communication skills, good quantitative skills and critical thinking ability. Today, employers are pressed by the "work smarter not harder" demand of the network economy, and they are becoming more specific about what they believe employees need in order to be successful in this new work place.

Demonstrating the extent of attention employers are giving to this area, in *What Business Wants From Higher Education*, Diana G. Oblinger and Anne-Lee Verville list the personal attributes necessary in today's work place:

- knowledge both real and potential (actual expertise and the ability to acquire knowledge)
- willingness and ability to learn and continue learning throughout life
- flexibility and adaptability to respond to change, to anticipate change and to lead change
- self-management skills, such as self-discipline, ability to deal with stress, prioritization, planning and an ability to juggle several things at once
- self-motivation, ranging from being a self-starter to seeing things through to a conclusion, including such characteristics as resilience, tenacity and determination
- positive self-image, including self-confidence, self-awareness, self-belief, self-sufficiency, self-direction, and self-promotion
- ability to communicate, formally and informally, with a wide range of people
- ability to relate to and feel comfortable with people at all levels in the organization as well as those outside the organization, and to be able to make and maintain relationships as circumstances change; and,
- ability to work effectively in teams -- often more than one team at once -- and to be able to readjust roles from one project situation to another in an ever-shifting work environment.^{vi}

Employers understand that if their firms are going to stay competitive, and if the American economy is going to be globally competitive, front line workers will be

operating at the same level of decision-making that many supervisors and managers have in the past. Rather than "deskilling" society, new technologies are creating opportunities for workers to have more rather than less impact on their firm's success.

For higher education, the implications are profound. Pure "technical training" does not meet the long-term needs of workers, though it often does meet a short-term need to get started on to a productive career path. Educators looking at these kinds of lists of required skills often point out that these are skills and abilities developed through liberal education. We make that claim, though we are sometimes challenged to demonstrate that these valued skills are indeed developed in our classes.

But we educators also argue that education is for more than work, and we are right. And our students often understand this. In fact, they arrive at our campuses asking for more than learning for the sake of learning. They seek learning that will help them live well in this new world where they know that more than work is changing. Society itself is being reshaped by the technology and the economies that are emerging. Pierre Levy, professor of hypermedia at the University of Paris, takes Kelly's network economy even further. Levy sees us moving past an information economy into an economy that is based on human interactions, a social economy. The one thing that is beyond the reach of pure technology, according to Levy, is the construction and maintenance of social interactions. But it is not simply a collection of individuals that he sees communicating across the world. Instead Levy sees the Internet as a central nervous system for the world, creating a "collective consciousness" that will help humans achieve a new level of civilization.^{vii}

Aside from the combined impact of technology, of changing economies, and of globalization, there is another expression from the work place that is critically important to our appreciating how our expectations of our work lives are changing. In the past decade, we have seen an explosion of books, seminars, conferences, discussion groups, listservs, etc., that clearly demonstrate people are searching for deeper meaning and purposefulness in their work. Often ascribed to the arena of "spirituality and work," these efforts have little to do with traditional thoughts of religion and spirituality and everything to do with people seeking a worldview that helps them understand their relationship to the world in order to live in it more authentically. They seek to expand their capacity to shape that world by making important contributions to it. And it is not only in the corporate world that this exploration is happening. Since 1996, the American Association for Higher Education has offered sessions at its national conferences on spirituality, authenticity, and formation in higher education.

James Autry, retired Chair and CEO of Meredith Corporation, describes his dawning comprehension of the changing expectations we have for our work lives: "The question I struggled with for many years goes something like this: How can I keep my life and work properly separated? It was the wrong question. The right question, which I did not begin

to ask until about 1980, is How can I keep my life and my work properly *integrated*?" After years of visiting many corporate work sites, Autry has concluded that, regardless of organizational structure, of special programs or processes, the only thing that really works in bringing about significant, long-lasting, positive change is a working environment in which people can integrate their work and their lives in ways that provide meaning and fulfillment, dignity and worth.^{viii}

Our academic distinctions, which separate career or practical education from liberal education, work against the possibility of living more integrated lives. Too often we ask our students to separate their career studies and work lives from their liberal learning. Nothing could more genuinely undermine the potential of liberal education creating a better society than to deny its application in our life's work.

