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# *An Obscure Destiny, This Business of Teaching English*

JOSEPH R. URGO

What is education for? Why do people go to college? Why do college graduates go to graduate school?

The story "Old Mrs. Harris," in Willa Cather's collection *Obscure Destinies* (1932), centers on the fate of Mrs. Harris's granddaughter, Vickie Templeton, the eldest child of a Colorado family in decline. Vickie receives a scholarship to attend the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and discusses the matter with her worldly neighbor, Mr. Rosen. Mr. Rosen asks her why she wants to go to college. Vickie answers, "To learn." Rosen presses further: "But why do you want to learn? What do you want to do with it?" Vickie responds, at a loss: "I don't know. Nothing, I guess." Rosen won't let go. "Then what do you want it for?" Vickie holds her ground: "I don't know. I just want it." To Vickie's surprise, this reply pleases Mr. Rosen, and his pleasure relieves the tense exchange between them. "Then if you want it without any purpose at all," he says, "you will not be disappointed" (158).

The dialogue between Mr. Rosen and Vickie Templeton will strike a familiar chord among readers of *Profession*. In literary studies we take for granted the idea of open-ended education, and we refer to it in various ways: knowledge for its own sake, the pursuit of learning, the habit of inquiry. The concept is an article of faith among educators in the liberal arts. Most will even recognize Mr. Rosen's quotation from Michelet, which Cather used on more than one occasion in her writing: "Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout" ("The end is nothing; the road is all"). Mr. Rosen writes down the quotation on a piece of paper

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and tells Vickie to take it with her to college "as an antidote, a corrective for whatever colleges might do to her" (159). What is it that colleges will do to her? Are colleges still doing it to students?

I chair the Department of English and Humanities at Bryant College in Rhode Island. Bryant is a business college with the motto "Education for Business Leadership." We have business majors in accounting, applied actuarial mathematics, computer information systems, finance, management, and marketing. Although we offer majors in liberal arts fields (communications, economics, English, history, international studies), the vast majority of our students take degrees in business. In 1994 the college received national accreditation for its business programs from the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Ironically, the most recent AACSB accreditation standards (which the college must meet by 2004) demand fewer credit hours in business and more credit hours in liberal arts; at least half of any student's program of study must be in what the AACSB calls "general education." It appears, then, that only half of the curriculum can be specifically "for" something ("for business leadership"); the other half must be something else.

The achievement of the national accreditation led to a thoroughgoing curriculum reform in which over thirty percent of the faculty participated. The reorganization of the business curriculum demanded that materials be presented in fewer credit hours; the reorganization of the liberal arts curriculum allowed for the creation of distribution requirements and a wide variety of program minors. Needless to say, this restructuring has greatly altered the curricular landscape here, revitalizing the role of the Department of English and Humanities, moving us from service to partnership. After all, the AACSB has implicitly insisted that the motto "Education for ________" be left at least half blank, leaving open the possibility that education may not be for anything in particular or, ultimately, that education may be for education.

Graduate programs in English and related areas might learn something from the AACSB. One of the most serious degradations of education in our present system is the stress on the destination (sometimes collapsed into an emphasis on "outcomes"). Of course, the issue is not new; Cather saw the problem earlier in the century, as have many others. In setting its accreditation standards, the AACSB has attempted to counter a tendency in business education to overemphasize the first job at the expense of the career path, or the road with the more obscure outcome, or destiny. Liberal education at its best prepares students for uncertainty by rewarding the very qualities that technical training means to reduce: provisionality, indeterminacy, and the suspension of decision. The emphasis on securing the first job subverts the educational process by implying that education is equivalent to qualification or, in the language of the school corridors, a hurdle to jump over. For example, when graduate programs in literary studies equate the decline of the job market with

failure of programs, they trivialize their missions as educational institutions. Anyone who goes to college or graduate school to get a job will inevitably be (to quote Mr. Rosen) disappointed—in the job, in the education, or in both.

Incoming freshmen at Bryant are asked to choose (or predict) their major. Dutifully, most check off one of the majors listed on the form. In recent years, however, many began to leave that question blank. Undaunted, the office of undergraduate programs added the category "undeclared" to the choices. Roughly a third of all incoming freshmen check off this category, now enshrined as an acceptable answer. Mr. Rosen would be pleased. Equally pleased is the English and humanities department. "These are our students," one colleague said at a department meeting. Very few check off English as a major. Most of our majors come from the ranks of the undeclared, and we try our best to maintain the value of contingency or provisionality in their educational program.

People who graduate from college with a degree in accounting will either be accountants or be disappointed. The certainty of the correlation between the field and the career (accounting-accountant; finance–financial analyst) makes the road and its end virtually the same. But what about the English and humanities offerings? The career placement office is always trying to pin down what it is that English majors might do in their careers (journalism? publishing?), and the English department is always trying to leave that section of the form (or of the viewbook or brochure) ambiguous. The fact is that people who major in one of the liberal arts get an education in, of, and for itself. Once that education is under way, we think they can do or learn how to do almost anything.

English professors at business and other technical colleges do something that I doubt English professors at liberal arts colleges do: explain continually, to students, parents, trustees, and their colleagues "on the other side" (i.e., in business departments) why students should take courses with such titles as Studies in Comparative Literature or Women and the Creative Imagination. At one curriculum meeting, for example, a marketing professor asked, "Why shouldn't all the books studied in a course on the novel have business themes?" Another asked, "Why, once a student has taken an English course, does that student still write poorly?" If students can learn a computer program once and for all, why can't they learn to write once and for all?

