

A Second Adolescence: Two Big Questions and Where They Belong

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Abstract

Evidence points to the importance undergraduate students attach to two "big questions"—"What should I do with my life?" and "What does 'higher' education have to do with my life?" Recent changes in American higher education, while individually desirable, have had the unintended cumulative effect of making it more difficult to deal with such questions. These and similar questions are not subjective issues appropriate only for "bull sessions" but require very high order cognitive capacities—post-formal reasoning or reflective judgment. The article ends with five specific suggestions about how such questions can best be addressed in colleges and universities. This paper is based on a presentation given at the 2008 Institute on College Student Values in Tallahassee, Florida.

A funny thing happened to me not long after I accepted the invitation to speak to you today. A birthday made me start thinking more seriously about whether this time I could finally get a passing grade in Retirement 101, and, on that chance, what I wanted to accomplish before that big red letter day—and what I wanted to do after it. I realized those questions were linked to higher education in one way or another, but I also realized that I was not very good at thinking about them. It is hard work! Then I thought, you know, you are in the same boat as many college students. You are wondering what to do with the rest of your life, what would be satisfying and meaningful, and you are clueless, embarrassingly, totally clueless. Better not tell anyone. Just go down to Florida, and check it out. It is retirement paradise. Buy an RV; take up shuffleboard, anything is better than thinking about that terrible, big question: "What do I do with the rest of my life?"

The only consolation in all this was that I felt much closer to the situation of young people in college today. I had entered, not I hope, second childhood, but second late adolescence. I was struggling with a question that I know often bothers college students. And often it is linked to another question: "What does this 'higher' education have to do with *my* life?"

Those are the two questions I would like to explore with you today. But how does an ancient historian—an increasingly ancient historian—who has just admitted that he is totally clueless about his own life, say anything useful? Eventually it dawned on me that a historical perspective might be helpful, provided I did not get carried away by nostalgia and sentimentality (two of my favorite pass times—along with narratives of decline)

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about how good things were in the golden age of our youth and how sad things are now. Humanists love narratives of decline. Some people even get royalty checks for them. Think of the titles of books on higher education from Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* to Anthony Kroman's recent *Education's End*, not to mention the PBS series *Declining by Degrees*.

In fact, however, if you look at American higher education over the past half century or so, you find an ambitious, I want to say "noble," but still unfinished agenda—to make the best possible education accessible to every American who aspires to it, and to make welcome individuals and groups that had been excluded, segregated, tolerated only up to some quota, or closeted.

You all know this story, so I will not try to retell it. Instead let me simply point to some unintended consequences of some of the changes, *good* changes that have happened in recent decades. They will shed some light, I think, on those two Big Questions we adolescents ask: "What do I do with my life?" and "What does all this education stuff have to do with *that*?" That will be Part One of this talk.

Then I want to go on to suggest that these unintended consequences have cumulatively caused a vacuum at the heart of higher education, with some very serious results. That will be Part Two; Part Three will suggest some ways of dealing with that vacuum, and thereby making a big difference in the education, and the lives, of our students.

I. Unintended Consequences

So, first, I will talk about unintended consequences of good changes made over the past five or six decades. Here is an example of what I mean. Some of the best work on improving student learning has focused on the transition from being a novice in some field to thinking like an expert in it. (A few years ago the National Research Council produced a series of publications with the general title *How People Learn*. These placed great emphasis on "thinking like an expert.")

The Culture of Expertise: I understand the concept of "thinking like an expert" from my abortive experience with chemistry. I tried to memorize the formulas, not to understand why they might be true, and thought the laboratory sessions were like following a recipe in a cookbook. I never got to the stage—my fault, not yours Professor Yourtie!—of seeing how basic principles were at work. If I could have done that, I would still not have been an expert, but I would have started on the road towards thinking like one. Today I believe many more students are on their way to thinking like experts in all sorts of fields.

The goal of encouraging students to "think like experts" usually entails active forms of learning and results in higher levels of student engagement. But an all encompassing "culture of expertise," brings with it some unintended consequences. It does not work well, for example, when one moves from mastering specific bodies of knowledge to reflecting on the wider implications of that knowledge. The big questions which we have under consideration are not ones for which some expert has the one right answer. Nor is a culture of expertise fully compatible with democratic decision making.

