

THE BRADFORD PLAN: THE STORY OF A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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Cooperative education, the joining of education and work, has been with us for almost seventy-five years. Today it is practiced by a quarter of all four-year colleges and universities, and about half of all two-year institutions.

We have learned a lot about its advantages over the past seven decades:

- It offers students broad and deep exposure to different career possibilities;
- It enables theoretical and applied learning to progress hand in hand;
- It allows students to develop socially, grow personally, learn interpersonal skills, and take charge of their lives;
- It encourages some students to remain in college rather than drop out;
- It provides a salary for some students, reducing institutional need for financial aid;
- It enables employers to obtain staff at low cost;
- It provides employers with an opportunity to recruit, train, and try out potential employees without making a prior commitment;
- It results in jobs for many students and greater employability for most;
- It enables faculty members to minimize "applied" aspects of courses, since students can learn them on the job;
- It can improve academic performance: several studies have shown that students in cooperative programs perform better academically than other students; and

- It is popular with students and faculty.

Despite this raft of pluses and a long history, there is a sense that cooperative education is far more appropriate to professional and technical schools than liberal arts colleges, our oldest institutions of higher learning. In fact, many see an inconsistency between cooperative education and the liberal arts. One is frequently described as *training* and the other as *schooling*. Cooperative education is depicted as narrowly focused and practical while the liberal arts are thought of as esoteric and intellectual.

At Bradford College we disagree. We have married education in the liberal arts with education on the job. We see the liberal arts as practical. And we view cooperative education or work experience as a liberal art.

This is not a particularly novel view. It is as old as higher education.

For most of higher education history, there has been a splendid compatibility between the liberal arts vision of the educated person and the practical needs of college graduates. The earliest colleges—Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge—nearly a millennium ago, were distinctly practical. They offered only four courses of study—law, medicine, theology, and the arts. The first three were explicitly utilitarian and law was the most popular of all medieval studies. But the arts curriculum, the ancestor of today's liberal arts, teaching the classical trivium and to a lesser extent quadrivium, was practical too. It taught logic and Latin, staples for entrance into both the professional schools and job market of the day.

The American college, a descendent of the medieval arts program, followed in the same tradition. It offered a classical curriculum consisting of just twelve subjects ranging from catechism and Aramaic to rhetoric and logic. Its aim was the practical one of training a learned clergy.

From the first, the accepted mission of the college was not to train monkish churchmen, but to educate thoughtful community leaders. There was wide agreement that the practical education required for life was a liberal arts education. The course of study for all students—whether in the ministry, law, or medicine—was the same. It was not a narrow Biblical training for the minister or a restricted regimen of Hippocrates for the doctor, but a broad education for the leaders of a shared culture.

There was in short an intimate bond between the liberal arts and practical preparation for life. The college was inextricably intertwined into the society and its mission was to produce educated people of vision who would lead their nation.

Here's the point. Students of the early colleges—just as the student generations before and after them—were preparing practically for life. Yet, the education they received was not narrowly determined by the demands

of the marketplace, but by the collegiate vision of the educated person. And upon graduation these young people entered the positions of leadership for which they had become appropriately equipped. The liberal arts vision of the educated person and the practical life needs of the society were one and the same.

Since that time the program of the American liberal arts college has undergone many and varied permutations, but the commitment to useful education has remained a persistent and consistent theme. If the history of higher education teaches us anything, it is that the liberal arts have always been practical. Preparation for life was, is and always will be the essential mission of collegiate education.

Bradford College is dedicated to this tradition of practical liberal arts education. We educate students about the existing world of which they are a part and teach them the intellectual skills and knowledge needed to live in that world in an autonomous and socially beneficial manner. We offer an education rooted in the life of the mind and nurtured by the pragmatic realities and practical necessities of living in the last fifth of the twentieth century. At Bradford that means liberal arts in the classroom and liberal arts in the workplace.

The Liberal Arts in the Workplace

Cooperative education programs tend to be of two basic types—consecutive and concurrent. In consecutive programs (the most frequent form), periods of full-time work are alternated with periods of full-time school. In concurrent programs, the student works half-time and attends classes half-time or works full-time and attends classes part-time. At Bradford undergraduates are offered concurrently the opportunity to work and attend classes half-time. The experience is formally titled “The Liberal Arts Internship.”

With the aid of the college internship supervisor, students are placed in a full-time job (at least 32 hours per week). They are required to interview for the position, much as they would for permanent employment. Both the employer and the student have the right to refuse the position.

It is the job of the internship supervisor to locate and evaluate the quality of the work experience. To date, the local community, embracing southern New Hampshire, northern Massachusetts and Boston, has been very generous in offering positions. In fact, we still have more opportunities than we do students interested in filling them. This has allowed us to be rather selective in choosing jobs. We insist that the position be neither menial nor unsupervised. It must be commensurate with the student's

educational level. We are quite candid in telling employers that the assignment involves a good deal of work on their part and probably will not pay for itself.

