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Education for Self-Reliance, Responsibility and Hope

John Strassburger
Ursinus College

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EDUCATION
for
SELF-RELIANCE,
RESPONSIBILITY
and
HOPE

*First in a series
of occasional papers from
John Strassburger, President*
URSINUS COLLEGE



EIGHT REASONS WHY COLLEGE MAY BE THE BEST INVESTMENT



WITH RISING COSTS and families' growing concern for realizing a high return on their educational investment, liberal arts colleges are being held to the test: What is the outcome they produce? What do they do for young people that makes them worth the cost?

Traditional responses touting the virtues of being liberally educated often sound hollow. Assertions that the liberal arts are the best means of educating citizens do not clarify the connection of a college education to the complexities of modern experience.

The real stakes in education are clear: whether young adults will be able to meet the future with energy and optimism. The undergraduate liberal arts education developing at Ursinus College goes to the heart of how young people become fulfilled human beings. It prepares them for their most important responsibilities.

I believe there are compelling reasons for paying attention to what Ursinus is doing. These are what I want to address in the first of a series of papers I will be sending to alumni and friends of the college. In future papers, I will discuss the importance of writing and speaking in our curriculum and the role of faculty as mentors and coaches, among other topics. These elements are crucial to the outcomes we, our students, and their parents all seek.



REASON ONE

KNOWLEDGE IS NOT ENOUGH. SELF-RELIANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY ARE THE KEYS TO A FULL LIFE AND EFFECTIVE CITIZENSHIP.

Young people's greatest asset is their orientation toward the future. The college years are precisely the time when they possess the greatest reservoirs of energy and optimism, reservoirs that they will draw on the rest of their lives. We see this at Ursinus in the surge of interest in service learning and volunteerism, especially such programs as Habitat for Humanity. Yet in America these very reservoirs are threatening to dry up. Last winter, the Washington Post published a series of articles about Americans' diminishing sense of trust. According to its detailed survey, Americans no longer have faith in the federal government or any other institution. Small wonder, since, according to the survey, Americans no longer trust each other. We are in danger of becoming a nation of cynical strangers, a high percentage of whom are convinced that "people like me don't have any say."

By far the most shocking fact, however, was that the cynicism was highest among young people. It should have been just the opposite. As the study pointed out, "trust is not slowly acquired over a lifetime. It is far more likely to diminish rather than grow with age."

If the young people we are going to depend on to solve tomorrow's problems are apathetic and unable to see a future worth striving for, if they are in danger of becoming bystanders to democracy, what is ahead for our society? For our world?

Faced with this pervasive challenge, college must do more than “enable” students with a suite of sophisticated skills and competitive credentials. To promote a real future for its graduates, college must transform their sense of what is possible.

Ursinus College spurs this transformation by helping students to gain sovereignty over life. We strengthen their ability to take charge, restoring the sense of optimism that comes from knowing they are in control of their lives — intellectually, socially, and morally. The cornerstones of the Ursinus liberal arts program are self-reliance and responsibility, developed through an emphasis on achievement. The program is coherent, cumulative, and comprehensive. It doesn't stop at the classroom door but touches every area of students' lives.

The standard by which colleges must measure the outcome of education has gone up. What matters is not only our graduates' success in the world of work but also the quality of the world they help make.



REASON TWO

BALANCE AND FOCUS IN THE CURRICULUM BUILD RESERVOIRS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING.

When many students and parents think of college outcomes, they expect expertise and employability. They see learning as a ladder whose top rung is specialized knowledge. All else is left behind in the

climb. College's chief task, however, is just the opposite — to make sure students don't sacrifice the potential for creativity and satisfaction that they don't even know they possess. We have an obligation to balance competence with versatility. All graduates today must be both specialists and generalists. Anything less dooms them to lives in a pin-ball game, in which they are likely to always be moving, bouncing off the next necessity, never anticipating change, never in control.

A core curriculum that defines itself too narrowly in terms of required courses can actually defeat the fundamental purpose of a liberal arts education. The Ursinus Liberal Studies Program runs in parallel tracks. Courses provide intellectual balance and sharp focus. There is a constant interplay between general and specific knowledge throughout the four years. Our core is organized around the different ways we know the world: through history, art, science, and social relations. The first-year Liberal Studies Seminar offers the method in miniature, with large-scale topics and focused, intensive discussions. In their majors, students work toward a capstone project that demonstrates competence and the ability to frame questions that matter.

