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The purpose of Berry

THE HEADLINES ARE RELENTLESS: “College costs too much,” “How Liberal Arts Colleges Are Failing America,” “The Campus Tsunami,” “The future of online vs. residential education,” and “Come the Revolution.”

Two articles landed on my desk recently. One was titled “The End of the University as We Know It.” Its central claim was that with major universities providing access to free online lectures, half of America’s universities will be closed in 50 years and “ten years from now Harvard will enroll ten million students.” The logic is that “the Internet is a great destroyer of any traditional business that relies on the sale of information.”

The other article highlighted “whiz kids who were dropping out of college to pursue riches and experiences through their own entrepreneurial initiatives.” The point was that college is an unnecessary and time-consuming expense.

What are we to make of these assumptions? Is a college education really about the sale of information? If so, books should have put colleges out of business long ago.

And is college primarily a means for increasing one’s personal wealth? Evidence demonstrates that a college degree is associated with many benefits including higher salaries, better health, more stable marriages and better opportunities for one’s children. Even so, a college degree that does not focus on what it means to live a worthwhile life – a life imbued with meaning and purpose – leaves one uneducated in the most profound way.

SPARKLE IN THEIR EYES

When Martha Berry first established her residential school, she emphasized a model that “teaches by doing” with students

undertaking all manner of work necessary to sustain the institution, from growing crops, tending livestock and preparing food to constructing the buildings in which they lived, worked and studied. Martha intended to break the cycle of poverty in the hill country of Northwest Georgia by investing in educated and morally sound families who would become the foundation for strong rural communities.

Martha sought out deserving and talented boys and girls who had “sparkle in their eyes,” but her goal was not simply or primarily to advance their eventual success and prosperity. Students were taught to honor work. As she explained to them, “The co-ordination of the hand and head will strengthen your earning ability and your character and will enable you to render a valued service to humanity.”

And, for Martha, this valued service was normally rendered in one’s home community.

AGENTS OF IMPROVEMENT

A century later, the world has changed dramatically, as have the communities that send students to Berry. Yet, the purpose of Berry endures: *to prepare graduates with the knowledge, experience, integrity and passion to improve the places where they choose to live and work.* And the means for achieving this purpose – an education of the head, heart and hands – remains effective, which is why Berry holds firmly to a residential model of education.

As a residential campus, Berry is a living laboratory where students *experience firsthand* what it means to form, sustain and improve a community of learners. Each year anew, the community must organize and govern itself to create shared expectations, pursue goals, resolve conflicts and negotiate

differences. This practical learning occurs in the residence halls, on the playing fields, in work settings, with work teams, with study groups, and in the classroom. Learning how to improve Berry as a campus community provides a practical and principled lesson in how to improve any community.

Berry is also part of an extended community, the community of Rome and Floyd County. Berry’s health and continued prosperity are contingent on the well-being of this larger neighborhood. Thus, Berry has a vested interest in improving the community in which it resides by promoting economic development, encouraging educational attainment, and building a vibrant culture for the arts and recreation. Learning how Berry faculty, staff and students can partner with other agencies to improve Rome and Floyd County, including a specific commitment to early childhood education in South Rome, provides a practical and principled demonstration of service to an extended community.

Every year, Berry students and faculty also travel to communities afar – in places like Costa Rica and Uganda – to invest time and resources in children and families in order to promote economic development, healthy families and educational attainment in our global communities. These students are deeply affected by the relationships they form and the resiliency and warmth of these developing and rural communities.

Berry also occupies a large footprint. Although never wholly self-sustaining, the college has land resources and assets that allow it to serve as a model of stewardship in the production of food, water and timber resources. In particular, Berry’s land holdings provide an opportunity to define a healthy place – one that emphasizes environmental well-being and assesses the role of environ-



Heart, hands

mental influences on human and animal health through epidemiologic and laboratory investigations. Berry's opportunity in this area is substantial because it aligns with a national "One Health" initiative "dedicated to improving the lives of all species – human and animal – through the integration of human medicine, veterinary medicine and environmental science." Learning how to improve and inhabit Berry as an ecosystem provides a practical and principled model of stewardship of place and creation.