In his forthcoming book, *The Magic of Dialogue*, long-time respected pollster, Daniel Yankelovich, concludes that Americans are hungry for enhanced quality of life, for deeper community, for endowing our communal life with spiritual significance. . . They are ready, Yankelovich says, to accept truths over and above those of science and technical expertise without discarding their immense contributions.^{ix} I believe that what he is saying is that many in America are ready to engage with the highest ideals of humanity and to engage with each other at a deeper level in order to endow their own lives and those of others with larger meaning. What better way to support people who seek a deeper understanding of life than to make liberal education available to them throughout their lives, not just for the years they are enrolled in undergraduate education.

Implications of the Changing Workforce for Higher Education

The same factors that are changing the American workforce are also changing American higher education. Most significantly, the market for higher education is increasing rapidly, with demand for both degree and post-degree learning opportunities. Students are bringing new expectations for sophisticated on-line services and 24/7 access to learning that is relevant to their lives. The American Association of University Professors took note:

"The world of higher learning is in the midst of accelerating and sometimes turbulent change. Much of that change is driven by technologies that only a few years ago would have seemed fantastic. Yet we can expect ever-newer technologies to permeate and reconfigure higher education in the coming years. These modes of communication are profoundly affecting the work of faculty members. They are reshaping the processes of teaching and learning, redefining the roles and authority of faculty members in organizing and overseeing the curriculum, and altering the bases for evaluating student -- and faculty

performance. The implication of these developments extend far beyond teaching and learning activities, for the new technologies are penetrating many, if not all, major fronts of higher education, deeply influencing its organization, governance and finance."^x

Thirty years after Control Data Corporation pioneered the exploration of using computers in education, we are now seeing the rapid expansion of "alternative providers" of higher education, increasing our competitive environment dramatically. The fact that electronic campuses do not have the up-front costs of bricks and mortar campuses nor the requirement of a huge investment in library resources has reduced considerably the barriers to entry. The recent announcement by the Department of Education that they will pilot a financial aid program for students who are exclusively on-line learners indicates that another barrier is disappearing.

Some of these for-profit colleges are becoming the darlings of Wall Street where investments are making this one of the hottest growth sectors of the economy. These investments are creating deep pockets from which these new providers are finding it possible to attract respected members of the academic community who are excited about designing the most innovative curricula while being very well-compensated in the process.

Michael Dolence describes this new learning landscape in presentations to public officials and to education leaders. The numbers say a lot:

- About 15 million FTE in higher education (about 7 million in community colleges)
- About 76 million adults active in learning environments
- 40 states have adopted virtual university strategies world wide in the past 30 months
- More than 17,000 courses indexed on the WWW, with more coming daily
- More than 1 million online learners
- More than 350 companies producing courseware
- More than 70 Author-ware companies
- More than 1000 corporate universities^{xi}

These figures are six months old -- and most likely already out of date!

Many faculty and administrators may dismiss these numbers by arguing they are not really about higher education, but workers and their employers would disagree. The 76 million learners in what has been called the adult education market represent about 40% of U.S. adults. While 2.3 million are involved in basic-skills courses, the remaining 74 million are involved in credential and degree programs, diploma and certificate programs, work-related training and personal enrichment. Dismissing these as being unlike college courses is focusing on differences in delivery more than in substance. Today the fastest-growing market in higher education is for post-baccalaureate certificates in areas of

emerging workforce significance. Many of the people seeking these post-baccalaureate certificates care little about the prestige of the institution or the status of its graduate school. Instead, they want assurance that they will be getting the most advanced knowledge and developing marketable skills in the most efficient process.

