CAREER EDUCATION: A Legitimate Emphasis? (3)

by Don Doezema

In our previous installment we tried to show the importance of a strong liberal arts education-both in preparation for occupation or vocation, and for the development of the student's "capability for responsible living" as a citizen of the Kingdom. The importance we assigned to the academic subjects in this regard raises, as we suggested last time, a question concerning the legitimacy of courses of any other kind in the curriculum. Is there no place, for example, for mechanical drawing in the high school curriculum? Or for data processing? Or for auto mechanics? We think there is. There are, in fact, students at Covenant this year who are receiving credit for work in those very areas. It's interesting to note that Luther, apparently, would not have questioned the propriety of that. It was his idea that boys should, in addition to the time they spent with the academics in school, "learn some trade and do whatever is desired, so that study and work may go on together, while the children are young and can attend to both." Zylstra, too, does not object to the inclusion of some instruction in vocational skills in the school curriculum, "provided they are not regarded as adequate substitutes for what are called the humanities, sciences, and social studies." The point, it seems to me, is that whatever role the manual arts have in a high school curriculum it must remain a subordinate one. The school must, in other words, by all means retain its major and minor sequences as conditions for graduation. Not all high schools have done that, you know. In an attempt, apparently, to be all things to all people many high schools allow a student to take whatever he pleases, without regard to whether or not his schedule as a whole shows any kind of solid pattern. And the results are just exactly what one would expect. The February 1978 Newsletter of the National Center for Education Statistics reports a decline in political knowledge

assessment scores. The newsletter speaks too of results which could hardly be called encouraging, in reading and mathematics competency tests, given to 13 and 17 year-olds. One of the math questions was this: "A parking lot charges 35 cents for the first half hour and 25 cents for each additional hour or fraction of an hour. For a car parked from 10:45 in the morning until 3:05 in the afternoon, how much money should be charged?" That was answered correctly by 48% of the 17 year-olds who took the tests. Forty-eight percent! Another math item was this: "1/5 is equivalent to what percent? (Choice of: 1.5%, 5%, 15%, 20%)." The correct answer was selected by 63% of the 17 year-olds. In the political knowledge assessment, 55% of the 17 year-olds correctly identified a state assembly as belonging to the legislative branch of government. In commenting on those results, the president of the National Council for the Social Studies had this to say: "The results are disappointing but not surprising. Social studies is receiving very low priority in the curriculum and the attrition rate of these courses is very high. Electives are being substituted for hard-core government classes." It seems imperative, therefore, that whether students chafe under them or not, restriction of a prescribed course of study must be retained.

At Covenant a 30 hour English major is required of every student, whether college-bound or not. The students who are in the College-Preparatory track complete an additional major, and at least two 20-hour minors, one of which must be a foreign language. Those in the general track are not required to select a second major, but they must complete a minor in math, science, and history. And the few students who elect to get some training in auto mechanics, furniture manufacturing, graphic arts, electronics, accounting, data processing drafting, nurse aid, medical secretary, or whatever, at the local Skills Center, are subject to the same requirements for graduation as are those who remain at the school for the entire day. They must complete the same major/minor sequences, and earn at least 200 credit hours. The difference lies in that they are permitted a maximum of 40 hours in a skills area. It's true of course that, were the student to have remained at his home school for the entire day, he would of necessity have taken more courses from among the history, science, math, and English offerings. But the fact is that, even with the 40 hours at the Skills Center, the *major emphasis* in his program of studies remains in the liberal arts.

