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Counting Quality

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Counting Quality

Fifth in a series of occasional papers
from John Strassburger • President

Ursinus College

At the very moment when American liberal arts colleges need to make a persuasive case for the kind of education only they can provide, they are distracting themselves with statistics. In response to ratings and rankings in a growing number of publications and student guidebooks, they are trying to quantify and enumerate "quality" when they could and should be demonstrating it, forcefully and concretely. The very thing they deplore in students — focusing on grades, rankings and test scores while ignoring the content of education — they are doing themselves. And although today's students are accomplishing the most impressive work that undergraduates have ever done, not enough people know it because colleges, abetted by major philanthropic foundations, social science research firms and the media, have found it more immediately advantageous to play the numbers game than to communicate substance.

America needs liberal arts colleges, perhaps more now than it ever has, to produce graduates capable of sustaining civil government, leading our workforce and crafting a moral society. Liberal arts colleges are uniquely able to summon up the best in young people. But surveys and rankings cannot fully explain why this is so or convince anyone that investing in a liberal education produces valuable results. Only examples of what colleges do superbly well — and what their students accomplish — can make the point.

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In this paper, I use examples from Ursinus College to show that educational quality is not a mystery, even though it cannot be reduced to numerical indices. When we invest in liberal arts colleges, we know the kind of results we can expect. And instead of distracting ourselves with quantifying quality, we can and should be discussing how to insure that the conditions for student success are being created on as many campuses as possible.

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John Dewey's Hog

In spite of current prosperity, there is continuing anxiety in America about the future and our children's place in it. Even the most elite institutions feel compelled to play the numbers game to demonstrate their importance to a credential-oriented constituency. And breaking away from this tendency to get a clearer view of educational value is only becoming more difficult.

We at Ursinus know about the distraction of trying to count quality because we, too, have experienced it. Recently, Ursinus and the other members of the Annapolis Group, an organization of some of the country's leading colleges and universities, were invited to participate in a national study of student attitudes toward their educational experiences. The study is funded by a respected foundation and conducted by seasoned researchers. Its goal is to discover from students' subjective responses if the participating institutions are doing a good job. It promises to serve as a benchmarking instrument to establish norms for educational practice. These are laudable objectives,

but when the study was proposed, I suggested the group ought to decline.

My reasons are similar to John Dewey's response to the IQ test. When Dewey was asked what he thought about the test, he likened it to his family's preparations for taking a hog to market. "In order to figure out how much to charge for the animal, my family put the hog on one end of a seesaw and piled up bricks on the other until the two balanced. Then we tried to figure out how much those bricks weighed," said Dewey. The student survey promised to give us lots of data to mull over, but in my mind that data would leave us no wiser about the living, breathing subjects or the benefits of their experience.

In aiming to quantify quality, the study also raised many methodological issues, the most critical of which illustrate how the penchant for numerical rankings is spinning education off its rails. Indeed, the study reveals the mistaken nature of the entire quantifying enterprise and the system of ratings,

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rankings and evaluations it supports. For example, students were asked to rate the frequency of their discussions with faculty outside of class, from "very often" to "never." What can such a question tell us except that different students will have different perceptions? More important, these perceptions will be determined largely by expectations the students have of the institutions they attend, not whether the institutions are doing anything right. If a student at college X expects to see faculty fifty times a week and sees them only forty, she would respond "occasionally." A student at university Y might expect considerably less and answer "very often" to ten meetings a week.

Even more pernicious, the study will end up obscuring real differences in wealth and background among students, ranking colleges where most or all students have jobs off campus against colleges where students can afford not to work, without acknowledging the different resources of students. Although much criticized, the attempts by various states to

compare their own public school systems at least have the virtue of weighting the differing circumstances.