"General" Education: A similar shift has taken place in the old "general education," the survey courses aimed at "exposing" students in their first year or two of

college to broad swaths of content, usually drawn from Western civilization. You know what I mean, the “Plato to NATO” courses, often a mile wide and an inch deep. These courses have, by and large, either disappeared, or have been marginalized. They have often been replaced by smaller, more focused courses, freshman seminars sometimes, focused on a specialty about which the professor is an expert. In my view, this change makes a lot of sense. But once again, there is an unintended consequence. As the old courses in Western civilization and Great Books were pushed aside, so were many texts from many cultures—ones that speak powerfully and directly to the Big Question “What should I do with my life?” and hence to that other Big Question “What is this education for?”

In Loco Parentis: The old idea that colleges stood *in loco parentis* to their students and hence had the responsibility of monitoring the social life of their students has all but totally disappeared. They are adults, we tell ourselves, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. So much for parietal hours and the like; goodbye, and in my view, good riddance. But as *in loco parentis* goes out the door, in through the window come countless programs and interventions designed to help young people with the pressures and problems they face, and with them student life professionals, often of exemplary skill and compassion. I wonder, though, whether this transition increases the distance between faculty and students and leaves the college teacher no longer feeling quite the same responsibility to encourage and nurture personal growth.

Sectarianism: Another change that also entails unintended consequences, I believe, is the welcome decline of sectarianism as a defining feature of institutional identity. Even those institutions that were founded by religious groups or retain a denominational affiliation have for the most part become non-sectarian. Goodbye to abominations such as compulsory chapel or doctrinal orthodoxy as a condition for faculty appointments. Goodbye, so long, farewell forever!

But again there has been an unintended consequence. “Non-sectarian” has come to mean “secular,” and come to mean that at exactly at the time when the “secularism hypothesis” has proved untenable. By “secularism hypothesis” I mean the idea that religion is a mere survival from the remote past, something that will fade away as modernism and affluence increase. Do not hold your breath. In an age of intensifying religion, at home and abroad, non-sectarianism may be fine, but secularism provides a very inadequate basis for finding our way in the world in which we live. By secularism I mean the systematic marginalization of religious thought, language, insights and practices from the intellectual and educational functions of a college or university.

One of our Teagle Big Questions Working groups is asking the hard question whether what they call “secularity” can provide an adequate basis for a genuine liberal education. They are not saying the answer to that is a simple “No” but are trying to understand how secular assumptions both enable and limit the ways students engage their big questions. They plan to share what they are learning with a wider audience at a conference next November at Vassar College. I urge you to attend.²

² For more information on their project see: <http://projects.vassar.edu/secularity/>

The issue of “secularity” seems to me an urgent one, both globally and on campus. Certainly for many entering students religion provides the only language they have with which to think about the most pressing questions in their lives. It does not matter whether you like that or not. That is where many students are, as the Social Science Research Council has shown in a valuable publication called *The Religious Engagement of American Undergraduates: Why Now and What Next?* and in an online forum: <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum>. The question then becomes how faculty members work with the often radically different beliefs, vocabularies, and conceptions students bring with them. The most important thing, in my view, is not to dismiss those complicated issues. How to do that is a big question in its own right and deserves open, honest scrutiny.

II. Cumulative Effects

There are other changes, of course, but let us stop with these four reforms and these four unintended consequences. If you wanted to sum up the reforms, you might say, they freed students *from* petty stupidities of various sorts. If you looked at the unintended consequences you might ask about the other kind of freedom—freedom *to*? Has higher education emerged with a sufficiently robust sense of the full liberating power of a college education? I do not think so. Taken individually these unintended consequences may be relatively minor matters. But their cumulative effect, I believe, has resulted in a draining away, perhaps even a vacuum in one crucial part of a genuinely “higher” education. The transformative power of such an education requires openness to and a rich intellectual and personal engagement with questions to which no expert can provide the single right answer.