Do we encourage our students to attend the Skills Center on a part-time basis? The truth is that we *could* not, even if we *wanted* to. The Skills Center has facilities for a *limited* number of students in each area, and every high school which sends students to the Center finds that, especially in certain skill areas, their problem is not that they must look for students to fill the school's quota but rather that they must decide which of the applicants to turn away in order to remain within that quota. The Skills Center program is, therefore, really quite self-regulating. For reasons of our own, however, we are inclined to be quite selective in our assignments to the Skills Center. In addition to our preference for the academics, there is the fact that we like to believe that our parents have sent their children to the Protestant Reformed grade schools and high school because their desire is that their children receive their education in *our* schools. It would hardly seem to be consistent with that aim if, when we have them enrolled in our school, we send them off to another institution for a good share of each day. Yet, we (and by "we" I mean the school administration with the approval of the parents) send them anyway. We do that because we believe that we must take into consideration the matter of individual differences. It's a simple fact that not every student is able to achieve academic success. Not every student has the intellectual ability to handle the advanced science and math courses. Some have abilities which are most decidedly of the mechanical kind. Many of these have rather well defined plans for putting those abilities to use after high school graduation. For that matter, even some of the more academically inclined have occupational plans which would be helped considerably by a class in electronics or data processing or child care or machine metals. It seems to us that, for these students, we should be willing to settle for some kind of reasonable combination of academic and vocational education—especially if the latter is limited to the last year or two of the student's secondary schooling. Actually, then, he will be leaving the environment of our own schools just a bit earlier, and on a gradual basis. He will thus acquire some training in an occupational skill, while at the same time retaining in his schooling the elements of a liberal arts education, and receiving the latter from our own Protestant Reformed perspective.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I'd like to say again that we do not consider vocational training to be a substitute track designed for those who cannot or will not master the basics. We

did suggest above that those who can not, because of ability or inclination, achieve academic success, might be served as well by a limited vocational program as they would be by being asked to struggle through additional science or social studies classes. But we did not mean to say that the Skills Center is only for students who can't make the grade in the regular academic program. Fact is, there have been quite able students at Covenant who have expressed an interest in and have actually taken a skills class. For that matter, one of their teachers enrolled in an evening class at the same school and found it to be most enjoyable and beneficial. We repeat, those classes are not designed for the dullards. But, in addition, we want to reemphasize our conviction that for no one must the vocational be a substitute track. Some students would like nothing better, I think, than to make it that. Perceiving little practical use for Archimedes or Shakespeare in the course of a day's work as a mechanic, they would happily limit their "education" to the practical arts and the vocational skill classes. They simply are not particularly motivated when it comes to the academics. Lack of motivation and interest, in fact, is a pervasive phenomenon, true of all students to some extent and to some students to a great extent. And that makes for big problems for the teacher of English, and the teacher of history, and the teacher of science. The solution, as we indicated before, is most emphatically not to steer them into, or let them choose a program in which they *avoid* the English, history, and science classes. We ought, however, to be more than merely *negative* ("Do not let them graduate without having 'taken' American Lit."). So, though it might appear as if I'm straying a bit from the topic which was assigned to me, I'd like to conclude this article with just a bit about the matter of motivation in the academics.

James D. Koerner describes the problem like this:

> ...All industrialized countries of the world and quite a few developing countries of the world share the following problem: they take all people in that society at age 6, 7 in some places, to age 15 in some countries, 16 in others, 17, 18, with us-we might say 21, or more-they take that population whose natural bent is for action and they bottle it up for substantial periods of time in institutions called schools, where it is subjected to a certain amount of physical restraint and, one hopes, intellectual discipline.
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> Students react to this part-time incarceration in various ways. As we all know, most students seem to cope with it without discernable damage, some students resist it but stay the course to the end and graduate without any particular accomplishments or prospects, and some fight it every step of the way and drop out as soon as possible. Everywhere in the world educators struggle with the problem of the last two groups in particular,

> the resisters and the dropouts. In our present state of knowledge, nobody, in any country I know of, has had very much success in designing programs for these groups of students.

And then, note this:

> The advocates of basic education strongly feel that these two groups of students, the resisters and the dropouts, have a special need for the education that is most truly vocational. And that is an education grounded in language, number, and other so-called academic subjects.

What that amounts to really is that there is a *need* for what is sometimes not *wanted*. And it's that circumstance which provides for the teacher one of his biggest challenges. That challenge is to create in the students a conviction that the curriculum and daily school experiences are *pertinent*, that they are *relevant*; for when the students are convinced of *that*, they are motivated to learn. Many teachers in the schools of America, I think, are not equal to the challenge. Some simply refuse to be bothered by relevancy. Confidently asserting that studying the humanities is important to the growth of the "whole" individual, essential to the formation of "responsible" citizens, and necessary for the development of "personal values," they just forge ahead, assuring themselves that at some point in the future some of their students will thank them for their efforts. I read of one teacher who made bold to suggest that very thing in writing, as follows: "I have faith in the ability of a few of our students...to come to terms with the best of what has been thought and written if we present them the written record without apology. Our responsibility ends there. They will take what they can, leave what they cannot use." Few, perhaps, will *admit* to an attitude of that sort, but I suspect that many more in desperation actually proceed on that basis. They despair, that is, of being able to motivate a student with promises of a postponed, though inevitable, benefit of a study of the humanities, and they simply present the subject matter, trusting that some students will derive some benefit, somehow.

