

## **Work and the Curriculum**

*Gary Daynes*

Let us assume three things:

- That work is one of the central aspects of human life,
- That choosing one's life work requires more than learning to do a job; instead it also requires one to learn the sort of work to which one is called, or one's vocation,
- That schooling has a role in helping people to choose work wisely and to work well.

If these things are true, the curricula of nearly all schools (but especially colleges) are poorly matched to the work they are to do.

Consider the content and sequence of a typical college degree. The student begins by taking general education courses--courses aimed at introducing students to a broad range of disciplines and investigating possible lines of work. As the student progresses through the curriculum, her focus narrows on a discipline and she learns the practices of the discipline with greater specificity. She may work while in school, likely in a field distinct, though, from her field of study. She is likely also to complete an internship with the hopes of catching the eye of a potential employer. The college will help her seek that job through a career center. Upon graduation, she will likely get a job, one that will require her to learn new tasks, policies, and processes (often at the frustration of the employer who will complain that college doesn't teach its new employees the right skills). At that point, she will discover whether the job she is doing and the work to which she feels called are in alignment. For a high proportion of recent graduates, who stay in jobs for a brief time and skip from field to field, the answer is no.

The flaws in this approach to work are obvious. First, work as a category of human activity--one to which thinkers have devoted attention since the beginning of writing--is addressed nowhere in the curriculum. Second, the choice of a field of work is unintentional. The curriculum and staff hope that in becoming acquainted with a broad range of disciplines the student will stumble across one that attracts her. Third, the consideration of work swiftly becomes preparation for a job, leaving to the margins the question of the type of work to which the student is called. Fourth, the student's employment while in college is unrelated to the development of her vocation. Fifth, the question of vocation, then, is something that the frustrated recent graduate and the frustrated employer must stumble through. Sixth, for those students who find little of intrinsic interest in general education and for whom salary upon graduation is a key (and understandable) measure of success, schooling is worse than boring. It is instead frustrating in the sense that it thwarts her discovery of meaning and purpose in work.

Let me acknowledge that the approach to work in the curriculum and the school is understandable, for four reasons. First, the curriculum, especially in general education, continues to embrace a deductive approach to reasoning in which abstractions like "sociology" provide premises on which further learning is based. In contrast, making meaning from work is inductive--it begins with the particularities of one's calling. Second, the curriculum is devoted to

the idea of a career in a single field, such that focusing on increasingly narrow fields prepares one to work narrowly but deeply. Third, in periods of economic stability and in strata of relative affluence and prestige, this form of curriculum has worked--all else being equal--pretty well. It prepares a graduate for a steady sequence of jobs within a particular field. Fourth, finding purpose in work, in spite of our language about "discovering your calling" is a lifelong task that requires one to reflect on the intersection of one's labor and one's soul. Schools as currently constituted help relatively little with lifelong concerns like faith, relationships, politics, and work.

If what I have written is true, then schools must remake themselves in order to help people learn and sustain their vocations. In saying this, let me note that I am not suggesting that schools should turn to vocational education as currently practiced. After all, most "vocational" education is unconcerned with vocation in the sense of calling and purpose. Instead, it simply skips general education and professional disciplines and teaches students how to do particular jobs.

What would the curriculum of a school that takes vocation seriously look like?

First, the consideration of vocation would come at the beginning of learning. Every new student would at the outset of his time in school, study, pray, write, and talk with a guide--someone with training in the discernment of vocation. This period may last weeks or months, but progress in the curriculum does not start until the student has a preliminary sense of his gifts and the types of work to which those gifts point him.

Second, work linked to vocation would be an early and consistent part of schooling. In making vocation-focused work part of the curriculum, the school would allow the student to test her sense of vocation, to explore how that vocation might play itself out in the world of work, and to develop a set of work-related practices that would be the basis of further learning. Early work would also provide the student with something she needs badly while in school--a real income. (Note that in suggesting vocation-related work as part of the curriculum, I am proposing something similar to but distinct from the approach to work in America's work colleges. There, all students work on campus as part of their educations. All students would also work in our school. But unlike work colleges, a student's work would likely be off-campus, since there are relatively few on-campus jobs that give access to vocation-related work. In addition, work (and learning about one's work) would be a full-time learning experience, not an activity filling a few hours a week between classes.)

Third, a key part of learning about work through vocation would be to explore the civic components of work. Too often our discussions in higher education about careers are intensely individualistic, focusing as they do on one's ability to land a job. But work in the vocational sense is communal, in that it assumes service to the public good as a part of meaningful work. It is civic in another way as well--colleges rely (though they don't always acknowledge it) on a flourishing community for their own flourishing. Vocation-related work in our school, then, would also bolster the local economy, and through it, the independent businesses, schools, and non-profits that form the basis of a vibrant local economy. This task is of central importance at a

time when geographic mobility is declining even while economic opportunity is concentrating in major cities. Connection to place, then, is a way both of taking advantage of the increasing geographic stability of workers and of bolstering the economic and community life of those places.