Trying to give numerical grades to subjective experiences in this way blurs distinctions between institutions and, in any case, is wrong-headed. The values education seeks to develop (beyond narrow sets of skills) cannot be quantified, only demonstrated. How do you quantify intellectual integrity, self-reliance and critical thinking? Beyond obvious indices like small class size, how do you quantify the means by which you seek these ends? Rather, all institutions, not just liberal arts colleges, need to communicate what they want education to accomplish for all their students, then create the programs to further those goals and, finally, see if the work of students justifies those means.

There is one other dimension that no one wishes to talk about. Since much quantitative information is meant to comment, usually publicly, on an institution's quality, we are kidding

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ourselves if we deny that students will be encouraged to “make their school look good” by tilting their answers. A look at academic annual reports confirms that colleges and universities strive mightily to make themselves look as good as possible for surveys and rankings. Nor do very many institutions distribute questionnaires from student guides at random. We need to ask what lessons these exercises are teaching students.

When I look not at statistics (that pile of bricks on Dewey’s balance) but at a living, breathing institution, Ursinus, I have a much easier time grasping what we are trying to accomplish and whether it is working. Describing what works when we are talking about something as complicated as the process of transforming high school students into leaders and responsible adults is no job for sound bites, but it is worth spelling out so people can see where their educational investments might make the most sense.

The Texture of Talk

We know that learning is a social act, and thus willy-nilly requires the existence of a learning community. Philosopher Michael Oakshott wrote that the aim of liberal education is to elevate the level of conversation. At first blush, this seems precious. Yet it suggests that education consists of engaging with the ideas of others through a kind of conversation. Our goal, then, ought to be to elevate the plane of that conversation, making our best hopes and ideals integral to our interactions with all others. It is no accident that the foremost philosopher of the Western tradition, Plato, structured his essential writings as dialogues.

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To tap the benefits of a learning community and raise the level of conversation, universities such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton have organized themselves into "minicolleges." Other large universities, including many prestigious ones, have crafted small, exclusive "honors colleges." These efforts frankly admit that in some circumstances — for limited numbers of students — standard economies of scale should not apply. Liberal arts

colleges like Ursinus go farther, saying that every student can benefit from this experience, and our essential mission demands that we shape learning communities as large as our campus.

But what language might conceivably animate a universal conversation? Since the time of the ancient Greeks, in places as different as Sri Lanka and Central Africa, drama, and the arts generally, have been woven into the fabric of self-conscious communities. I was pleased to hear students in a senior honors colloquium in which I participate say that the presence of more than sixty sculptures on our campus continuously provokes not only pleasure but discussion. We have noticed that as we doubled the number of student plays, student involvement with theater has far more than doubled. Because drama has always been a powerful force for raising and engaging the issues that face us, Ursinus is launching a major effort to expand our drama program — to get everyone involved in performing, viewing and talking.

In a similar way, we have attempted to capitalize on the enormous advantage of having an outstanding art museum on our campus. Clearly not every college can hope to be so blessed, but even a great museum can have a limited impact on students' lives if it exists on a campus as a specialized professional enterprise. This last fall, to celebrate the museum's tenth anniversary, students themselves curated a retrospective drawn from the museum's collections, including works by world-class artists such as Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg and Georges Braque. They wrote the catalogue, and, as former National Gallery of Art director J. Carter Brown noted in an address on campus, "they could hardly have developed an organizing principle more likely to promote conversation." Campuses need art in all its forms in all places — in concert halls, coffee houses, theaters and open spaces — to jump-start the conversation and elevate its level. Nothing works better, faster.

Ideas in Common

Yet productive learning communities need more than art and proximity. Converting personal conversation into education requires that talk draw on ideas current in the larger community. Robert Hutchins proposed one solution some seventy years ago at the University of Chicago — an interdisciplinary course for all students, taught by faculty from many departments. His idea was to nurture intellectual conversation beyond the boundaries of individual classrooms. Fierce debates over the content of “core” courses, as well as the rise of faculty specialization have helped sink versions of the Hutchins idea at many institutions. But these centrifugal forces can be overcome. They did not daunt our faculty when we set out to create a Common Intellectual Experience for all students at Ursinus. The faculty members from various departments succeeded in developing the course because they kept in mind the larger goal of crafting the college as a learning community. Above all, they were willing to be models, to practice what they preached by collaborating across disciplines.