Others, in an attempt to create some kind of relevancy, resort to what is really a watering down of the liberal arts courses in order that they might conform to a utilitarian standard. Career enthusiasts, for example, seek to integrate the humanities with career training, in their attempt to give meaning to the liberal arts. But that's no better. Jesse Jones, Associate Professor of English at Abilene Christian University of Dallas, emphasized the necessity of retaining the academics, full strength, in an article in a 1976 issue of the Journal of Higher Education. He writes that if

a school "has defined the desired 'education' of its students in such a way as to incorporate or include the humanities..., then that institution's instructors must accomplish that task by insisting upon the student's entry into *their* worlds-philosophy, literature, the fine arts-rather than by attempting to skim off the cream of values and pour it into a technical-vocational jug." And, elsewhere in that same article, reacting further against any dilution of humanities courses in an attempt to meet students' expectations of relevance and usefulness, Jones writes that "what the career student must be taught, what is incumbant upon the humanities instructor to teach, is an expanded concept of 'use'."

That, it seems to me, is sound advice. There is a *need* for relevance. Perhaps the lack of motivation on the part of some of our own students is due to our failure to make clear the relevancy which the subject matter we teach does in fact have. It has relevance because Christian instruction is in essence an inspecting of the works of God's hand, the purpose being that we might fall down in worship before Him. It has relevance, not to the degree that we succeed in relating it to economic life, but to the degree that it serves to fit a child of God for citizenship in the Kingdom. Christian education, therefore, as Rev. Engelsma noted in his *Reformed Education*, is "useful, in the highest degree useful, fitting the child to live life as it ought to be lived; and, I may add, with an eye on the book of Proverbs, preparing the child to live a life that is blessed and happy." He went on to state that "Christian education, and it alone, escapes the condemnation that Alfred North Whitehead passed upon modern education: ...we offer children-algebra, from which nothing follows; history, from which nothing follows; and a couple of languages, never mastered; and lastly, most dreary of all, literature, represented by plays of Shakespeare, with philological notes and short analyses of plot and character to be in substance committed to memory."

Proponents of Career Education are right, it seems to me, in this one respect, namely that they advocate the organization of the entire school program around a dominant theme. They err, of course, in their selection of that theme: *Careers*. As suggested above, we also have a theme which we believe should permeate every aspect of *our* instruction. To make it do that is, I am convinced, *the* challenge for Christian school teachers. And I think that we would do well to imitate the zeal with which some

Career enthusiasts, at least if we can judge at all by their literature, seek to accomplish their goal.

In conclusion, it is our conviction that the practical arts and some kind of vocational training can have a legitimate place in the course of study of some high school students, but that Christian secondary education ought by all means to retain its strong emphasis on the liberal arts, and that teachers should make every effort to insure that students sense the relevancy of the liberal arts as they come to see their entire instruction as a mirror in which shines the glory of their God, Who has written His name on all His works.

LANGUAGE IS GETTING MORE WORSER

Mr. F. Hanko

I think I'm going to do real good on my English exam this time. I ain't never got no bad marks in English this semester. I always brung my book home and done by assignment real neat and careful. At first I didn't know nothing about them verbs and adverbs, but once I seen how to do it, I didn't have no trouble at all. On the test I done better than in my class. But then, everybody can't be good at English without he studies.

I got this here one friend. Me and him are going to study together. We both try to do better than each other, but I usually get less wrong, so I get the best marks. He can't get that there grammar very easy even though he tries kind of hard. Each of us want to do their best as far as this exam, though. But if I was him, I would have began by studying more earlier. Studying together, however, the exam ought to be easier both for him and me. If we try to really and truly concentrate like we should, his