

GENERAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE:
A FORUM DISCUSSION

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Vaun Waddell, Moderator*

On October 18, 2000, the meeting of the General Education Committee was taped as a forum discussion. Members reviewed a list of questions in advance, but the conversation was allowed to develop spontaneously. The full transcript is about double the length of this edited version.

WHAT IS GENERAL EDUCATION?

Vaun: I want to call your attention to the difference between you and the rest of us on campus. What you have chewed on and slept over has become old hat to you. But your oldest hat is probably the one we'll find the most stimulating. We don't do what you do; we don't know what you know. At the risk of boring each other by repetition, please just give your thoughts on the issues you know best. Shall we start with *liberal arts education*?

Scott: Probably a bad term. Unfortunately, I think many Mormons are reluctant about both the words—*liberal* and *art*.

Vaun: With the terms or with the concept?

Scott: With the terms. I think we are ok with what it means. We inherited the term from an educational tradition, and I don't feel many are comfortable with the term *liberal arts education*.

Vaun: I am trying to get at the distinction between us and a community college—which we are not.

Brian: I'm comfortable with the term *liberal arts education*.

Scott: Well, you are a classic example of it. You understand the deep meaning of the words.

Phil: What would be the difference between *general education* and *liberal education*?

Brian: *General education* seems to be a development of the German tradition, where they distinguished between the education for professions and the education they should get to be well rounded.

That has been the model for American universities for a long time. Much of the market pressure is toward specialization, at least until now. I think that is changing. Whereas a *liberal arts education* has historical roots in medieval universities and the trivium-quadrivium* liberal arts, and all the way back to Plato where the idea was that the slaves need the specialized education; it is rather for free people—the liberated people—to receive an education that gives them the gift of fuller, richer lives. We have liberal arts schools where the ideal is the well rounded person.

Vaun: How does that drive general education requirements at our college or any college? Or does it?

Scott: We are serving two masters. I don't think we don't know that we are not a community college.

Vaun: Let's see...that was three negatives.

Phil: Well, what is the mission of a community college?

Scott: Upgrading...upgrading skills.

Vaun: Average age of students: 29.

Scott: You've been a construction worker and your back hurts and you want to learn how to be better at doing estimates or some such thing. You want to do whatever it takes to get a better job.

Vaun: So why must our construction management majors take FA-100? Isn't this a result of the liberal arts tradition?

Brian: I should think so, yes.

Scott: But we don't have a clear conception of ourselves as an institution that qualifies people to go out and get jobs, and much of what we will do is that. On the other hand, I am very uncomfortable with making this a trade tech because I believe in the liberal arts education. Mormons tend to be uncomfortable with the term "liberal." And in an age of science we are uncomfortable with the word "art."

* *Editor's Note*—The medieval undergraduate curriculum, the "liberal arts" that set free scholars' minds and lives, consisted of grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the trivium, or lower division subjects), followed by geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music (the quadrivium, or upper division subjects).

Brian: But students in a vocational training institution in ages past have never had to take general education or liberal arts education. It wasn't considered part of their role in society.

Vaun: It worked from apprenticeship towards...

Brian: ...that is right. We have tried to meld the aristocratic education and the common vocational training.

Jack: I have a list of the ten fastest growing occupations. Here they are: Computer Engineer, Computer Support Specialist, Systems Analyst, Database Administrator, Desktop Publishing Specialist, Paralegal and Legal Assistant, Personal Care and Home Health Aide, Medical Assistant, Human Service Assistant, and Physician Assistant. I would guess that six years ago most of them did not even exist.

And here's a report on people who graduated with a degree in physics. They have been working awhile, and they list what they do. Well, problem solving is the first thing they list. But interpersonal skills they do a lot, and that is strange because people in physics are not known for interpersonal skills. Technical writing they do a lot of, and management skills, advanced computer skills, space equipment, procuring, and business principles.

Here is my point: with a rapidly evolving workplace the only education that makes any sense is a general education. You can't guarantee that anything you learn in college will even be important in five or ten years. But if you learn general principles, then those are the ones that will probably continue to exist as time goes on.