"Examine all things and retain what is good," said Zacharias Ursinus, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer whose name and spirit grace this college. Education is not sufficient if it merely enables students to climb to the top of a ladder. To borrow an image from the philosopher Wittgenstein, it must enable them to kick the ladder away — and keep climbing.



REASON THREE

STUDENTS LEARN TO TAKE CHARGE IN A PROGRAM THAT SHIFTS THE RESPONSIBILITY AND MOTIVATION FOR PURSUING AN EDUCATION FROM THE FACULTY TO THEMSELVES.

Of all the factors contributing to fulfillment, the most important is motivation. Colleges cannot teach it, but they are uniquely equipped to create the conditions to unlock it. Those conditions are high expectations, low authoritarianism, and maximum responsibility. A college unlocks motivation by transforming knowledge from something transmitted and received to something gained and applied.

This can be done in many ways. At Ursinus, we have mounted an effort to involve as many of our students as possible in original research, the kind of opportunity for substantive achievement usually reserved for graduate students. Our alumni have joined the effort, underwriting stipends to support independent work during the summer. These projects require our students to develop a topic that calls on the knowledge and skills they have already gained and on new knowledge they must acquire. Last year we saw some of the fruits of the program at the first Centennial Conference Student Research Colloquium, one of several undergraduate research conferences we have hosted in the last several years. The level of achievement, on topics ranging from gene sequencing to themes in classical Latin literature, is convincing proof that for colleges, there is only one telling measure of academic quality: the work students are actually doing.

To produce such results, it is not enough to introduce students to a research setting and let faculty tell them what to do. Students must be the ones asking the questions. To that end, our faculty have reoriented the way they conduct research. Faculty members design research projects to include undergraduates. They don't set topics but teach students how to develop and hone them. With their own stake in faculty projects, students become integral members of a team, ready to assume real responsibilities.

In all disciplines, Ursinus students are expected to make oral presentations to their peers and faculty, to own what they have done. Each year, as many as 150 students go beyond that, presenting their work at conferences and seminars.

This philosophy of student-driven achievement also shapes our approach to bricks and mortar. The extension of the science building Ursinus is constructing has no designated faculty laboratories. It is common space, where faculty members and students will work side by side.

Achievement is the best motivator. When students take possession of the process of learning, they don't want to let go. Our labs now have twenty-four-hour access; lights are on late at night because it is not someone else's project to oversee, it's theirs, not someone else's idea but entrepreneurial relation to knowledge becomes the model for lifelong learning. As a member of our faculty remarked, "You don't learn a discipline as a body of information, you do it. Energy flows when you take charge of the discovery and apply it."



REASON FOUR

FACULTY POINT THE WAY TO ADULthood BY SERVING AS COACHES/MENTORS.

Colleges have always touted teaching as their chief virtue, but many are just beginning to make the best use of their teachers. College faculties are arguably better credentialed than they have ever been. Our faculty has more Fulbright Fellows and National Science Foundation grant winners than ever. But with a highly professionalized faculty, it is just as important to reorient them toward the teaching relationship. Ursinus faculty act as mentors and coaches, working with students toward a single goal: the students' intellectual independence. Student achievement is thus a key measure of faculty achievement. An impressive publication record is necessary but not sufficient for a place on the Ursinus faculty. One Ursinus professor remarked: "Our productivity includes not only the papers we publish but also the papers our students present and publish."

In the coach/mentor model, faculty members are resources rather than simply authorities. They set the expectations for the integrity of students' efforts and see the process of independence-building through to conclusion, assisting students in presenting their work at conferences and in publishing their results. In the Psychology Department, faculty members assist students in building a portfolio of work completed in and out of the classroom. This becomes a component of the student's transcript, a substantive calling card in the professional world.

In the coach/mentor relation, students are encouraged to take intellectual risks. Regardless of the outcome of their projects, they gain in motivation and self-reliance.

On the other side of the equation, Ursinus faculty use significant scholarly time developing ways to teach more effectively. They practice what the late Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation, called the "scholarship of teaching." We have not created a special teaching institute as many colleges and universities have. Instead, a seed fund supports innovative ideas from the faculty. Faculty created the first-year Liberal Studies Seminars and established a campuswide reading group to deepen their common intellectual conversation across disciplines. Faculty members in the English Department and their colleagues in Modern Languages invite alumni high school teachers back to campus to help develop more effective classroom approaches, and they are using computers in innovative ways to illuminate how literary works speak to readers.

