A liberal arts education should be a public good for people of all socioeconomic backgrounds (essay)

Submitted by Lynn Pasquerella on January 21, 2016 - 3:00am

Following the fourth round of the Republican presidential debates, a flurry of media attention focused on Florida Senator Marco Rubio’s assertion that “we need more welders, less philosophers.” In addition to noting the grammatical error in his statement, defenders of the liberal arts leaped to prove Rubio wrong by producing data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicating that the median salary of philosophers in fact exceeds that of welders.

Many commentators also highlighted the value of a discipline that fosters the critical-thinking, writing and arguing skills necessary in a rapidly changing, globally interdependent world where the jobs of the future have not yet been invented. Moreover, they contended that philosophical training, which encourages the kind of adaptability and flexibility required in an uncertain job market, is a plus.

A case in point is the highly publicized, and ironic, story of Matthew B. Crawford, author of Shop Class as Soulcraft, who earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Chicago and used online tutorials to become a welder and motorcycle mechanic. Rather than reaffirm that a liberal arts education leads to a life of underemployment, Crawford’s story illustrates the capacity of someone who is liberally educated to be an innovator in his own life.

As a college president, I pay careful attention to contemporary discourse surrounding the value added of higher education. Yet I admit to being personally interested in the response, both within and outside of the academy, to Rubio’s assertion. I was trained as a philosopher, earning my Ph.D. from Brown University in metaphysics and ethics. My father, by contrast, dropped out of school at the age of 16 to join the war effort following the attack on Pearl Harbor, and later traveled 70 miles round-trip daily on a bus to work third shift as -- you guessed it -- a welder at Pratt and Whitney. Known by his buddies in the Marines as Satch, my father had street smarts and could fix anything. I spent hours by his side as he dismantled engines, repaired faulty starters and dabbled in electronics using discarded tubes and cylinders that we salvaged on weekends from the town dump.

Both of my parents valued effort and disciplined work, and they encouraged me to go to college to escape the factory jobs that circumscribed their lives. Nevertheless, when I invited my father to
my graduation from Brown, he declined, admonishing, “I hope you don’t think this makes you better than us.” I assured him that my academic success did not constitute a rejection of my working-class roots, or of him.

I was reminded of this long-ago conversation with my father when Senator Rubio condemned those of us in higher education for stigmatizing vocational education in the context of whether to raise the minimum wage. My fear is that in the quest to prove Marco Rubio wrong regarding the value of the humanities, we fail to take seriously the message at the core of his controversial statement. Those of us seeking to respond to Rubio’s assertion regarding the value of welders over philosophers must ask why his message resonates with such a broad segment of our society.

For many people in America, a liberal arts education seems reserved for those within the ivory tower, reflecting a willful disconnect from the practical matters of everyday life. And according to Senator Rubio, higher education is too expensive, too difficult to access and doesn’t teach people 21st-century skills. Those accusations fuel the image of a liberal education as a self-indulgent luxury, underlying calls for the elimination of humanities programs in favor of vocational and preprofessional programs that are regarded as singularly responding to demands for economic opportunity.

Of course, it is little wonder that the liberal arts are considered a luxury and irrelevant to success in a world that equates long-term happiness with wealth. But while those of us in the humanities may condemn the skeptics for being misguided, it is time to recognize the extent to which we ourselves have perpetuated this misconception.

Senator Rubio’s statements should remind us of the risk of slipping into Casaubonism and of the failure to connect liberal learning to the lives of people outside of the academy. Consider this: there is growing economic segregation in American higher education, with more than 50 percent of students attending community colleges and one in every two students dropping out. Yet a liberal arts education will remain secure in wealthy communities and at elite, private institutions, which were built upon the foundation of liberal learning and its inextricable link to democratic engagement and civic responsibility. In contrast, liberal education will be under increasing scrutiny at public institutions -- community colleges, where I began my education, and other state colleges and universities.

In challenging Rubio’s rhetoric, we can learn lessons from the past. Remember Sarah Palin’s talk of death panels? She opposed President Obama’s proposed inclusion in a health care reform plan of a provision that would reimburse physicians for talking to their patients about advance directives for end-of-life decisions or hospice care. The phrase's invocations of Nazi programs targeting the elderly, ill and disabled subsequently led politicians to excise the proposal early on from the U.S. House of Representatives’ Tri-Committee bill. The furor started with a post on Palin’s Facebook page asserting that if the government passed health care legislation, boards would be set up to determine whether the elderly and disabled were worthy of care. In the weeks that followed, politicians issued statements warning against a policy that would push us toward government-encouraged euthanasia; they trumpeted instead the need to protect seniors from being put to death by their government.

In fact, the positing of death panels was Politifact’s 2009 “Lie of the Year.” However, by
disavowing the truth of the claims of death panels by calling them laughable, President Obama failed to address the real fear underlying the concerns of those who readily believed the rhetoric, namely, the denial of necessary medical care at a time of urgent need. Thus, an opportunity was lost for meaningful debate over critical end-of-life issues that were pushed aside during the process of political jockeying.

My goal here is not to dredge up partisan debates, but instead to draw attention to the nature of the fear that people across the country have expressed, then and now. Just as people during Palin’s run were genuinely concerned that the government would be allowed to determine what constitutes necessary care and who should be allowed to receive it, those pushing vocational education over liberal education today do so grounded in fear that their children will not be able to have a better life than they had. That fear creates a false dichotomy between vocational and liberal education, between welding and philosophy. Everyone, including welders, can benefit from liberal learning precisely because the illumination of human consciousness through literature, philosophy, music and the arts enriches the experience of individuals alone and as members of a community, allowing us to flourish fully as human beings.

Inasmuch as scholarly traditions in the liberal arts serve as benchmarks and frameworks for grappling with abiding human questions and concerns, reserving these opportunities only for those who can afford an elite education or live in well-heeled communities has profound consequences in terms of egalitarian principles of justice and fairness. Most important, it thwarts our nation’s historic mission of educating for democracy. We must restore America’s trust in higher education, viewing it not as a private commodity but as a public good -- one that all our citizens, whatever their socioeconomic background can access. While there has been a good deal of rhetoric regarding the principle of universal access to higher education as an essential symbol of our nation’s commitment to equality of opportunity, the reality is that many of our citizens still have “closed futures” and consequently are, in a very real sense, unfree. Denying access to higher education not only drastically undermines the promise of equal opportunity for individuals, it limits prospects for economic growth at the national level.

In an effort to redress social inequality, colleges and universities must establish partnerships with businesses and industry, primary and secondary schools, public officials and community members. This approach to creating access to higher education necessitates bringing leadership beyond the academy by making our scholarly expertise available as a public resource. The result would be a transformation of colleges and universities into a visible force in the lives of even the most disenfranchised members of society. Until we do so, we will have failed to address the real concerns of those whose cheers filled the auditorium when Senator Rubio urged us toward a return to vocationalism on the back of philosophy jokes.

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