

The Purposes of Undergraduate Education

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With autumn commences another academic year at our college campuses, accompanied by the ritual convocations where faculty, staff, students and parents are reminded of why higher education is worthy of their commitment. This is especially important in institutions like Butler that focus on undergraduate education. For our purpose is not simply to educate students for particular professions; it is to equip them to choose what kind of people they want to be.

This is not to say that career preparation is inconsequential. Butler offers a panoply of professional studies and internships so that our students can be immediately employable upon graduation. Ninety-seven percent of the class of 2003 were employed, doing graduate study, traveling on fellowships or engaged in volunteer service within six months of graduation.

Nonetheless, studies show that 60 percent of students graduate in majors different from those in which they began, and that the present generation of students will change careers seven times over a lifetime. One futurologist has estimated that 30 percent of our undergraduates will eventually work at jobs that do not yet exist.

For these reasons, career preparation is but one reason to pursue higher education, and perhaps not the most important one. Being successful in a career presupposes that one is prepared to choose one wisely and adaptable enough to change as the world changes. And that's why in undergraduate education we are interested in cultivating people, not just knowledge and skills.

At the heart of undergraduate education is personalized liberal education. Within the curriculum, liberal or general education, are the courses that enable students to master different ways of knowing; creating knowledge in the sciences is different from creating meaning in literature; there are different methodologies for verifying insights in physics as opposed to psychology. Moreover, the advance and transmission of knowledge is inherently social: it is dependent on human beings working together.

Thus, liberal education necessarily teaches students how to think critically, how to communicate effectively and how to live in a community. At Butler, all students, irregardless of whether they are in the college of business, pharmacy, education, fine arts or liberal arts and sciences, take the same general education core. Butler has a local definition of liberal education, and it is a priority that all students have the same opportunity to achieve that education.

The Greeks, from whom we inherited the notion of liberal education, believed that what people know shapes who they are. In institutions that prize liberal learning, professors are finally responsible not only for the transmission of knowledge, but the encouragement of character. Thus, professors are both invested in learning and implicated in the lives of their students.

As teachers, we are pledged to assist our students, not only in mastering the knowledge and methods of our disciplines, but to help them learn how to learn for themselves. We endeavor to assist them in the development, not only of their minds, but also of their aesthetic sensibilities, their moral compasses and their relations to the community of humankind.

This kind of undergraduate education is relationship-intensive. It depends on knowledge of the person as well as the subject. That's why it's so important that a professor know students by name and face. But beyond teachers, liberal learning ideally occurs not only in the classroom but in the entire residential and co-curricular experience. Sources of learning may include roommates, people in the residence hall, a classmate or teammate, a fellow student encountered in a club or service project, a staff member who says or does kindness, even a dean or a president.

People that one encounters during the undergraduate years may well become friends for life. This is because friends are those who have stood with us as we've struggled with change. And during those four college years, students change at a greater rate than in any comparable period in their lives. The capacity for friend-making, for seeing one's own flourishing being tied up in the well-being of others, this is not the least of the lessons of college. It is the gift of one's best self, and the ability not simply to make a living, but to make a life worth living.