BECOMING BYU-IDAHO

Scott: Don't you have the sense that the 120-hour baccalaureate degree at BYU-Idaho is trying to be sensitive to that notion? Industry is saying, "Give us people who know how to think, who know how to read, who know how to write, who can get along with other people, and we will give them our in-house training." I think the administration and the brethren are sensitive to what you just articulated.

Jack: Yes, I think so.

Larry: We do have a problem, though, because all of us come from our own backgrounds, our own situations, and where we were educated. Sometimes those things carry a bigger influence than the wish to do what will be a greater blessing to our people. We haven't really got the great models of general education that do what Jack has suggested. We have some portions of them, but all who have graduated from Ricks College have not all those skills. Nor have they been available at other institutions that I am aware of. I think we are saying that we would like something unique.

Brian: When many of us were going to college, the model of corporate structure was a few people at the top who were doing the thinking and the communicating and everyone else is a cog in the machine and so we train those cogs to fit.

Scott: Except the democratic model runs counter to that.

Brian: Obviously it does. But that has been changing radically in the last 30 or 40 years, has it not? speaking of Demming's model for corporate structure.

Phil: I think there are organizations that are more cooperative than ever before, and corporate restructuring has happened in the last few years. You have that pyramid-like structure squeezing out the middle, making a broader and flatter organization. What they are finding is that you can make it flatter but the functions are still all there, and so it does put demands on the employees. You have to do more than ever before.

Brian: And that is why I was wondering if general education in universities has been slow to adapt. Only in the past 20 years have we been seeing changes in general education that reflect what the students will be doing afterwards. Our own general education is modeled after general education in the American system 50 years ago.

Scott: We tend to want to fashion as we have been fashioned, as Larry said a few minutes ago. But most of us come from universities where the name of the game was research and publication. So you want as much as possible to spend your time specializing. You want to talk to your students, graduate students or upper division students, about the things you are interested in. So there has been, at most of the universities we attended, a heavy emphasis on specialization, just because that was the thing most of our professors were committed to.

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Well, that is not the game we want to play anymore: I want all my students to know about blah-blah-blah because that is what I learned. I think the ship of curious workmanship is questioning the whole tradition of where we have been as graduate students. Obviously, because we are here rather than at a university, we have adjusted to the notion of a non-specializing university.

Brian: So I take it our answer to Vaun's question is that the student in the vocational program should take FA-100 because it is going to make him more capable of changing in the workplace, being able to read, write, and understand.

Scott: Even if you don't get idealistic about this, everybody should know how to think because the glory of God is intelligence. Even if you want to look at it from the workplace model, the reasons for contemporary general education sound really compelling.

Vaun: Maybe we can particularize by bringing it to Ricks College. We've talked about universities and university systems. At this historical juncture, the general education committee and others are trying to rethink roles and commissions. So you will be dealing with the issue of general education as we train people who go right to the workplace or graduate programs, not transfer students. We will run into competing interests, for example between general and major courses.

Phil: When we started, our function was to review courses to see if they fit the template. I think maybe we are now at the point where we should say what our ideal is, or the ideal combination. We want to teach these skills in the context of liberal education or general education.

Vaun: There has been tension, and now we go from 128 to 120 credits. That will add tension. Can there be courses that actually do two things. Do they exist? Can they exist?

Scott: Students don't say to each other, "How are your general education courses?" They say, "What is your major?" And when they talk about general education, it's, "How many more generals do you have to get out of the way?" Where do students get this? Well, they probably get it from society generally, they probably get it from their parents, and from some faculty members because we want to teach our specialties. Let's face it, we like people who like what we like.

Larry: But I think you brought up an interesting point earlier that I hadn't thought of before in the same light. At the places where we graduated, the instructors we got close to had special research interests, so they drove us to become interested in those kinds of things. Research was more important than teaching. Now we've come to a new moment of time where we're not having to satisfy the institutions we graduated from. We don't have to satisfy those who promoted research. We have an opportunity to come from a whole different vantage point: teaching, where that is the primary focus and concern. And our templates in the past were written to satisfy the mentality of those institutions where we graduated.