The coach/mentor model better approximates the way productive people interact in the world, drawing on the experience of others in order to accomplish goals they set. Outstanding faculty choose colleges like Ursinus because they want this kind of relationship with students. Ursinus's responsibility is to allow great thinkers to be great teachers.



REASON FIVE

TAKING CHARGE OF ONE'S OWN LIFE IS THE BEST DEFENSE AGAINST BEING PIGEONHOLED BY LIFE.

John W. Gardner has written, "Life isn't a train ride where you choose your destination, pay your fare, and settle back for a nap. It's a cycle ride over uncertain terrain, with you in the driver's seat, constantly correcting your balance and determining the direction of progress."

We live in a world that makes it difficult to determine one's own direction. Our students have been marketing targets since they were young children. They have been "massaged" by the mass media, as theoretician Marshall McLuhan put it in the 1960s. In recent decades, this massage has become a pummeling. Students are shaped by the media as consumers before they have had a chance to develop souls. In a popular culture dedicated to selling, everything is a commodity, and the image young people absorb of themselves is as narrow, passive consumers — option choosers, not decision makers. They are encouraged to define themselves and others — jock, nerd, intellectual, feminist, etc. Life, too, gets stereotyped. Work is drudgery, a task that serves someone else's purpose; in private life we compensate by indulging appetites. The campus version of the dichotomy is captured in the phrase "work hard, play hard," learning being no fun at all.

What can college do against this pigeonholing and passivity? It is easier to teach how to get what we want than to teach how to discover what we should want. The Ursinus curriculum keeps the doors of intellectual possibility open by demanding that students take courses that

make them think in a variety of different ways. I consider it a mark of success that several of our best student writers began by declaring themselves premed, and several outstanding psychology and chemistry research presentations were done by students who planned to major in the humanities. Only by asking students to use all their capabilities and take responsibility for the direction of their lives can we help them turn from being consumers and followers into creators and leaders. We can't return to a simpler world, where the burden of choice is lightened by institutions, families, myths, or even the authority of college presidents. At Ursinus, students discover themselves by actively making themselves, and this prepares them to make their world.



REASON SIX

STUDENTS ENTER THE WORLD WHEN THEY ENTER
URSINUS.

The most important aspect of the Ursinus campus is one students can't see from a dormitory window — its connections to the world. Many of the best liberal arts colleges were located in rural settings, in part to avoid distractions and make it easier to shape the student experience. But the “distractions” of the world represent the very challenges students will face as adults. The search for knowledge and the careful concentration on texts and meanings must be a springboard, not a cloistered escape. To cite Ernest Boyer again, in 1994 he

called for a New American College, connected to the world and committed to making it better. Precisely because a college like Ursinus is dedicated to supporting student achievement, it can launch students into the world and give them exceptional opportunities to change it.

Ursinus is forty-five minutes from center city Philadelphia, with all its resources, energies, and problems. Our students understand just how close that is because alumni, administration, and faculty are creating opportunities for internships and service placements off campus. Our pre-medical, business, and education majors have long been involved in the Philadelphia area. They are being joined in greater numbers by students interning in communications, the fine arts, government, and research.

Students want and need this connectedness of learning to life. They hunger for the chance to apply knowledge. They also sense, as perhaps no generation before them has, the daily impact of global forces on their lives. That should be exhilarating, not incapacitating. For decades, Ursinus has required foreign language study, but to increase students' sense of themselves in a connected world, we are examining every aspect of the curriculum for international learning opportunities. We are making it financially easier for students on scholarship to study abroad, linking with other institutions to extend our global reach, encouraging faculty to take students into the field, and calling on our alumni to help us create international internships. As bucolic as our campus might seem, it is not an incubator for entering the world. Our students are already in it, learning they can shape its future.



REASON SEVEN

THE COMMUNITY MAKES INDIVIDUALS INTO CITIZENS.

America has always been divided between self-interest and team spirit, between what psychologist Carol Gilligan has called the different moral sensitivities of individual and community. More than 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville warned of the result if the balance shifted too far to one side: fragmentation or conformism. We know which way it has tilted in our time. The single-minded pursuit of individual satisfaction has built little worlds that touch but rarely intersect. Each person is a moral universe, and there is no means for reconciling competing interests, much less harnessing them for a greater good.