Carol Geary Schneider and Robert Shoenberg have rightly argued that this knowledge-based economy with its global perspective and sophisticated adaptation of technology is affecting different institutions in differing ways.^{xii} Certainly the 7 million students with an average age close to 30 enrolled in our community colleges bring the changes in the workforce more dramatically to the attention of those institutions. There we find the students who are working first and going to school second; whose course schedules must adapt to work and family rather than the reverse; and whose demands for relevant education are expressed by their enrollment patterns. In fact, community college students' behavior is a direct challenge to the advice so many of us were given in the sixties and seventies. In those years, we were told, "Finish your degree now or you will never complete it." Community college students today so believe in lifelong learning that they are not bothered by the possibility of stopping out for a semester or two. They know that they will return for more education throughout their lives.

But while the impact may differ, there is no doubt that all institutions are beginning to experience significant change. Public institutions, whether two- or four-year colleges, or regional universities or major research universities, are hearing much more explicit demands from legislative leaders and their governors for documentation of learning. Private colleges are more likely to have demands for change pressed on them by parents and trustees. For many institutions, the source of the most significant change may well be the entering freshman, straight out of high schools where they have become adept in the use of e-mail, web-site syllabi and course support, Internet research, and virtual team work.

For ten years, I've been asked whether faculty or administrators should be the ones to lead change in higher education. Each time, I have given the same answer: It doesn't matter which group decides to lead it, and of course, it's best if it is a collaborative process. But the real issue is that if faculty and administrators do not lead the change, there is no question that the students will!

My own home state of Minnesota provides a good illustration of the changing higher education market. With a population of just over 4 million, we have over 250,000 students enrolled in traditional public and private higher education. But our legislators are no longer limiting their expectation of access to learning to recent high school graduates. Instead, they are asking who is ready to serve the 2.5 million adults in the workforce who need ongoing education, and they want to know who will serve them most productively and efficiently. Responses from schools to "Just give us the money and trust us to do it!"

went nowhere during the recent legislative session. Instead, we are beginning to see increased legislative interest in funding following learners rather than supporting institutions. And there is a noticeably increased willingness on the part of learners and funders alike to consider alternative providers who are devising ways to assess and validate the learning experience.

So what does all this have to do with liberal education? A great deal if we really believe in the value of liberal learning -- and if we pay attention to why adults seek continued learning.

In a recent plenary address at the national conference of the American Association for Higher Education, Laura Palmer Noone, Academic Vice President of the University of Phoenix, referenced studies from the College Board that indicate why adults learn. Dr. Noone noted that few adults learn for the sheer pleasure of learning. They usually learn in order to cope with changes in their lives. These changes -- and the necessary learning -- occur in various aspects of adult life. Every adult who seeks additional learning because of a transition can point to a specific event that triggered the transition and the desire for new learning. The College Board found that the topic an adult chooses is always related to life transition, though the topic is not always related to the event triggering the learning.^{xiii}

We err if we assume it is only marketable skills adults are seeking. When triggering events such as changes in work, personal life, health, etc., drive an adult to seek additional learning, these returning students are today more often seeking learning to make sense (and meaning) of their lives. And they are not limiting their efforts to their work lives. The people included in the College Board studies give substance to the concept of lifelong learning. They are already doing it, and they are demonstrating for us how and why it will grow in the future. We short-change the adult learner and indeed our society if we do not insure access to the benefits of liberal learning as people sort through the meaning of the changes in their lives. These adult learners are telling us that it is time we let go of the model of liberal education aimed exclusively at young adults 18 -25. They are telling us it is time we explored how to make liberal education available for a life time.