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Vaun: Because of transfer?

Larry: Because of transfer. And now all of a sudden the whole lid has been lifted, and we could really be wonderful for our students on a general education level. But if we do, we have to throw away this old mentality, and we don't have to satisfy anybody's program outside of ours. General education could be really fun if all of us could realize what it could mean.

Jack: I agree. There is something significant about the fact that there will be 16 majors. We'll have physics majors who also take business courses. Or they will take business and pre-med. These people are going to go to different departments. There will be a psychologist who knows computers, or there will be a physicist that wants to be a patent attorney. It is shooting down all the barriers we've had before and saying, "Well, would you like to design a major? You could have a minor in this, and a minor in this, and a minor in this." Now all these things Larry has talked about, all this structure, is just being wiped out. "What would you like to do? What would you like to study?"

Brian: When I came into the committee, I was excited because we had a new horizon here, the possibility for a clean slate. But the template was pretty much what we already had. I was a little bit disappointed. Everything had to be presented to the brethren and the accreditation committee.

Scott: Well, it is the same paradox: the relationship between general education and major education or between visionary thinking and practicality. The practicality is that you have to get this thing

approved and you have to get it accredited. We, in a kind of bureaucratic necessity, are torn between the visionary and the practical. So somehow the vision has to be reconciled to the practice. The practice has to be expanded by the vision. And this is the tension at the center.

Larry: In college I delighted in general education classes I could find a quick use for. I'm probably not the visionary general education person; I'm very practical minded. So I would want things where I could say, "Oh my, look how I could use that." I chose to do that which I could do quickest and easiest, and most automatically fit in as much as I could from classes which would actually have two applications. Economics, for one, did a couple of things. I had a different purpose as a student than I would have now.

Jack: President Bednar is very anxious to open things up. I think we will be approaching a more ideal situation in time, but the necessity of having to have things up and running by next fall requires some things. You can't reinvent everything.

Scott: What I am hoping is that we can educate ourselves and each other to continue the vision. If all the vision has to come up front and things get set in concrete for next fall, for accreditation, then we are just back to where we have always been.

Brian: We'll be a little BYU-Idaho or a big Ricks College.

Scott: And what I'm hoping is that we can continue the dialogue and think and change. We can recast the concrete as we go along. What can we do to get our programs to be four year programs? We've given considerable thought to the capstone course.

THE CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

Vaun: Let's talk about the capstone course.

Brian: We need to change our view of education. We've traditionally, in the American schools, considered general education to be the annex to the real education, to vocational professional education. Students have to go over to the annex occasionally to serve tradition. But general education is foundational. So we could rename it the Foundations of Education. And everything they do after general education is building upon that, building upon what they

have learned in general education. The capstone course is a fulfillment of all that in the end.

Vaun: It is a return to general after specializing in a major?

Brian: I suppose it is, isn't it? An integration of what you've learned in your major and what you've learned in your general education.

Phil: Well, it is the culmination of your four-year degree. It does integrate both the skill and the content of a broad general education using the things you picked up in the major courses. I think we are pretty excited about giving opportunities to students to use everything they've learned, especially the broad based education, the skills that Jack mentioned, problem solving, writing skills, teamwork skills, bringing all these to bear on a particular problem and working as a team.

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Brian: Capstone courses were originally conceived as major projects or senior projects. It would pull together all they have learned in their major and perhaps do that in teams with other people in related majors, for example, business and accounting. So the teams would no longer be within a division or within a department. Teams would integrate students from all across the campus into teams of, let's say, five students who choose a project. They can work on that project over a semester together, have some product at the end to demonstrate their work—solve the problem, or at least advance the process to hand on to another team the next semester. And these are service type projects, not criticism projects, that will require students to integrate skills.

Scott: The metaphor—capstone course—suggests the relationship to previous education, but we also see it as a bridging course to the world of work where people with different areas of expertise are given a problem and called upon to work together, and maybe even the primary skill would not be their knowledge in physics but would be something in management or a mode of thought. So someone who is used to thinking using the scientific method and someone who had expertise in mathematical problem solving might be put together with a humanist or someone from business. We hope it would be the culmination of the university experience, a bridge into the world, not only the world of work but also the world of the citizen.