Critical Thinking or Spiritual Development: There is ample evidence, if not of a “vacuum” in higher education, at least of a distressing disconnect. That is evident, for example, in Barbara Walvoord’s recent study of sixty-six introductory theology and religion courses,³ where she found a “great divide.” Faculty members typically had “critical thinking” at the top of their list of goals while students, she reports, say they want to work on their spiritual and religious development.

The biggest challenge before us, I believe, is to bridge divides such as this, ones that separate cognitive development from personal growth, the search for a meaningful life from the mastery of a field of study, and “academics” from student “life.”

At Harvard: Professor Richard Light tells me that he and some of his colleagues at Harvard recently asked a sample of first year students about their experience in the classroom and outside it and found high levels of satisfaction, maybe even \$40,000 dollars worth. But at the end of the interviews they would ask “Suppose you were dean for a day here at Harvard, and could make any one change you wanted. What would it be?”

Many of the answers clustered around something like this: “I don’t really know what this education adds up to, how it relates to what I am going to be doing with the rest

³ Walvoord, Barbara. Students’ Spirituality and ‘Big Questions’ in the Introductory Religion Courses, *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 11 (February 2008) pp. 3—13.

of my life. I miss an opportunity to really think about that.” In other words, they share this adolescent’s second big question.

Dick Light and his colleagues then devised a very straight forward response: they have set up a series of faculty led, non-credit seminars, offered for the first time this spring. We will know by the end of this semester how well it is working. Right now let us simply note that the students felt a need for something of this sort.

A Wider Sample: What Dick Light found at Harvard corresponds to what others have found when they ask students about their experience, or when as in the case of Paul Christesen at Dartmouth, students asked *him*. I suspect you would find the same on your campus. Certainly the broader survey conducted by Helen and Alexander Astin and their colleagues at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA points in the same direction. They surveyed 112,000 first year students at 236 institutions and found that high expectations at the beginning of that year were not always matched by what they found at college, especially where the advancement of their self understanding, development of values, and spiritual growth were concerned.⁴

This survey suggests that students are looking for something they are not finding, and maybe some faculty feel the same way. That would explain the very positive and imaginative response we received to the Teagle Big Questions initiative. Phi Beta Kappa, small colleges such as Carleton and Hampshire, the National Humanities Center, universities such as Chicago, surprised and delighted us with their imagination and determination to bring a wide range of such questions into focus. The University of Richmond, for example, has posed this issue (among others) for discussion with colleagues at other Virginia colleges: “Asking students to suspend certain beliefs and convictions, even as classroom leaders do the same, is arguably the first step in developing critical faculties of independent thought and fostering unbiased, meaningful discussion.”⁵

To be sure, difficult issues surround such efforts; one colleague points out:

We're finding this coupling (of religion and big questions) can chafe people on both sides of the religious-secular divide. Secular colleagues worry we're saying that you have to be religious to ask big questions. Religious colleagues worry we're reducing (and mis-defining) religion to asking big questions.

The Big Questions generate more heat than light sometimes, but how much better to engage them, clarify them, argue them out than to shrug them off and walk away!

Whatever Happened to the Bull Session? When I argue that Big Questions, such as those we have been discussing, deserve a prominent place in the instructional and intellectual life of a college, I often get a reply along these lines, “Whatever happened to the late night bull session? If students want to talk about the meaning of life (note the shift from “a meaningful life”), let them have a bull session, but don’t clutter up my classes with such stuff.”

⁴ See: <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/spirituality.html>

⁵ For more on the Teagle Big Questions initiative see: <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/grantmaking/grantees/bigquestions.aspx>

That, I believe, is totally wrong. It fails to recognize some basic facts: students of the traditional college-going age usually have a very limited vocabulary with which to think about such questions. By “vocabulary” I mean not only words but metaphors, images, logical structures, models, and exempla. They are also often unaware that anyone born before their happy natal day sometime around 1990, ever had anything useful to say about such matters or indeed ever thought about them at all. They are not just “naïve, moralistic, deists,” as Chris Smith and Melinda Denton, if I remember correctly, once described them,⁶ they are radically culture bound, and hence their discussions are likely, if they amount to anything at all, to reinforce the values and cultural norms of contemporary America, not least consumerism.

