Dreamers, Designers, and Doers

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION results in graduates who are successful at what they choose to do? What kind of education results in graduates who, many years later, still credit their college with helping them to live a fulfilling and appreciated life?

It is a Wellesley kind of education.

Women emerge from their four years at Wellesley having developed three distinct crucial attributes: They are dreamers, they are designers, and they are doers. Dreaming is creative vision, seeing new and different approaches to old problems. For dreams to become reality, there must be good planning—that is where the designer skills come in. And the best plans are of little use without doers to enact them. A Wellesley education is designed to allow students to be all three.

In our classrooms and in our residential environment, we provide students with a broad context for their diverse interests, an organizing framework that helps them make sense of the world. Our liberal-arts curriculum, emphasizing humanities, social science, and science, is deliberately designed to provide that necessary broad context and to help transform students' interests into specific skills. This is the true value of a Wellesley education, and more generally of a liberal-arts education.

'In our classrooms and in our residential environment, we provide students with a broad context for their diverse interests, an organizing framework that helps them make sense of the world.'

—President H. Kim Bottomly

The Wellesley story—a story that spans more than 125 years—is about doing what is necessary to produce the dreamers, designers, and doers that the world so badly needs.

But there are other stories out there—new stories.

The national dialogue currently portrays higher education merely as preparation for specific careers—the producer of certified persons, rather than the producer of educated persons. I recently read a report by the National Governors Association (NGA) that exemplifies what is wrong with this new story. The report, *Degrees for What Jobs? Raising Expectations for Universities and Colleges in a Global Economy,* criticizes higher education for being insensitive to the immediate needs of industry and, therefore, failing to support American competitiveness. Curricula, the report suggests, should be determined by market trends, so schools should increase the number of degrees in program areas that currently have high employer demand. (In doing so, the "nonrelevant" majors would be eliminated, the report implies.) But, if you listen to the employers cited in the NGA report, they want employees who are self-directed and who take initiative, who are adaptable and willing to learn, who have high ethical standards and integrity, and who are able to communicate effectively. Ironically, the competencies employers want are exactly the skills that a broad liberal-arts education provides—the same skills that would be diminished if we followed the recommendations in this report.

This way of thinking has significant negative consequences. For one, it diminishes the role of the humanities. If the goal of getting a college degree is primarily the pragmatic acquisition of specific job skills, then there is little justification for the humanities. Yet, some of the more progressive undergraduate business and engineering schools have come to appreciate the role of the humanities in producing the best innovators and the best creative dreamers. This approach also undermines the role of the faculty in setting curriculum. Faculty, not market trends, are the experts at creating educated persons. One of the faculty's most important contributions—one that we take very seriously at Wellesley—is upholding the standards of the academic enterprise. These are standards that have served this country very well over the past century and more.

I am not worried about Wellesley. We know how to educate undergraduates, and we have the successful history to prove it. We will keep doing what we have always done so well. I do worry, however, about the many fine educational institutions that will not be able to ignore the "new story" implicit in the NGA report. Those institutions educate the vast majority of our nation's college graduates. If they are forced to follow the prescriptions and proscriptions of this politically popular report, our nation could find itself with a less competent leadership core, a less literate and humane population. The shrinking influence of the humanities will hurt us all—even those of us from Wellesley, where the humanities will always be cherished.

We all need to join the national debate so these "new stories" about the role of undergraduate education are not the dominant ones. Wellesley's own dreamers, designers, and doers prove that a liberal-arts education remains relevant, valuable, and necessary today.

H. Kim Bottomly

JUSTIN KNIGHT