Vaun: For years I've fantasized about a course that would involve cross-disciplinary teaching, involve working in groups with both product and process in mind, maybe involve oral examinations, which would be more demonstrations than examinations, before peers and professors. Was I hoping for a capstone course?

Scott: And we are hoping for it too. We are excited because we see it as more real, more coordinated with the real world and the application of skills in ways that people in the past have had to wait for until they got on the job. I'm describing my own experience: how has the university education I received prepared me for what I am doing now? I didn't think that it did at all. Until, of course, I realized...

Vaun: ...that you had a good liberal arts, oops, excuse me, general education. No, excuse me, foundation education.

THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

Scott: Let's take two minutes and answer, What is your wish list? Let's just go around.

Jack: I think these specialty courses are going to achieve some of our goals automatically because you'll have people in business taking a physics course, people in art taking business, people from all disciplines. They are going to raise questions because they are not going to be from the same homogenous group. I also think this capstone experience could bless the world, could look at problems of church members throughout the world, could achieve some of the vision President Hinckley had.

Phil: Well, after that statement I don't know how I can add. I have really been converted to this. To me relevancy has always been application in the world. We should make general education and liberal education applicable. It is a time when we can fashion the ideal person, not only in terms of education, but combining character development and religious training. We have a great opportunity here to integrate it all.

Vaun: I've always wondered, what is a church-school?

Larry: Students can come away having great insight into what the world does need or what the church does need. I think that's something that almost takes a world of experience to learn, and

yet we could do it with general education and capstone classes like it has never been done before. I think broadening the insight and understanding of our students is one of the great blessings that can come from this.

Brian: Sometimes I have the tendency to exaggerate the ability of a university to affect students. Much of the formation of character is done before they get here. The university may not have that much influence. Yet, for most of our students we can have a tremendous impact on the direction of their lives, turning the soul a bit in one direction or another.

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But an ideal education would have to be Socrates on one end of the log and I on the other end of the log and a book between us. Everything that digresses from that is a compromise. We have to compromise an awful lot in modern education. So in terms of BYU-Idaho, if I could have a wish list, I'd like a complete re-visioning of *general education* as *foundational education*, so that we no longer consider it a facade but it becomes the core of everything we do. Then have major courses that are not merely teaching this set of skills or giving this set of information but really integrating material so that students rethink physics, how it might impact other fields, one writing about it, one reading about it, so that they begin to see the reason and the questions that have driven their discipline, all those questions deriving from the general education, for example, "So why in the world do we use quadratic equations?" Then culminate all that in a capstone course. It takes them out of themselves and out of their specialization to look outward towards the world.

Vaun: The student would not just do physics problems, but define the platonic "Physics."

Brian: At least be able to see why the physics questions came up in the first place. Don't just memorize the second law of thermodynamics, but explain where it came from.

Vaun: I memorized it once, but my mind is entropic and I've forgotten it.

Scott: My dream is that we would help our students, because of our own example, to fall in love so deeply with the process of education that it would be like breathing, as we do every day of our lives. We would be excited about the combination of our academic, spiritual, and social worlds: all one thing. And

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someday an important part of what we are doing here would be either virtually or literally going to all corners of the earth to help solve the social, the spiritual, the educational problems. And I believe we have an opportunity at this time and this place to work out the vision of our prophet, a vision so momentous and far reaching. I don't think this is just pie in the sky. I think it will take awhile to get there, but I hope we can make it as big as the prophet has invited us to see it.

Vaun: I am an old idealist, but I wonder if it is possible to teach falling in love or if institutionalization kills that part.

Scott: Institutionalization tends to, but people who are in love can, by their example, teach. I don't think the institution will teach falling in love, but I think about my own education. I saw people who loved learning. It was my exposure to them that convinced me that I wanted to be like this or that person—who happened to be an educated person. ☺