Liberal Education for the New Era

Surprisingly, the purposes of liberal education today are not so different from those attached to learning in ancient Greece. Thomas Mitchell, Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, is finding that Ireland's rapid economic expansion is raising similar challenges to that country's traditional higher education. Mitchell explores the old and the new meaning of higher education in a recent issue of *Change*. He notes that the Sophists revolutionized higher education in their day: "Their goal was eminently practical, and is one that has

never been far from the minds of educators: to produce citizens equipped to succeed in the circumstances of their society."^{xiv} What's different today, in Ireland as in America -- almost as different even from fifty or sixty years ago as from thousands of years ago -- is that the circumstances of our society are changing at a much faster rate. We no longer can rely on "equipping" citizens during one early phase of their adult lives for the changes that will occur throughout their lives. We don't even know many of the changes that will occur. Instead, we need to begin to explore what lifelong learning means, not only in terms of students having access to our current curriculum, but also in how course design, student participation, and course completion may look wholly different when the students are stopping in and out for continual formal learning throughout their lifetimes.

Mitchell laments that today there is no longer a shared vision of the goals of undergraduate education. It may be that the goal of a standard vision of undergraduate education is simply not feasible in today's increasingly diverse world. In the absence of such a vision, a proliferation of degrees and courses of uneven quality and uncertain purpose have evolved, creating an often incoherent menu of options. Unfortunately, though perhaps not unexpectedly, at the same time, "liberal education" has become for many members of the public almost a synonym for a free-for-all approach to a curriculum filled with faddish courses. Degree requirements seem to have more to do with the political power of a discipline than with the ultimate value for the student.

None of this comes as a great surprise to most liberal educators. The discontent with current approaches is a common faculty conversation. With rare exception, however, even where faculty have initiated significant change efforts with high hopes and high goals, the changes that have actually been implemented in general and liberal studies in recent years have been more tweaking at the edges rather than substantive reform.

The current free-for-all curriculum is often laid at the feet of the students of the sixties who challenged the course and core requirements that they confronted in their baccalaureate programs. This attribution is in error. Acknowledging that my age places me squarely in the midst of sixties student life and therefore gives me an admitted lack of objectivity, I want to suggest an alternative perspective. Donna Shavlik, recently retired Director of Women's Programs for the American Council for Education, offers what I believe is a more accurate assessment of what happened during this era of campus turmoil. At the time, Dr Shavlik was a new assistant professor at a major public research university. Her recollection is that "in the sixties what the students were asking for was relevance, but what we gave them was permissiveness." It is an insightful observation. My recollection as a student at the University of Illinois, one of the most politically active campuses, is not that students objected to requirements. The objection was not to being required to study Shakespeare. Instead, students were asking, "What does Shakespeare have to do with the racial conflict in our country or the war we are fighting in Vietnam?" The issue was not that we did not want to study Shakespeare; the more critical question

was: How does Shakespeare help us understand what is happening in our streets and what is happening in Southeast Asia? How is Shakespeare relevant to our twentieth century lives?

Some faculty of the time, and indeed quite probably some readers of this essay, took up that challenge with great seriousness. And they struggled with making the great writers and great ideas of history relevant to the lives of the students of the times. But there was an easier path available, and I fear too many institutions chose to take it. They concluded that if students did not see the relevance of some courses, then they need not enroll in them. Instead they were offered a wider menu of courses. The consequence was a permissiveness that left students free to choose whatever they wanted to study. From the faculty member's perspective the demand for relevance was sidestepped because students who did not recognize the relevance of a particular course of study would be unlikely to enroll in it.

The reactions of parents, students, and public officials (let alone employers!) to this permissive curriculum has not been positive. Parents, often based on their own college experience, advise students to "stick it out" until they get to their major courses where they will find more value. Students retain the "knowledge" just long enough to pass their test and then discard it and restore their prior beliefs. *A Private University*, the video made at Harvard several years ago, demonstrates that this happens for students at the most prestigious colleges as well as at lesser known institutions. And, unfortunately, public officials meddle without expertise but with deep passion when they believe colleges and universities are rejecting the calls for an education relevant to our times.