The most serious problem with the “Let them have bull sessions” dogma, however, is that it overlooks the fact that such questions are among the most challenging and intellectually demanding topics any of us confront. Dealing with them requires a remarkable degree of reflective judgment; they are in fact beautiful opportunities to employ “postformal” reasoning. That is, they are questions for which there is no single right answer. They require not blather over a beer, but the hard work of thinking straight.

Have you ever noticed how often talk about Big Questions takes the form of a minor premise and a conclusion in a syllogism of which the major premise is unstated and hence, presumably, unexamined? “I like people, so I figure I’ll be a salesman.” “Since I have always done well in my courses in Comparative Literature, I have concluded that I should pursue graduate school in that field.” “I don’t know what else to do with all this stuff, so I suppose I better become a teacher.” “I can make more money by working for Goldman Sachs.” It’s not easy to tease out the unstated major premise and examine it in some systematic way. A little training in formal logic would help.

But formal reasoning does not do the whole trick. At some point Big Questions start to require something even more challenging. To deal with them one needs to navigate terrain where evidence and logic give out. They can get you part of the way but beyond that point you need other things, including, oftentimes, the ability to observe your own thought patterns. “Metacognition,” the experts say; “mindfulness” the pop psych books say. The terms do not help me a lot. I am happy if I can blow the whistle on myself, take time to reflect, and drop a red flag on the play. I have learned over the years that some words and thought patterns are signs things are out of bounds. For example, when I catch myself using the word “entitled,” I know I am likely to be getting myself into trouble. It helps, I have found, to translate it into Greek: *hybris* is the closest equivalent.

Hungry: For all these reasons the bull session isn’t much help. Left on their own most students reinvent and reinforce the assumptions and values with which they entered college, whether they be the religious doctrines of their upbringing, or the clichés of consumer society and pop culture. The bull session may leave students bloated with beer, but like much of the curriculum, and much of college life, it leaves them unsatisfied—hungry, I believe, for a more deeply grounded approach to the questions that really matter.

⁶ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquest Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives Of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press).

In my bleaker moments I fear that this hunger is part of the reason so many students today seem unengaged with learning, or worse—lost and adrift in their personal lives. I recently heard the director of medical service at a prestigious research university, one of the most selective in the country, say that at any given point in time ten percent of the undergraduates there were “floundering.” When I expressed skepticism, his counterpart at another equally prestigious and selective university said he thought that number “was about right” on his campus.⁷

I do not believe that this psychic distress is *caused* by the disconnect or vacuum we have been discussing. But I do not think our current practice helps very much either. The causes, I believe, lie deep in contemporary culture and the false values it so powerfully transmits. Colleges and universities cannot change all that, but they have a responsibility, I believe, to challenge assumptions, confront big questions, and provide fresh perspectives and rich vocabularies for dealing with them. There are some things they can do, and one of them, in Socratic terms, is to insist on the importance of the examined life.

In the third part of this talk let us be as specific as possible about steps that can be taken. First, however, we need to look at some disturbing evidence.

III. Things That Help

The Wabash National Study: Charles Blaich, director of the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, is willing to let me tell you some preliminary results from their study of first year students at nineteen colleges and universities. The study followed over 3,000 students from a spectrum of institutions ranging from community colleges to research universities, with private liberal arts colleges strongly represented. The results may well change as the study is extended over time, but the questions it raises are important enough to focus on right now.

The study sought, among other things, to find out what changes took place during the first year of college. Adapting the Defining Issues Test the study found significant improvement (about 10%) in students’ moral reasoning. But in other respects, such as critical thinking, well-being and leadership, the changes were small. When it came to diversity the changes were, overall, negative. Even greater declines were evident in academic motivation, community involvement, and even professional success.

The results challenge our conventional picture of students making steady progress toward lofty goals. They also challenge some familiar ideas that the amount of time, per se, that students spend with faculty and staff produces positive results. Once again it is quality time that counts. I doubt that the results can be explained away by saying, as some have, that students are just too swept up in their new found independence and the challenges of daily life to make much progress during their first year at college. It is equally likely, I fear, that many of them start on a course during that year that sweeps

⁷ In the oral version of this talk delivered at Tallahassee at the Institute on College Student Values on February 4th 2008, I polled the audience and found that almost no one thought the 10% figure was too high an estimate for the situation on their campuses they knew best; about 20% thought it was about right; and 80% thought the estimate was too low.

them further and further away from the realization of our goals and their initial aspirations. Time and the continuation of the Wabash study will tell.