Twenty-five faculty from sixteen departments taught the initial course, using texts from both Western and Eastern intellectual traditions. They focused on fundamental issues of existence that are very hard for students simply to walk away from. I recall vividly the excitement of the first class, when students actually applauded a discussion of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Even more exciting was to see them, half an hour after the class ended, gathered on the plaza next to our Olin Auditorium, still talking about the play.

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Not trusting my own enthusiasm, I wondered whether such results would be general and durable. I had a clue during one of the desserts we host for first-year students, when one student remarked that the course was what she had always dreamed college would be. Here survey data have proved revealing, albeit not the kind of numerical data that would yield a "rating" of one to ten. We asked students to fill out a questionnaire that encouraged them to respond in detail to the course. Students are shrewd about their educations, and they

have a sense of what works beyond their own personal likes and dislikes (and the grades they receive). Their responses showed how seriously they take the quality of the conversation. Many students remarked on the purely practical benefits of the CIE: improved writing skills, greater logical rigor and improved ability to manage abstract concepts. But the students really wanted to talk about the impact of the course on their lives. One wrote, "I have become more outgoing and more open to people with different backgrounds." Others wrote about how the ideas in the classroom fueled discussions in dorm rooms. For many, the class created an opportunity to examine — and reaffirm — their religious faith. Perhaps my favorite response was the most sweeping: "The course has forced me to look into the deeper meaning of everything."

Can such a transformation be calibrated? Probably not. But it is possible to find out if it is happening by asking the students themselves.

Morals and Tutorials

We can also track transformation by asking the faculty. Their responses to the CIE, it seems to me, reveal the fundamentally moral nature of education that liberal arts colleges are uniquely organized to provide. This may be the most important — and least quantifiable — contribution of these colleges to American education. It is no accident that most of America's liberal arts colleges were founded with strong religious affiliations. Notions of community, moral and spiritual formation and intellectual training were bound up together. Although today largely secular, colleges like Ursinus retain the potential force of these connections.

One faculty member in particular said that the Common Intellectual Experience produced the best first-year work she had ever seen. Even more important was the level of personal commitment involved. "I would have to say that this course is one of the hardest things I have ever done here. I found much of the material very difficult....[and] am naturally more

comfortable teaching in my own discipline. Yet I think we owe it to our students to carry on the work that this course entails.”

We owe it to our students. At a college like Ursinus, faculty and students enter into a moral contract with each other. Faculty agree to put no other goal above the education of the student and to represent to the student standards of intellectual integrity and commitment. Faculty take students seriously. For their part, students agree to engage the work to the best of their abilities and not waste the precious time they have with their professors. The common term on both sides is respect.

It was the original expectation of many educational institutions that the contract between teacher and student would extend beyond the classroom. Certainly we have come a long way from the nineteenth-century expectation of Cambridge University faculty that they be bachelors, live in college and take their meals in the dining hall. Yet many of the best colleges and

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universities have found a way to sustain the force of these relations by incorporating models of one-on-one teaching similar to the tutorials of Oxford and Cambridge. These models have more potential than any of the alternatives for producing the powerful combination of challenge and support conducive to high achievement.

24 Again, there are many ways colleges and universities can invest in these relationships. When students and faculty designed a new science building at Ursinus, they insisted that if the college's undergraduate science programs were to remain in the forefront, there not only had to be spaces dedicated to undergraduate research and science writing but also serendipity spaces — well-lit nooks and crannies with plenty of comfortable, moveable furniture, the kind designed to enable people to put their feet up. When noted architecture critic Inga Saffron praised the new building recently, it was, indeed, for successfully crafting conversation spaces — places where science can happen as a dialogue.