Students tend to choose work experiences related to their majors and career plans. Over the past year, they have worked at everything from law offices and banks to schools and art restoration laboratories. Positions have been both paid and unpaid.

Most cooperative programs end here. This is where the Bradford program begins. We believe that if all students merely wanted jobs, they would need only employment agencies, not colleges. Bradford thinks it is important for students to learn something about work.

Two courses are linked with the work experience. The first is a class on the literature of work. Students study some of the classical—ancient and modern—thinking about work. They become acquainted with the seminal social science research on work, and they learn about the critical scientific conclusions. Writers may vary from Plato and Karl Marx to Lewis Thomas and Studs Terkel. If the course is successful, students discover that humankind has always been asking the same questions about life, both in and out of the workplace.

The second course is much more practical. It focuses directly on the students' work experience. They are asked to look at how their jobs are organized and administered, how work affects the quality of their lives, and how they affect the workplace.

The course leader is the internship director, assisted by the on-the-job supervisors, the people who direct students on a daily basis in the workplace. The supervisors' participation in this course is a big plus. It forces students to come to grips with the realities of their jobs, rather than abstractions. It gives the supervisors a greater sense of participation and ownership of the program. Many enjoy the affiliation with a college. And it allows the internship supervisor an opportunity to meet, in a very friendly setting, the people whose jobs and performances she must evaluate.

The course, one semester in length, meets once a week for three hours. A project focusing on some aspect of the job is required. Students must also maintain a journal detailing their work experiences and reactions for the term. This class has been described as everything from a bull session and group therapy to an intensive and demanding case study course or class in sociology or psychology of work. It is all of these things.

Consequences

We think the benefits of this program are enormous. Earlier I listed the advantages of cooperative education. Many of these are consequences of

the Bradford program. But our aim is somewhat different. We want most of all to broaden and enrich the student's view of working.

The typical undergraduate in America has a rather narrow and somewhat distorted vision of work. Job expectations are unrealistic. Two out of three college freshmen anticipate careers in the professions. And two out of five are planning on positions in the platinum professions—law and medicine. When asked to describe their aims for the future, 70 percent of current freshmen say it is essential or very important not to be well off financially, but to be *very* well off financially. According to surveys their plans call for a big house (not a condominium or apartment), a large well-kept lawn, the latest appliances (a high quality stereo ranks high on the list), clothes in the latest style, and at least one car. In short, for many undergraduates work has become merely instrumental—simply a path to wealth and status.

For the Bradford faculty and staff, this was a deeply disturbing realization. Our students tend to be of traditional college age. This means they can anticipate working for the next five decades. To depreciate work, to see it merely as a means to another end, was horrifying to us. It is to diminish the human condition.

Consequently, the aim in offering work experience to students at Bradford is to help them see that work is not just 9-to-5. Work fills our lives. While we do “have” occupations, we also work at our social responsibilities, family responsibilities, civic responsibilities, personal responsibilities, and the myriad of coping activities—brushing our teeth and combing our hair—that it takes to get us from today until tomorrow. It is not exaggeration to say that the largest part of our lives is work—often rewarding, sometimes joyful, but still work. At Bradford, we want students to come to terms with this reality.

More than this we want students to realize that work is the way we give meaning to time. It is the way we come to view ourselves and the way others come to see us. Work is at once self-fulfilling and self-sustaining. To be without work, in the words of Ortega Y Gasset,

... is a worse negation of life than death itself. Because to live means to have something to do—a mission to fulfill—and in the measure in which we avoid setting our life to something, we make it empty.

Camus put it even more succinctly: “Without work all life goes rotten.” At Bradford, we believe that any education which ignores so critical an aspect of our being is incomplete. For us work is the essential subject of a liberal education.

A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

At the same time, education for work is also a practical essential for our students. We live in an age in which the liberal arts are increasingly thought of as outdated, perhaps even irrelevant. Student enrollments nationally are shifting sharply away from the liberal arts toward professional subjects. Business enrollments have grown more than 50 percent in the past decade. Everyone has heard the story, true or untrue, of a liberal arts graduate driving a taxi.

The reality is this. A liberal arts degree provides students with job mobility. Study after study has shown that liberal arts degree recipients do better in terms of advancement and salaries than graduates in business or engineering. Today the problem for the liberal arts graduate is the first job, getting started. Currently graduates are receiving fewer offers at lower salaries than their professional student counterparts. Work experience through cooperative education is a way to give the liberal arts students an edge, a means of getting that first job.

The goal of a Bradford College education is to offer students a quality liberal arts education that will prepare them practically for life after college. On-the-job experience, or cooperative education, is essential for both our liberal arts and practical missions.