There is, however, some good news emerging from this study. It comes when you look at the minority of students who report a truly positive academic experience. Three sets of practices are strongly associated with positive growth among those students who encountered them: good teaching and high quality interaction with faculty; diversity experiences and academic challenge.⁸ These practices, including academic challenge, correlated with all sorts of positive growth, “personal” growth as well as strictly “academic” achievement.

That is an extremely important point: the data suggest that one of the best ways to increase students’ sense of motivation and well being is to see that the college’s environment provides rich diversity experiences, high levels of academic challenge and teaching practices geared to helping students meet those challenges.

Institutions vary greatly in the extent to which they provide such an environment, but by and large students simply are not experiencing these best practices very often. For example, less than half the students, even at small institutions that pride themselves on their devotion to their students, report that they “frequently” or “often” experienced the practices grouped together as “good teaching and high quality interaction with faculty.” Even at high scoring institutions there is still a lot of room for improvement in the big three factors: academic challenge, quality of teaching, and diversity experience.

Without the right kind of environment, and especially the right kind of teaching, students may actually regress in college. Let me put it in extreme form: the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed students who arrive in late August for their first year may become the beer guzzling, tail-gate partying seniors, sitting in the back row of class, unreachable, and now unteachable.

The importance of academic challenge brings us back to the question that arose in our consideration of the alleged benefits of the bull session: what is the relation, if any, between the development of cognitive capacities such as critical thinking, and ostensibly purely “personal” things such as the development of motivation, values, spiritual growth, and well being?

Let me suggest a hypothesis: “cognitive” and “personal” growth are inextricably connected. They are not two different things, reified into “academics” and “extracurricular life.” It does not work to think this way. In fact, if the implicit message to students is that living a meaningful and satisfying life is purely “personal,” does not require any process of rational thought, is unrelated to the life of the mind, then students are being seriously misled. But if “cognitive” and “personal” are two sides of the same coin, then college should indeed be all the things we hope for it—richly rewarding, mind opening, transformative.

Let us explore then for a minute the idea that the ability to formulate rich and lasting values and to relate them to personal decision making involves higher order cognitive capacities. Sure, it involves other things as well, but it is the distinctive task of a college or university to challenge, and thereby develop those capacities. No wonder then that the Wabash study should have found that academic challenge has such wide

⁸ See the Wabash web site www.liberalarts.wabash.edu

ranging benefits. But the good teaching that must go along with such challenge cannot stop, as we have seen, with formal reasoning.

Reflective Judgment: The first of our Big Questions—“What should I do with my life?” is a perfect opportunity for reflective judgment. Even though I am a complete amateur in cognitive psychology, I sometimes find the technical term “postformal reasoning” useful, since this type of judgment builds on formal logic, critical thinking as it is usually understood, analytical reasoning, and problem solving. These are prerequisites, but a properly reflective approach to Big Questions requires more than that because, after all, we are complicated creatures living in complex social organizations, and because our actions—even the tiniest gesture—can sometimes have vast ripple effects and unintended consequences.

“Ah, but there’s no single right answer to such questions,” someone objects. Precisely. That is one *definition* of postformal reasoning. It is the kind of reasoning that is needed when there is no single solution to the problem. Most of the big issues we struggle with have no single, universally applicable, solution. Varying solutions can be proposed based on values, judgments, worldview etc., but how effective they will be is less a matter of definitive proof than of alertness to context and long term consequences. Some approaches are richer and more revealing than others. Our job is to find them.

Postformal reasoning need not be an arcane concoction of the psychometricians. We need it every day when we try to evaluate alternative possibilities, clarify the options, see their implications (including unintended consequences) and ground our decision in well thought out values and principles. It’s what we didn’t do when we went into Iraq. Understandably perhaps, since post formal reasoning is one of the toughest and highest forms of cognition. It is what makes higher education genuinely “higher.” But it is not something we have focused on, even at the finest universities.