Interestingly, it may well be that it is the consequence of the hodge-podge of courses many students took during the seventies and eighties under the rubric of general education or liberal education that has left them seeking greater spiritual understanding in their mid-life period. If these adults are queried about what they are looking for, they talk about developing a more integrated worldview and finding more opportunity for meaningful purpose and action in the world. They say they are trying to understand themselves better and understand better their relationship to the world. They are seeking something that will help them have fulfilling lives in the midst of changing circumstances in society. They are seeking what we claim liberal education is about.

What today's adult learners seek sounds very much like what the American Association for Colleges and Universities describes in its Statement on Liberal Learning: "A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions."^{xv} Whether you compare that statement to the purposes of higher education advocated by the Sophists in

their day or to what employers are seeking in workers today, they are not so very different. More importantly, the AACU's Statement reflects what many people in today's workforce are seeking -- the opportunity to live responsible, productive, and creative lives. For this, they need access to liberal learning beyond their early adult years.

We need to make liberal learning opportunities available in ways that foster people's ability to personalize and apply what they are learning to the everyday lives they are leading. With so much attention still to the "amount of material we have to cover," it is the personalization and application of new knowledge that is still too often missed in liberal education. In the sixties, professors often dismissed this thirst for personalization and application by arguing that the students were denigrating Shakespeare by hoping to apply his ideas to their Saturday night dates. While I wouldn't totally dismiss the possibility of that application, I would remind you that it wasn't usually to our romantic lives that we sought a connection -- it was in our public, our political, and our social lives where we sought illumination.

In the past thirty years, everything we have learned about the learning process suggests that for new knowledge and insights to be sustained the learner must be able to apply them to situations with which they can relate.

Going further, Ted Marchese in *New Learning About Learning* reports on the work of John Seeley Brown and Brown's colleagues at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), which suggests that students benefit even more when there is a "felt need" to learn something than when there is simply an opportunity to apply what is learned. It is an important distinction. Knowledge, the researchers say, cannot be abstracted from the situations in which it is learned and used; it is always a part of a particular activity, context, and culture. Marchese reports that the PARC researchers propose an "epistemology of knowledge that puts activity and perception *before* conceptual representation -- not the other way around, as it is in classrooms."^{xvi}

PARC researchers' discoveries would argue for a substantive change in how we teach and in how we create learning opportunities. Too often, we hope our students will see the connections of our subject matter to their lives because we see those connections. Or we hope they will translate the intellectual skills they are developing to other venues because we know they are translatable. We assume if they have been exposed to an idea or a methodology they will try to apply it in the future. Yet, too often, they are themselves uncertain about how to do this unless they are given the opportunity during the learning experience. Relevance may be most impressive when we discover it for ourselves, but that in no way diminishes the importance of the role of a guide who creates the opportunity for us to make that discovery.

Discovering the Relevance of Liberal Learning

I am well aware that, throughout this paper, I have been broaching a controversial topic -- that liberal education should be substantively relevant to students' lives, in fact helping students create their life's work. I firmly believe that we need to construct a new vision for learning, especially for liberal learning, in the face of so much swift technological change, economic restructuring, budgetary crises, and political and global shifts. We need to do more than adopt principles, create new core curricula, and express desirable goals. We need to learn how to provide real-time access to liberal learning for adults as they can benefit from it. We should do so in ways that provide meaningful learning opportunities that are personalized, competence-validated, and assessed.

Rather than leaving adult learning programs to focus on technical and business skills, we need to design adult learning opportunities that bring the best of liberal learning into the lives of adults in the work place as well as in the rest of society. Too frequently, we have dismissed the adult learning market as being about technical or job training. We have left to our more entrepreneurial colleagues in professional and technical programs the opportunity to develop targeted programming that is accessible and convenient. It's time for advocates of liberal learning not only to design their own programs for working adults, but to find ways to collaborate with their technical colleagues to create the kinds of learning opportunities that incorporate a fuller world view -- interdisciplinary learning that advances specific job skills and expands the workers' understanding of the world in which they live and work.