But the most effective way to foster conversation is to invest in it directly. And we do not need student surveys to tell us which schools do so and which do not. At Ursinus we provide grants to some fifteen percent of our rising seniors to enable them during the summer to work one-on-one with a faculty member on a sustained academic project. This is over and above our requirement that every student carry out an independent project of research, scholarship or artistic creativity before graduation. It may seem too obvious to need mentioning, but no meaningful comparisons of the frequency of independent work can be made between schools unless financial aid is taken into account. Students who have to work to pay for college often cannot afford to take advantage of opportunities that would extend their learning beyond the classroom.

Students themselves provide the most powerful testimony to the value of such mentored projects. Their relationship to knowledge changes. They begin to value it for its own sake,

and the task becomes a source of pride. Their regular classes take on heightened meaning, and they gain a richer appreciation of themselves as individuals. One student described the experience in physical terms. "I grew limbs," he said. The work itself is ample evidence. If there is a "golden age" for student achievement, it is not decades past, when students supposedly cared more about reading and were better prepared by their secondary schools to write. I have looked into student work from earlier periods, and much of it would not pass muster in today's Ursinus classrooms.

Again, the evidence of achievement may not be conveniently numerical, but it is there in black and white. One needs only to pick up a copy of the proceedings from our Centennial Conference* Undergraduate Research Colloquia to find under-

*Ursinus College, Johns Hopkins, Swarthmore, Franklin & Marshall, Haverford, Dickinson, Bryn Mawr, Gettysburg, Muhlenberg, Washington and Western Maryland.

graduate investigations of every kind conducted with passion, resourcefulness and impressive sophistication. And this is not exceptional work, not merely the “best of the best” that every institution can advertise in small quantity. It is a broad index of the overall quality of the conversation on the Ursinus campus and among other members of our conference.

Even more important, however, our students repeatedly invoke words like integrity to describe the lessons they learn from sustained study with a faculty member. Integrity consists not only of being honest but of reconciling what one does with what one is. Our dean of faculty, Judith Levy, who is a biochemist, likes to say that the laboratory notebook is the symbol of this integrity. The scrupulous noting of results embodies discipline, honesty and commitment to a shared enterprise — discovery. It is a moral act. Starting early in her tenure as a young faculty member at Wellesley, Dean Levy began leaving her notebook on her lab bench, so students could consult it and see what she

was doing. She expects her students to stand behind their work with equal forthrightness.

Teaching undergraduates integrity is surely of critical importance for the future of democracy. Integrity counts. But as the above example indicates, it is something taught best when taught indirectly, through the crafting of experiences with integrity as their *sine qua non*. And it is often the case that students do not identify it as the substance of education until years, even decades, later. The duration — the unfolding nature — of education is something that must be kept in mind whenever an attempt is made to measure education's effectiveness.

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**Democracy, Diversity
and the Laptop**

I have said that the nature of education at a liberal arts college is social and moral, and that it depends on the formation of a special kind of community. We need to add that this community is diverse and democratic. I would go farther: The quality of the education will be directly proportional to these attributes. The work of University of Maryland's Jeffrey Milem and others underscores that learning amidst diversity enhances achievement. Education depends inherently on diversity because it occurs through encounters with difference, otherness, the unknown — different people, unknown ideas, other points of view. Students in the Ursinus Common Intellectual Experience have expressed repeatedly a sense of wonder at encountering ideas they had never experienced and viewpoints they had never imagined. Education in such a setting has the power to transform individuals. And the need for these encounters has only increased.

Between Proposition 209 and debates about affirmative action, it is easy to lose sight of the fundamental reality that

educated adults in the twenty-first century are dealing more and more with people unlike themselves. Therefore it is essential that students learn about cultures other than their own, and learn from students different from themselves. In the past, statistical studies were very useful in alerting higher education to the need to become more inclusive. Surveys have also clearly indicated that academically outstanding high school students want a diverse environment. It is one of the key reasons they look forward to going to college. But we already knew that, at least at Ursinus, by talking to students year in and year out.