"Once and for all," like "happily ever after," is of course antithetical to everything we try to do in literary studies. Nonetheless, the argument that education is a road whose destination doesn't matter is getting tougher to defend, because the arguments for job training and professional preparation are in actuality arguments against education, against intellectual inquiry, and against the spirit of unfettered imagination. And so to defend the obscure destinies of education appears to be an assault on the values of efficiency and productivity—articles of faith in the business world, in the academy, and in the national culture. The frequency of observations in *Profession* and elsewhere about the paucity of opportunities in the academic job market and the declining number of jobs for literature and language PhDs enforces the notion that education ought to be for something, whether that something is business leadership or a tenure-track job. I am afraid that such thinking is potentially disastrous for teaching anything to anybody.



AACSB requirements that increase the liberal arts component at business schools are responding to developments in the business world, to what might be called a postjob environment. As William Bridges argues in *Jobshift: How to Prosper in a Workplace without Jobs*, the era of lifetime employment is passing rapidly. In a postjob world, workers prepare themselves for a succession of task-oriented term assignments within multiple career paths. The assumption behind the latest AACSB educational requirements is that, while a business education will ensure competency in the present environment, an engagement with the liberal arts will prepare students for the obscure destinies of a jobless world.

The concept of the job can be traced to the nineteenth century in the United States, to the industrial revolution and the development of factories and managerial bureaucracies. Much resistance arose to such work organization at the time; then for a while in this century it felt normal to work a forty-hour week at the same institution for thirty years. As the industrial era now yields to the information age (or whatever it ends up being labeled), places of employment will yield to employment situations, and workers will become small businesses themselves, moving from task to task, migrating with opportunities. The literary crisis of the self may finally reach closure as subjectivity is equated with having options. In any case, it is important to see the disappearance of tenure-track jobs and the rise of the itinerant professor (with and without tenure) not as some academic aberration but as part of a wider, more encompassing job shift in contemporary capitalism.

The question for graduate programs in literary studies is how to educate for such a world. At present, many graduate programs in English are preparing students not for academic job shifts but for a shrinking number of "permanent" jobs. As a result, graduate education makes cynics of its students and nurtures hostility in the coming generation of scholars who should, and do, resent sacrificing their educations to premature job training. For example, emphasizing the academic job market has meant that the publish-or-perish ethic has trickled down to the first-year graduate seminar. By stressing publication, graduate programs have encouraged ahistoricism (who has time for the past?) and greatly truncated research methods. Whereas graduate education was once the place to learn the scholarship one needed to begin a career, it is now the place to launch that career. What suffers? Scholarship suffers. I am sure all the readers of this journal have read published essays in their fields in which the writers have not done their homework and old arguments are rehearsed in new words. I don't know that graduate schools have the motto "Education for Assistant

Professors"; maybe they do. If the only purpose of graduate education in literary studies is to produce assistant professors of English, then we should close down half of those programs. A graduate program that declares such a mission has abandoned the field of education and entered the realm of technical and professional training.

Much of what constitutes teaching literature at a business college amounts to holding the line against this confusion of training with education. The size of the faculty at Bryant College has nearly doubled since 1986, the percentage of teachers with PhDs has increased dramatically, and the college has experienced a sea change in its identity and direction. As English department chair, I often advocate the obscure destinies of the educational process. Freshmen who read the want ads, choosing their majors on the basis of the current needs of corporate America, are foolhardy (as are graduate students who design their dissertations according to the MLA *Job Information List*). The only advice I know to impart to students is "Do what you're good at; study what gives you pleasure." If students immerse themselves in what they love now, they will probably grow accustomed to liking what they are doing and perhaps even end up doing something they enjoy, whatever it is. If they do what they think they must do to get a job (read: to survive), they will learn to abhor education. They will see it either as a hoax (because the elusive job market will shift by the time they graduate) or as a waste of time, since they are forced to study things that do not bring pleasure. As a result, education becomes a hurdle, a hoop, or a gate.

Ultimately, the interpretation of education as job training is rooted in and embodies the American tradition of anti-intellectualism, the antagonism toward any activity that is not practical, productive, or profitable. When you factor in the growing cost of higher education and the decline in federal funding for tuition assistance, that antagonism is fueled by real hardship. Thus we can expect those outside the academy to insist that education be *for* something. Those on the inside, however, cannot afford to capitulate, at least not entirely. A good portion of education, in order to maintain its integrity as education, must be for itself. As Vickie Templeton said, "I just want it." The obscure destinies of our students are perhaps their most important possession, the one thing that makes education possible.

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# *Beyond the Wars of Religion: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Desecularize American Education*

M. D. WALHOUT

In a recent article entitled "What (If Anything) Hath God Wrought? Academic Freedom and the Religious Professor," the Berkeley law professor Phillip E. Johnson complains that Christianity, while retaining "great vitality in the culture at large," is "effectively marginalized and shut out of academic discourse" (19). In support of his contention, Johnson cites the 1991 case of *Bishop v. Aronov*, in which a federal appeals court held that the University of Alabama was justified in preventing a professor from telling his students that he was a Christian, even in voluntary, after-hours sessions. "Just as women students would find no comfort in an openly sexist instructor," the court reasoned, "an Islamic or Jewish student will not likely savor the Christian bias that Dr. Bishop professes" (Johnson 16–17). That a federal court can equate Christianity with bigotry, Johnson notes, is a sign of a major shift in American culture, even though "many persons in academic life do not seem to realize that this cultural shift has occurred and still seem to imagine that a major threat to academic freedom is coming from a religious establishment that no longer exists" (19).

The demise of the religious establishment that once dominated American higher education is chronicled in George M. Marsden's *The Soul of the American University*. "On the one hand," says Marsden, "it is a story of the disestablishment of religion. On the other hand, it is a story of secularization" (6). Disestablishment led to the hiring of Jews, Catholics, agnostics, and even atheists at Protestant universities; secularization led to the banishment of religion from those same universities. The failure to distinguish between these

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