We also need to design liberal learning opportunities that serve our traditional students now and invite them to return for more formal opportunities for liberal learning throughout their lives. Richard M. Freeland, president of Northeastern University has given a great deal of thought to the nexus of liberal learning and technical learning and curriculum. "Many students do not want to be forced to choose between subjects that stimulate their minds and souls, and subjects that help them succeed in the practical world. Students do not want to choose between four more years of intellectual activity in an ivory tower and full-time work. The time is ripe for a new model of undergraduate education that gets beyond our rigid academic categories and combines the best aspects of liberal education, professional education, and practical education."^{xvii}

The practice-oriented, apprentice-based model he advocates is "animated by the belief that 'liberal learning for its own sake' is academic jargon, and that, for most people, learning is compelling chiefly to the extent it expands their understanding, widens their experience, increases their skills, and elevates their spirits." While Freeland is writing about undergraduate education, his comments are every bit as appropriate to the working adults who turn to education as a way to deal with a change or transition in their lives. Too often, the choices we provide them are practical job-skill courses designed in a

highly accessible format or liberal learning opportunities provided on the more traditional semester schedule at our convenience. In the end, there is no real choice here.

Michael Rao is now Chancellor of Montana State University Northern. Prior to assuming this position, he served as President of Mission College in Santa Clara CA. in the heart of Silicon Valley. The forces having impact on the economy, on the work place and on higher education, are moving faster, further, and with greater fury in this valley than in any other part of our nation. Not surprisingly, Rao and his faculty colleagues sought some way to explore these dynamics -- changes that were occurring in their own work lives -- to insure they were serving the people of their region well.

Their experience demonstrates the discovery of the relevance of liberal learning for both faculty and business leaders alike. After designing a faculty internship program to bring faculty and business leaders together in the work environment, participants soon moved beyond superficial discussion to ongoing forms of professional exchange. According to Rao, "We were surprised at how quickly the dialogue shifted from support for students' technical preparation to a need for education in liberal arts and sciences for the college's technical graduates."^{xviii} Surprising to the faculty, they learned that businesses competing in a global market place are not looking for skilled technicians, but rather well-rounded workers who can think critically, apply knowledge and communicate with others. They want to hire people who have technical skills and who bring the benefits of liberal learning to the work world. The business leaders learned that what they were looking for in terms of well-prepared workers could not be the result of a few slap-dash sessions on creativity, communications, and critical thinking. Such programming would not suffice to give students the opportunity to connect what they were learning with anything substantive happening in their lives. In the words of psychologist Robert Sternberg the business leaders were describing people who are "successfully intelligent," people who could combine three kinds of intelligences: analytical, creative, and practical.

Over the years, I have often wondered if employers really are looking for critical thinkers or simply problem solvers. In a series of interviews I've been conducting at a variety of workplaces, I'm discovering that my persistent cynicism that employers don't want independent thinkers is painted with too broad a brush. In research and development operations, employers clearly want innovative, outside-the-box thinkers -- even if they do make challenging employees. The rearrangement of the workplace now means that technical, marketing, finance and salespeople are serving on work teams with the R&D folks to develop new products and services. In this new arrangement employees across the board are required to use effective critical *and creative* thinking skills in very practical ways.

Employees with these capacities will have the leverage to meet personal goals in their work lives. They will be able to negotiate working arrangements as well as projects that

are more fulfilling for them and rewarding for the employer. The knowledge economy alone would not have given them such leverage. Nor would low unemployment alone put this kind of power in the hands of workers. It is the combination of the rapid expansion of the economy and a clear shortage of the kinds of skills needed that empowers today's well-educated workers to have increased expectations of the quality of their work lives.