What makes Berry special, then, is how it purposefully prepares graduates through academic rigor and practical experience to be agents of improvement. Berry's success can be evaluated in terms of whether its graduates employ the analytical, problem-solving and persuasive skills needed to make a place better. Does a teacher have the vision and insight to improve a whole school and not just one classroom? Does a real estate developer have the desire to improve a whole corridor and not just the parcels he or she owns? Does a medical doctor have an obligation to improve the local hospital?

Asking graduates to think beyond their own immediate assignment is asking them to embrace a broader sense of "ownership." If Berry asks its graduates to serve in this capacity – to be agents of improvement – then it should be clear about how it prepares them to this end.

THE PRACTICAL AND REFLECTIVE VALUE OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

What enables people to be agents of improvement? Of course, they must be able to communicate ideas clearly and concisely – orally and visually as well as in writing. At the least, they also must be able to reason critically about complex problems. In other words, as part of their essential learning at Berry, they should be able to:

- See a problem in context and from multiple perspectives
- Gather and interpret evidence relevant to the problem

- Understand the use of empirical reasoning to test ideas and draw conclusions
- Understand how complicated systems operate, whether those systems are social (economic, political, cultural) or natural (biochemical, ecological, organismic)
- Recommend practical, principled and creative solutions to the problem.

In the liberal arts tradition, analytical skills of this sort, which can be used to generate inspired solutions to the kind of thorny issues that confront society today, are learned in and across many disciplines. While no one discipline provides the perfect lens, each contributes in a distinctive and content-rich way when it purposefully helps students to reason critically about pressing problems.

At the heart of this same tradition is an exploration of what it means to live a "good life." Are we obligated to serve? If so, what is the basis of this obligation?

For Martha Berry, the basis was compelling. Serving ("to minister," as Berry's motto puts it) pours directly and reflexively from a well-formed Christian faith, which is why the "heart" portion of Berry's motto was critical in her mind. The message of Mark 10:45, from which our Biblical motto of service was drawn, was countercultural in Christ's time, just as it is now.

What is service from this context? Timothy Keller (see *Every Good Endeavor*) defines this kind of service as "putting the needs of others ahead of our own, or putting the needs of the community ahead of our individual needs." Service of this kind teaches self-knowledge, promotes community and yields joy. Service offered in humility teaches us to understand our own aptitudes, draws us away from our consumer (meet my needs) mindset and into relationships, and allows us to see ourselves as part of a larger story. Paradoxically, if we serve primarily to bolster our identity, it isn't really serving, and we miss the benefits.

Absent a well-formed foundation for

service, why should our graduates embrace as an obligation that which is often not rewarded or valued by society? To my mind, the need to probe this question reinforces the position that a college education must focus on what it means to live a life of value to others and why we must do so; otherwise, it is instruction that leaves one uneducated in the most profound ways.

In our moment of time, when technological advances are pervasive and communication immediate, it is easy to take our freedoms and relative affluence for granted – as if we were entitled to them. Our culture and our own impulses encourage us to seize this moment and live it to the fullest. What makes us most human, however, is our very ability to not take things for granted – to be self-aware about our moment in time and to wrestle with the deep and enduring questions of our own fragile and fleeting existence and what it means to live responsibly.

In the end, critics are correct to assert that the residential model of education is time-consuming and expensive. (Although in terms of debt, for most students four-year college debt is less than the cost of a Ford F-150.) After all, the residential model endeavors to do more than sell information via digital lectures distributed through "massively open online courses." I agree with columnist David Brooks that "people learn from the people they love" and that acquiring information more readily online (which is but the first and most trivial level of learning) allows liberal arts colleges to move "up the value chain – away from information transmission and up to higher things." We should all care more about these higher things.

The purpose of Berry – the Berry model – is to develop critical and creative problem-solvers who care enough to want to be agents of change in the communities in which they live and work – agents of improvement and peacemakers who are *life ready*. **B**