We need to set the development of postformal reasoning capacities as a clear goal for our institutions, our departments and programs, our courses and our counseling, to help students develop that kind of reasoning. And we have to develop ways of assessing how well we are doing in this most challenging, but most rewarding part of our professional lives. That is not easy, I know, but it can be done. Projects such as the Wabash national study are already pointing the way and much more can be done.

But while that work is going forward there is a lot that can be done right now on our campuses. We know what is needed: genuine diversity, intellectual challenge, and teaching that helps students meet that challenge. But let me go one step further and suggest a few additional things that we can do. Let me make five suggestions.

Five Suggestions

First, **Reclaim the Public Square** for the Big Questions, the ones we have been talking about and others of equal significance. I do not mean bring in an occasional big name, high fee, “public intellectual,” or politician. Take the money you would pay them and use it for a concerted effort, running from orientation week to capstone courses in the senior year—including a forum where faculty, student life staff, chaplains and others share their insights—new courses and seminars (whether for credit or not), brown bag lunches, dinner meetings at dining halls, a student edited journal—you know what might

work in your campus. Do not wait for the president to bless it or a foundation to fund it. Reclaim the public square.

Second, **Validate the Big Questions** at every opportunity. Reclaiming the public square will make this easier. But these questions have a place in classes and curriculum design. Finding it is not always easy, but you do not have to do it perfectly the first time. Trying sends the important message to students: It is OK to struggle with these issues. It is important. College is the moment to do it.

Third, **Try, Evaluate, Try Again**. We do not know yet what works best in developing the capacities students need to deal with their Big Questions. So try things; collect evidence about how well they worked; make improvements. You can call this systematic improvement; I call it “becoming a learning community,” because you need your colleagues’ and your students’ help to move to successively higher levels in this way.

Fourth, **Do Not Hoard Your Friends**, introduce your students to them. Students often have no idea that anyone else ever thought about the questions that concern them most. No wonder they feel alone and isolated. So introduce them, in class or out, to the authors, artists, biographers, philosophers, writers of texts sacred and secular, and musicians whose struggles with the Big Questions have been most meaningful to you. Do not limit yourself to those that provide neat answers. And do not think you have to be the expert. It is the questions that count and those who ask the questions well render the greatest service.

My friends have, for the most part, been dead for a couple of thousand years—Homer and Socrates and that crowd. But you know, if you share them, they come alive again. Try it and watch that miracle happen.

Finally, **Live the Questions**. One of my friends is the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Here is what he wrote to the aspiring young poet who asked for his advice:

*Do not search now for the answers which cannot be given to you because you could not live them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one distant day live right into the answer.*⁹

I wonder what the young poet thought that meant a century ago when he opened Rilke’s letter. I was wondering what it might mean to an adolescent today struggling with his own questions. Then came a message from my friend and former student Carolyn Dewald:

My Greek teacher in college, Martin Ostwald, was a refugee, as a teenager, in Canada and continued his education there and then in the United States. Although the Ostwalds had lived for over 300 years in Germany, as Jews he and his brother had first been interned and then separated from their father and sent out of the country. They were the only members of the family to survive, and Plato and Aristotle—in particular, the Apology and the Nichomachean Ethics—were taught to us . . . as practical, living documents about how to maintain one's belief in other people and responsible participation in our communities, in the face of almost insuperable obstacles. One of my history professors at Berkeley, Paul Alexander, escaped as a student from Nazi Germany

⁹ Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*, Letter 4.

only because an SS officer had at the last minute allowed a couple of young students to drive to the safety of Switzerland. . . .

Neither of these people told us, their students, about the details of their lives while we were students. . . . But they lived their beliefs in their teaching, and they put us in touch with the truth that one's life is, whether one wants it or not, a seamless web with one's beliefs, and that these beliefs will at some point in one's life come at a cost. Therefore, they should be tested, reasoned out, and reformulated so that they will hold up—and they can be tempered, made stronger and also more supple, by a solid knowledge of the literature and history of the past.

“Living the questions” is my biggest challenge to you. Your challenge to me, I bet, is to stop speaking. Let us each accept the other’s challenge!