Liberal learning and quality general education can provide workers with the base for reflecting on what is important to them and imagining what is possible for them today. It can help them develop a worldview that informs their decisions about how to achieve what they are able to imagine. Job skills training alone cannot do that. Liberal learning that is unconnected with their work cannot do it either. But liberal education presented in a way that invites them to apply it to the issues and opportunities they experience in their work places and in their lives can open their minds to whole new possibilities.

Workplace psychologist Richard Leider describes in *Fast Company* what happens in people's work lives when they don't bring the advantages of a sound liberal learning to their work. Leider interviewed nearly one thousand people who had been successful in their jobs and who had retired from leading companies after distinguished careers. Almost without exception, when these older people looked back, they expressed three regrets, according to Leider:

First, they say that if they could live their lives over again, *they would be more reflective*. They got so caught up in the doing, they say, that they often lost sight of the meaning. Looking back, they wish they had stopped at regular intervals to look at the big picture.

They also sounded a warning: Life picks up speed. The first half of your life is about getting established. Then time shifts gears. You hit the second half of your life, and everything moves faster. Days turn into weeks, weeks into months, and all of a sudden, you're 65 years old. Looking back, you realize that time is the most precious currency in life.

Second, if they could live their lives over again, *they would take more risks*. In relationships, they would have been more courageous. And in expressing their creative side, they would have taken more chances. I think it was Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, 'Most of us go to our graves with our music still inside us.' Many of these people felt that, despite their successes, their music was still inside them. Almost all of them said that they felt most alive when they took risks. Just being busy from business made them numb. Aliveness came with learning, growing, stretching, exploring.

Third, if they could live their lives over again, *they would understand what really gave them fulfillment*. I call that the power of purpose: doing something that contributes to life, adding value that extends beyond yourself.^{xix}

While Leider doesn't identify how many of these retired executives had at least a baccalaureate degree, I would be willing to suggest a fair number probably did. And in most of those degree programs, I expect they took a "menu of courses" that fulfilled a liberal learning or general education requirement. Still, they were unable to connect the purposes of that learning in their undergraduate program to what they did in their work lives. They may have had a college education, but they did not discover for themselves the relevance and value of liberal learning.

Invitation to Dialogue

Historically, higher education has been responsive to the market place in terms of expanding enrollments and creating new majors and new programs for emerging careers. Today, we are going to be much more driven by the market place across the curriculum -- not just in terms of career and professional education, but in terms of what students are seeking in order to live more satisfying lives. With access to higher education becoming easier, students of all ages will have options about what kinds of learning they want and how and where the learning will be available to them.

In his 1998 Robert Atwell lecture for the American Council of Education, Paul Elsner, Chancellor Emeritus of the Maricopa Community Colleges, posed a key issue: "The challenge seems to be whether we can be a market-oriented, customer-conscious organization and still create a dynamic, developing, reflective academic community."^{xx} Given the forces that are having impact on higher education today, the response must not be a Yes-No to *whether we can* do both, but rather a thoughtful, pragmatic, wise response to *how we will be* a market-oriented, customer-conscious organization and still create a dynamic, reflective academic community that fosters competent, productive living in our society.

Whether we like it or not, higher education will continue to become more market-oriented, driven by demands of students and funders alike. If higher education is not responsive, then both students and funders will seek out other providers who are more open to listening to the needs that people present to them. In the midst of this market frenzy, though, it is absolutely essential that the people who care most deeply about higher education take time not for debate but rather for dialogue about how to meet the world's needs for learning today. The alternative, if we are not willing to listen and to enter into meaningful dialogue, will be the destruction of the core values that give life and vitality to American higher education. And that alternative is too devastating to permit.

I invite you to enter into dialogue on your campus about three key challenges.