Numbers can tell us only to a limited degree whether we are making progress. It is important to look beyond the percentages of minority students colleges and universities are attracting to how they are actually committing their resources to make diversity continue to happen. At Ursinus, our admissions department has spent time strengthening relations with Philadelphia high schools with largely minority populations. We have added African-American faculty, built an effective

precollege academic orientation program and dramatically improved our graduation rate for African-American and Hispanic students. These are facts that can be quantified.

Qualitatively, there is no question that the dialogue among our students has become richer as a result of these efforts. Indeed, Ursinus has received considerable attention in the Philadelphia area for its commitment to forthright engagement of racial and minority issues. But this is only one piece of the diversity puzzle. Study of nonwestern cultures, languages and histories is a standard feature of our curriculum. Beyond the classroom, we have made international study an option that carries no hidden penalties by guaranteeing students that their financial aid will travel with them. As a result, more than twenty percent of our students engage in some form of overseas learning, and the percentage is rising.

Just as with our summer research fellowships, the commitment to fund overseas study represents our belief that to be trans-

formative for all its students, education must be democratic. It must proceed from a level playing field. Democracy is essential to the learning community we seek to create.

At small, private institutions, ensuring that every student has the same opportunity to participate in the intellectual conversation is expensive because it radiates throughout our decisions in ways large public universities rarely have to confront. To take an example, this year Ursinus is beginning a program of distributing laptop computers to all incoming students. We have also made a commitment to upgrading the machines at least once during the students' four years. We know, based on our own campus experience, that the computer enhances intellectual conversation outside the classroom and strengthens the community. Students, for example, have been instrumental in helping to design innovative computerized language learning programs that have won major foundation support. Given the potential of a networked campus to transform learning, it is

unacceptable that anyone be barred from the conversation because of an inability to afford the technology.

I doubt that any survey, even one seeking explicitly to determine whether colleges produce good citizens, could identify these policies as contributing effectively to a civic education. Students almost certainly would not put it that way. But if you asked them if such policies showed respect for their individual situations, fostered independent achievement, enhanced their sense of engagement and responsibility and encouraged them toward self-motivation, the answer would be yes. And if you asked them if these qualities were important to leading a nation, they would probably also answer yes.

**The Rear-View
Mirror and the
Road Ahead**

We know an enormous amount about what works in education. We know students like learning in small classes from faculty who recognize them as more than numbers. We know technology is essential, diversity is desirable and opportunities to develop intellectually outside the classroom are invaluable. We also know that liberal arts colleges produce disproportionate numbers of leaders in business and science. No wonder many of the key elements of liberal arts education are being adapted to other institutions — but only for limited numbers of students. What I have tried to outline above are aspects of educational quality that carry benefits surveys cannot describe.

Studies like the one proposed to the Annapolis Group may make many of us feel good by telling us what we already know — small liberal arts colleges do a better job than others at the things they do best. But we need to take our eyes off the rear-view mirror represented by these studies and look at the road ahead. We need new responses to changing conditions, better

ways of enabling our students to learn independently, new ideas about how to unite the general and the practical in education and more effective ways to make educational values flow into daily life and into our communities.

These things cannot be accomplished by worrying about what grades we get, measuring each tick up or down in the ratings and scrambling to boost this or that low point. They can be done only by doing — by trying and seeing how students respond in their work and their lives.

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Colleges and foundations can, and must, aim higher than conducting or funding surveys. We simply must devote all our resources to producing responsible adults. We have so much of value to accomplish that engaging in and promoting ranking surveys is simply wrong-headed. As the Czech leader and playwright Václav Havel said in his 1995 commencement address at Harvard:

Regardless of where I begin my thinking about the problems facing our civilization, I always return to the theme of human responsibility...The main task for the coming era [must] be a radical renewal of our sense of responsibility. Our conscience must catch up to our reason; otherwise we are lost.

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