

Statement of Undergraduate Careers Support in the Liberal Arts

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I value a strong liberal arts education and believe that education is more than just preparing one for a specific job. Education must have a lasting value (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2002). Today's college students need an education that will help them succeed in their work, in democracy, and in a globally diverse world. Looking back on my undergraduate experience at The Ohio State University, I wish I had a better understanding, at that time, of the value of the courses I was taking in the humanities, the arts, and the social and natural sciences. As an academic advisor, I now speak with conviction about the important outcomes of a balanced curriculum in the liberal arts. I strive to help students understand the purpose and value of a liberal arts background and want them to recognize the connections across their coursework and how their experiences will translate to their personal and professional lives beyond college. It is my desire that students realize that choosing a college major does not mean that one is tied to a specific career for the remainder of one's life. The possibilities, in fact, are endless.

It is not uncommon for students pursuing a liberal arts degree to be asked, "What are you going to do with that degree when you graduate?" ("But what do they do," n.d.). While an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts is not comprised of training for a specific occupation, it can prepare students for entry-level positions in almost any career. Entry into most professions requires additional on-the-job training. A liberal arts education provides a solid foundation for students to acquire this additional knowledge and skills. In today's workplace, employees are often expected to know something about a wide range of things and liberal arts students are certainly prepared to meet this expectation.

Students with a strong liberal arts background learn to communicate effectively both orally and in writing, think critically and analytically, adapt to change, and solve problems (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2002). These are transferrable skills needed in every aspect of life. Liberal arts students also become skilled at determining the validity of information, knowing how to form and defend arguments, and making decisions (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2002). In addition, as a result of their collegiate experiences, they become active, responsible, informed, and engaged citizens and gain an appreciation for the importance of understanding others and their differences and respecting others thoughts, ideas, and values (Bowen, 1977).

Students at a liberal arts college have a more integrated view of knowledge and are able to relate the content of their courses to one another and to broader life concerns (Boyer, 1987). They learn to appreciate that learning happens both in the classroom and through participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular experiences such as internships, study abroad opportunities, student organizations, campus activities, community service projects, and research projects (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Students begin to understand that learning takes place by talking about it, writing about it, relating it to experiences, and applying it to current issues and their own lives. In addition, students “learn how to learn” throughout their studies in the liberal arts, which is a critical skill for any career (“But what do they do,” n.d.).

Students establish membership in the campus community by integrating and engaging academically and socially (Tinto, 1993). A student’s learning experience is improved by becoming involved with academics, peers, faculty, and staff. As career

advisors, we can play a vital role in promoting student engagement both academically and socially. We can positively influence how students perceive and come to understand career exploration, choosing a major, gaining hands-on experience, networking, conducting a job search, etc. We also have the ability to encourage students to look for ways to connect socially on campus through clubs and organizations and academically through both in- and out-of-class learning experiences. Research indicates that the in- and out-of-class experiences of students are interconnected and positively shape student development and change in ways that we do not yet fully understand (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

When students become actively involved in the campus community, they feel a sense of belonging and mattering and are more invested in their overall college experience. A sense of belonging is the positive feeling one has when one feels as though they are part of something (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Schlossberg, 1989). It also includes an understanding of what is expected. When students make the transition to college, they may initially feel like an outsider. Programs and services, such as those provided by a career services office, can help students feel a sense of belonging and mattering and can make a positive impact on student success and whether or not students decide to persist.

Related to belonging is one's need to feel that one matters (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering includes an individual's desire to be noticed and acknowledged when in the presence of others and missed when gone, and knowing that others are personally interested in us and are depending on us. Mattering

refers to one's belief, right or wrong, that they matter to someone else and that someone else appreciates them.

As career advisors, we have the ability to establish meaningful and collaborative working relationships with students that promote both mattering and a sense of belonging. Even with our differences, we find connection through the need to matter and the need to belong. Creating environments that show all students that they matter will create greater student involvement (Astin, 1993). Career advisors have the opportunity to serve as educators in making higher education a more multiculturally sensitive and inclusive environment for everyone (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). We can set the example by building and maintaining relationships across difference and advocating for all students, including those from underrepresented and marginalized groups.

All students undergo numerous transitions as part of their college experiences (Schlossberg, 1989). Students experience transitions when they enter college, as they move through college, and when they prepare to graduate from college and pursue a career or graduate school. I believe that the career services office can assist students in all of these phases of transition, however, in doing so; it is important that we treat every student as a unique individual. It is also critical that we collaborate with career services professionals from peer institutions to discuss best practices and high-impact programming and services for the students we serve. Assessing our work to determine its impact and value is essential and helps to hold us accountable to our key stakeholders (i.e. students, faculty, staff, administration, parents, etc.), too.

As students begin their undergraduate experience at a liberal arts college, they should be encouraged to work with the career services office to enhance their self-awareness. A career advisor can help students identify and/or clarify their interests, skills, abilities, values, strengths, personality traits, and vocational goals. Students may, for example, gain insight by completing self-assessments and discussing the results with a career advisor. As students narrow in on their interests throughout their college experiences, career advisors can encourage students to further explore educational and/or career paths they may follow. This exploration process could include such activities as talking with faculty, researching employers, conducting informational interviews, and job shadowing individuals in different career areas. In addition, we can urge students throughout their time in college to gain knowledge and experience by pursuing hands-on opportunities such as internships, community service projects, engaging in applied research projects, etc.

As students move through their college experience, the career services office can also assist students in developing resumes and cover letters, conducting a successful job search, building a professional network, preparing for job and graduate school interviews, and connecting with alumni from the institution. In addition, the career services office can provide students direction on how to reflect upon and synthesize the personal value and relevance of an education in the liberal arts. It has been my experience that employers are looking for students who value lifelong learning and can articulate their collegiate experiences (coursework, co-curricular activities, and extracurricular activities) in a way that gives meaning to their key transferable skills and values. We can assist students in integrating the various parts of their education in an

effort to demonstrate their learning and we can encourage them to relate the content of their courses to one another and to broader life concerns and their vocations.

(Boyer, 1987).

As we advocate for students in their learning, growth and career development it is important to strike the appropriate balance between challenge and support (Pope et al., 2004). When we offer students too much support as an advisor, they may simply stop trying or even take advantage of the situation by not engaging at the level at which they are capable. If we challenge students beyond their capabilities, we may overwhelm them. When trying to balance the amount of challenge and support in our work with students, we must strive to get students to the point where they feel challenged to do their best, but feel supported to make mistakes (Pope et al., 2004). In addition, we must aspire to set high expectations for students in the advising relationship. When we expect more of students, they tend to rise to the high expectations (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

I believe in dreaming, following one's passion, and doing work one loves. As career advisors, we have the opportunity to inspire students every day to imagine, dream, discover, explore, and pursue in an effort to find the best career fit and make the world a better place.

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