The first challenge is to let go of defending learning for the sake of learning as the highest value in the academic community and to focus instead on making learning relevant to the purposes of students of all ages leading productive, fulfilling, rewarding work, civic, social, and personal lives. For many of you, this may not mean an individual change. But the issue is not solely what you do as an individual faculty member, but rather the stance, the culture, the values that are expressed by the organization and operation of your college or university. I am persuaded by my experience of working with people at a wide variety of colleges and universities that there are wonderfully creative people looking for new opportunities to make liberal learning more meaningful in our society. Exploring the ways in which you can foster a supportive community among the faculty and staff at your institutions will be essential to creating the right kinds of programs to serve the people who come to you.

The second challenge is to design learning programs in ways that insure ongoing access to liberal learning for adults throughout their lives in ways that connect with the changes and transitions they experience. The responses from diverse institutions will need to take a whole variety of configurations. Community colleges and urban universities may well want to have programs generally available to the entire public. Liberal arts colleges may alternatively focus on creating a permanent portal through which their own graduates will continue to return to their alma mater for reflection, refreshment and renewal throughout their lives. Today, there are a growing number of free-standing retreat and study centers that are designed to serve adult learners through more holistic approaches to knowledge. Collaborations with organizations like the Whidbey Institute in Washington state with its focus on environmental issues and the Woodside Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Minnesota could provide creative, innovative venues that bring liberal learning to broader audiences.

The third challenge is to see the dynamics that are having impact on your own lives in higher education as similar to those triggering events that drive other adults to seek new learning in order to respond productively to changes in their work and personal lives. Educators have always been lifelong learners, but most frequently, that learning has been about our own discipline or academic field. Today, the learning we need may well not be in a narrow subject field. It may be found in the interdisciplinary approaches of contemporary liberal learning programs that help us grapple with the dynamics having impact on the world our colleges and universities are intended to serve.

Over twenty years ago, I worked with a group of faculty who sought funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities to create a series of humanities seminars for their colleagues on their own campus. It was an exciting, stimulating experience as these

faculty from a variety of disciplines explored how this kind of course of study could help faculty make their teaching more relevant to the world their students were encountering. The project failed to be funded, but it laid the groundwork for a fundamental belief in my professional work: that our faculty and staff possess incredible creativity and that every institution already has in its faculty and staff the knowledge and insights that are necessary for creating the right future for that institution. The challenge is to create the space where this knowledge and these insights can be surfaced. Or, as Parker Palmer has said, to create the space where a community of truth can be pursued.

I want to offer an alternative to the theme of our conference. I want to suggest that it is not "great debates" we need, at least not the great debates that have become adversarial, creating factions on our campuses and in our disciplines. We need instead to create forums that go beyond the use of our analytical powers, and indeed employ our creative and practical intelligences in collective reflection and collaborative learning experiences. We need the spaces for collective inquiry and meaningful conversations, where dialogue as a process of deliberating together can support the creation of a new future rather than only debating the merits of differing views.

Our regular mechanisms of governance and departmental meetings do not invite us to look at the larger questions -- questions like: "Why are we --professionals on a campus -- here? What purpose do we serve in today's society? What is society calling us to do in this changing world?" Exploring these questions together can give us the opportunity to meet society's deep need for the highest quality higher education.

I believe that we will find, when we reflect with love and caring about higher education, that the choice does not have to be vocationalism versus liberal learning. Instead, I believe that we will have the opportunity to explore how preparing for careers -- or more fundamentally preparing for one's life's work -- can be the framework through which students will discover the relevance of liberal learning and its critical role in creating lives worth living.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Bridges, William. *JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace without Jobs*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994.

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- xviii Rao, Michael. "Liberal Arts for Business: A Partnership Built by Faculty," *AAHE Bulletin*, February 1999, pp. 7-10.
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- xx Elsner, Paul A. "Balancing Freedom and Responsibility with the New Market Forces," The Robert Atwell Distinguished Lecture Services, American Council on Education Annual Meeting, San Francisco CA, February 8, 1998.

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