Our students are well aware that the society they inhabit is one of shifting careers and dissolving attachments. Many have already seen the world of their parents upset as manufacturing jobs and sometimes whole industries disappeared. Others know the instability of corporate life through downsizing that has disrupted their families. They share a sense that separation of the self from everything beyond the self is not freedom but impoverishment.

In the end, we discover happiness with and through others. Governor John Winthrop's advice to Colonial New Englanders still applies: "We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, having always before our eyes our community as members of the same body." The recognition of a common destiny is the basis of citizenship.

Uniting self-affirmation with commitment to others is an uphill battle in America, but colleges can help make citizens if they take a more active role outside the classroom. At Ursinus, we are examining housing arrangements with an eye to making faculty more prominent in the fabric of residence life, both as resident advisors and as leaders of residence hall programs. Dormitories aren't classrooms, but neither are they worlds unto themselves, where adults should fear to tread. They can be places where organized learning of many different kinds takes place.

Many students would like to see fraternities and sororities become more service oriented, emphasizing genuine opportunities for leadership. Ursinus students already work in tutoring projects; in S.E.R.V. (Student Emergency Volunteer Response group), a group of Ursinus students certified as EMTs who work with the local ambulance corp to perform first aid on campus; and in a score of community activities and agencies, often as part of the academic program. This barely scratches the surface of what our students might do. The Greek system can lead the way by making public service an Ursinus hallmark.

This refocusing on service is part of an overall evolution of our campus culture. Ursinus students have always been involved. Many are superb athletes and dedicated team players. We are asking them to take more responsibility for the quality of campus life and their relations with each other. Among other opportunities, we have planned a regular series of "town meetings," where students from all areas of study can meet to resolve issues of broad concern. Ursinus prides itself on one-on-one interactions, but we must also be a place where





students learn how to talk, reason, and act in a larger arena. Citizenship should not be put off. It can be practiced wherever a community like Ursinus gathers for a common purpose.



REASON EIGHT

URSINUS SETS THE MORAL COMPASS.

All the aspects of Ursinus I have described grow out of values. Colleges have a great advantage in that they do not have to be all things to all people. Rather, they must assert that certain ideas and ways of being are desirable, and that individual values are not mere lifestyle choices: they make a difference to the world. By saying openly at Ursinus that we believe in self-reliance and responsibility, that we demand civility in discourse and integrity in work, we seek to provoke all our students to examine their assumptions about how they ought to live.

Many colleges have traditions of religious affiliation that can energize their discussion of moral ideas. Founded on the principles of the German Reformed Church, a branch of Calvinism, Ursinus has both a religious and a regional heritage to draw on. In our tradition, deepened as it is by a rural strain of Pennsylvania steadfastness, each individual bears responsibility for discovering the capacity for good, and the community is where goodness is proven. In our tradition, what you believe and what you do define your

worth. Ursinus is an ideal place for students to seek a balance between self and others, to come to grips with the principles that allow us to live together and thrive.

Large universities simply cannot do much in the way of including students in the process of defining these values. They can make rules and establish procedures. With our small size, however, we can recapture this great virtue of a residential campus. We can talk to each other and erase the one-dimensional labels that guarantee misunderstanding, irresponsibility, and ethical passivity.

As a community, Ursinus is beginning to discuss the adoption of an honor code. Our students do not need an additional set of rules that unconsciously reinforces the notion that campus standards of conduct are somehow different from those of adult life and therefore count less. Rather, we are seeking a statement that truly reflects our common understanding about what we value as a community of learners and what we expect from each other. Just as the best organizations and companies have quality assurance statements, which all their members helped craft, we together can develop a statement that expresses our aspiration to individual integrity and mutual respect.

There is a quality of ritual about this process, and as our alumni know, rituals at Ursinus are important. They symbolize why colleges such as this one are so important. Rituals mark passages of awareness, where stronger, wiser selves replace the narrower ones we were. They reaffirm that the experience of education is a progress of the whole self in which everything moves together, not just a few of

the parts. It is as much about forming habits of the heart as it is about forging tools of the mind. Finally, rituals also affirm that we are nourished by the past in order to contribute to something that extends into the future. Celebrations of memory, they are also acts of hope.



ABOUT THE SERIES



THIS IS THE FIRST in a series of occasional papers about the challenges confronting students and what Ursinus is doing to help them enter adult life.

For additional copies of this paper contact:

Office of the President

Ursinus College

PO Box 1000

Collegeville, PA 19426-1000

Telephone (610) 409-3587 or fax (610) 489-3642



