Business & Education

by Rebecca Bynum (December 2010)

Why Choose the Liberal Arts?
By Mark William Roche
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If asked which section of society currently controls our education system, one might casually and unthinkingly reply that government does, but that would be untrue. Control of education, which once rested in the hands of the church, passed straight through the government and landed directly in the hands of big business quite some time ago. And of course the depth and breadth of business control of government is substantial regardless; this goes without saying. And as is usually the case, whatever business wants, business gets. Government officials from the President on down, when discussing education today, invariably do so in terms of "global competitiveness," as though the entire purpose of education were simply to keep the economic wheels turning. The formerly lofty aims of education have long since been reduced to the mundane needs of business. Coupled with that, is the pressure from nervous parents who must now spend enormous sums in order to procure what is regarded as a minimum of education for their children. They seek reassurance that their youngsters will be equipped to procure well-paying jobs as a return on their investment.

Educators like Notre Dame's Mark William Roche (former dean of Notre Dame's college of Arts & Letters and Professor of German Language and Literature as well as Philosophy) are clearly uncomfortable with this state of affairs, but nonetheless, dutifully gear their pitch to the business world. Nowadays, a liberal arts education has to be justified, not by its

intrinsic value, but by its utility to business. One of the main complaints business has today is that their new hires, often graduates of elite universities, are deficient in "communication skills," meaning, they cannot write or speak properly. Addressing this issue and justifying Arts and Letters is the main thrust of the argument in *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* even as it swings between duty and rebellion. Between paragraphs like this:

> Our need for persons with breadth may be most acute when we are suffering economic troubles, even if that is a time when the liberal arts may be viewed as irrelevant. A former English and mathematics major at Williams College, Bethany McLean, was the first person to uncover the problems with Enron, writing an article in 2001 for *Fortune* magazine, "Is Enron Overpriced?" She looked beyond the numbers and asked how it all rhymed. Geoffrey Harpham has argued that one problem associated with the financial crisis of 2008 was that analysts looked only at computations and failed to think about the bigger picture. The frequent comments heard in this context – "It was all so obvious in retrospect" and "Our models failed to predict this" – suggest a failure to take into account more than simply facts and figures. One needs numbers, but one also needs a framework in which to give those numbers meaning and value. The capacity to ask the probing questions that elicit appropriate frameworks are more likely to originate in humanities courses or combinations of arts and sciences courses than in technical courses. (page 67)

and paragraphs like this:

> In our age, consumerism and pleonasty, the bondage of worldly things, tend to distract us from the heights of contemplation. One of the dominant goals of modernity has been to increase living standards and consumption; both of these factors have contributed to the definition of social success. As Arnold Gehlen notes in *Man in the Age of Technology*, anyone with historical consciousness

> cannot help but recognize that earlier generations had a much different view of ascetic values: “In any case the individual who renounced the goods of this earth always enjoyed a moral authority, whereas today he would be met with incomprehension.” (78, translation modified). Asceticism, according to Gehlen, “adds to the integration and composure of personality, and at the same time sharpens the social impulses and increases spiritual awareness” (106, translation modified). One need only think of Augustines’s elevation of fasting as resistance to the temptations of the world – sensual pleasures, shallow curiosity, and wealth – that draw us away from our highest values or of Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s arguments that the contemplative person is more self-sufficient, closer to the divine, engaged in what is most distinctive about human beings, and more removed from our common preoccupation with externals. What is distinctive about human beings is thought, love of wisdom, and love of one another in the contemplation of highest values, including goodness. An engagement with great questions and a love of thought allow all external trappings to recede in importance. (page 27)
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> He speaks of the college years as an island of contemplation, a time to ponder the “great questions” before the student must enter the daily grind of work and worry, the world of adult responsibility. This is the formative phase of a person’s life and Dr. Roche does not neglect to address character development. He writes with disdain about the attitudes of educators such as Stanley Fish who focus on “critical thinking” to the exclusion of moral development. Roche is clearly not at ease with the education-as-vocational-training school of thought, which is coming to dominate academia. Fish’s book, for example, is cynically titled, *Save the World on Your Own Time*.

Roche seems to decry the increasing fragmentation and specialization of knowledge which leads away from the philosophical ideas which integrate those disparate realms. He stresses that teachers should be good examples for their impressionable students who deeply desire to address the larger questions of life’s meaning and value. Many teachers

today seem afraid to address any question to which they don’t possess an immediate, well accepted and well defined answer. They refuse to address the great questions of existence, the very questions most students long to discuss. Roche realizes that these students do not want teachers who will supply pat answers, but rather require support from their own seeking minds. It’s really very simple, they need to read the great works of the past, the Western canon.

Dr. Roche has thought very deeply about teaching and about developing students who are confident in their writing ability and who can argue a position verbally and in public. He emphasizes both oral examination and classroom discussion. In this way, he seeks to produce students who are well versed in their subjects and who can think on their feet. He argues this type of training will better prepare them for the vagaries and vicissitude of work life. It is clear that he feels deeply about his vocation and doesn’t think much of those who teach as a necessary evil on the way to what they view as the higher calling of research. To illustrate, he writes,