

A False Choice between Liberal and Vocational Education

A persistent worry at my university is that it has turned into a vocational school and is neglecting the ideals of liberal education. A planned rehaul of Stanford's freshman requirements, centered on "the ideas of liberal and civic education," embodies this worry. "Unlike vocational or professional studies," the design team writes, "a liberal education trains students to be critical thinkers with a well-rounded knowledge base, including some areas of depth." The redesigned first year, which replaces a loose set of requirements with a core curriculum, emerges from fear that vocational studies will create students who do not have a broad base of liberal education and who cannot be citizens in a liberal society.

This opposition of liberal and vocational education is intuitive on its face: a liberal education trains a student to think critically, to have a broad base of knowledge about her society, and to develop a set of values upon which she has reflected and from which she can act. A vocational education trains a student in skills useful for a specific profession, preparing her to be an able and productive worker in that profession.

It is easy to think that liberal and vocational education, though not contradictory, oppose each other: with a limited four-year undergraduate career, a student must choose to do some things and not others, and is unlikely that she can pursue *both* a robust liberal education and a robust vocational one. If this is so, then though the university administrator can bemoan the drop in liberal-arts majors at her university, she can't very well compel students to major in philosophy when everyone knows well that computer science is the pipeline to a stable and lucrative career.

This is, it seems, part of the thinking behind Stanford's first-year rehaul: if our students will major in computer science, we can at least foist a taste of liberal education upon them as freshmen, in the hopes that either this taste will encourage deeper exploration, or that it will be sufficient to graduate a student who is not only a skilled worker but a decent citizen.

But this reasoning supposes that vocational and liberal education must be different things — and I think this is false. A vocational education *can and should* be liberal.

The word "vocation" has a connotation not present in synonyms like "trade" or "professional." In Max Weber's 1917 *Vocation Lectures*, "vocation" connotes not simply one's nine-to-five job, but one's "calling," one's life-work, a thing one finds worthy and to

which one feels great dedication. In the first lecture, “Science as a Vocation,” Weber discusses the vocation of being a scholar, arguing that the scholar must ask herself why she feels “called” to scholarship. Why, she should ask, does she dedicate herself to this work and find it worthy of her time? Weber interrogates the meaning and purpose of scholarship, what the scholar’s responsibilities are, what boundaries to her expertise she must recognize. He takes the broad perspective, critical thought, and ethical sensitivity central to liberal education and turns them upon the question of vocation itself.

What if we thought about the “vocation” in “vocational education” like Weber does? Then a vocational education would not mean merely an education that gives a student the skills for a particular profession. It would mean an education that also pushes her to think critically about the role of her profession in the broader social fabric, and to reflect upon a set of values to guide her work. It would mean educating a computer scientist who can write algorithms and knows the power of algorithms, but also knows the perils of algorithms and thus when to put down the algorithmic lens. It would, more broadly, mean professionals who are sensitive to the question of *what it means* to be in their profession.

The questions of a liberal education, often vague and hazy in philosophy class, are specific and, more importantly, *practicable* from the standpoint of a vocation. The question “what really matters, and why?” becomes “how do I as a computer scientist best position myself to find and aid our most important shared projects?” The question “what are our responsibilities and limitations as people?” becomes “how can I as an economist be the most helpful and where should I defer to the expertise of others?”

It is tempting to respond to the increased popularity of professional degrees by finding ways to require or convince students to *also* study the liberal arts. But under a Weberian understanding of “vocation,” a vocational education would be *inherently* liberal. It would be attuned to questions of meaning and value not in the abstract, but in the concrete and practical terms relevant to each vocation. In the Weberian sense, our universities are far from vocational, and it would be better if they were.