Fourth, in addition to civic learning, vibrant vocation-related work would be at the heart of developing expertise in a discipline. This is a significant point--our school would not eschew learning about a discipline. It would, though, base that disciplinary learning in the experience of being employed. The commitment to expertise growing from work has practical implications for our school, the most significant being that of focus. If our school is to meaningfully develop disciplinary expertise out of work linked to vocation and civic life, it can only focus on fields that serve vocation and the local community. Gone is the need to multiply majors to match other colleges. Instead, our school must limit fields of study to those that match its place and definition of vocational work.

Fifth, in our model, as the student grows from his specific vocation through work into a discipline, he would culminate his learning in general education. Placing general education last heightens the likelihood that those classes--so frequently disdained when they come, abstractly, at the beginning of the curriculum--take on real meaning. They provide context to meaningful work and deepening expertise. And they allow a student to check his sense of vocation against the thinking of preceding generations. Let me note that focus is a result in this part of the curriculum as well. There is no need, when general education comes last and provides framing for work and expertise, for survey courses across a wide range of disciplines. Instead, the student would need, and the curriculum offer, a core liberal arts curriculum anchored in religion, philosophy, history, literature, and math. These courses would both inform the student's philosophy and shape his comportment.

Sixth, graduation rather than marking a transition to work, would instead indicate a student's growth into maturity as measured by work, by expertise, by civic connection, and by comportment. It would also indicate the graduate's ability to mentor new students. Importantly, though, the graduate's relationship with our school would continue, in a particular sense. Today, colleges trumpet their commitment to lifelong learning. This usually means that students can come back and study other fields or take more content courses. At our school, students would instead have consistent access to opportunities for reflection, prayer, study, and counsel that allow them to trace the growth and evolution of their vocations. Put another way, our school assumes that graduates will continue to learn to do their work better, and to find ways to sharpen their skills in their workplaces. But it also assumes that the conversations necessary for the maintenance of vocation do not exist in most workplaces or communities. Instead, they will exist in our school's ongoing commitment to reflective opportunities for its graduates.

To this point our consideration has focused on the outcomes for students of an education that starts in vocation. It is worth noting in conclusion, though, the results of this form of education for our school. It would be smaller than its peers, both because its small size is essential to

originating education with an individual's vocation and because it has no need to be large. This last point bears a bit of exploration. Most schools believe they must grow to flourish, and they grow by abandoning focus for variety. Our school succeeds in its limits, because the limits of vocation, work, location, and curriculum are the basis of its success. Should a new understanding of vocation, or a new type of work, or a new place or new students require more services than the school can provide, it would not grow to meet those needs. Instead, it would plant another school, one attuned to the particular issues and opportunities that give it rise.

Our school would include roles unseen in most schools--staff who provide vocational counseling, mentors for working apprentices, civic guides who build connections to place, entrepreneurs who guide students originating new institutions of work, partnership builders who ensure that the school attends to the work and civic needs of its place. The role of faculty would differ as well, both in their relations to each other (real interdisciplinarity in general education attuned to the student rather than the vagaries of academic culture), and in their relations to students.

Our school wouldn't look like most schools either. A curriculum based in work would reorder the school's attention to many things that are important in current colleges but not in one focused on vocational work. Sports, for instance, may be part of a student's connection to community. So may theatre, concerts, etc. But the school needn't provide these things because the student, as part of her civic connections, would support those in the community. Similarly, our school would own no residence halls and provide no food services because those things, too, exist in the community (and by patronizing local apartments and restaurants, the students create the sort of flourishing community they need to find vocation-related work. In fact, the campus itself would look radically different. Reflective space would be important. So would places to learn. But gone is the need for the buildings and services that dominate college campuses today.

Finally our school would feel differently--a difference indicated again in its curriculum. The curriculum of today's schools is winnowing, whether it is a winnowing of interests, a narrowing of options, or a reduction in the number of students as the years of education progresses. For all of the focus we place on relationships in colleges, relationships of real meaning rarely take place between adults and students because meaningful interaction between adults and students comes at the end of school. Our school aims not to winnow. Instead it aims to entangle--starting with the seed of one's vocation it entwines students with work, and with place. It roots students in expertise and in a liberal education. And most importantly, it unites students and adults from the first interaction in the new school through and beyond graduation. And so our school creates its own community, one embedded in the place it calls home and the sort of work its students do.