Speaking Up and Speaking Out

Working for Social and Environmental Justice through Parks, Recreation, and Leisure

Edited by

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To Jim Murphy

for his kindness, enthusiasm, and idealism

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—Karen and Dan
Preface

by Daniel Dustin

Periodically, it is healthy for a profession to take a good hard look at itself. This is one of those occasions. While the field of parks, recreation, and leisure has come a long way as a human service profession, it still has a long way to go. This is especially evident when we think about social and environmental justice. With a few notable exceptions, we have not paid enough attention to these themes, and it is time we give them their due. We should neither shy away from speaking up and speaking out for people at the margins who are oppressed by social, cultural, political, and other injustices, nor should we shy away from speaking up and speaking out for the environment that is the ground of our being.

We live in a society that champions individualism and autonomy. We tout our superiority over other people, other living things, and other ways of knowing and being. We tend to view nature as a storehouse of raw materials that derives value only when extracted for human use. Our resulting hubris contributes to “othering,” treating people who are at the margins, and the natural world that sustains us, as if they were somehow inferior to us. Our relationship to most everything around us is one of dominance, distancing, and subordination: “We’re number one!” being a popular refrain.

It is time we adopt a more caring and connected attitude toward the world around us. It is time to replace our hubris with the humility that comes with acknowledging multiple ways of making sense out of life and multiple ways of believing, behaving, and being. Such a comprehensive justice perspective, as Adrienne Cachelin conceives of it in the closing chapter, is rooted in the basic ecological insight that there is no “other,” that we have been linked together since time immemorial by a common heritage. In theologian Sally McFague’s words, “All things living and all things not living are the products of the same primal explosion and evolutionary history and hence are interrelated in an internal way from the very beginning. We are distant cousins to the stars and near relations to the oceans, plants, and all other living creatures on our planet.”

Once the implications of McFague’s observation sink in, perhaps we can begin to see ourselves, as did Aldo Leopold, as plain members and citizens of a larger community of life, and rededicate ourselves to working together on behalf of community.

To move us in the right direction, we take a three-legged tack in this book. First, we address the importance of self-reflection, of seeking to know ourselves better so that we might behave more empathetically toward our fellow citizens. This soul search helps provide a reflexive foundation upon which to build healthy relationships with other people. Second, we discuss individuals and groups at the margins—the disenfranchised and the dispossessed—who are commonly oppressed by hegemonic forces, including our own parks, recreation, and leisure profession. What we try to do is help you see the world from their perspectives. We also extend this discussion to the natural world to better understand our ethical obligations toward it. Third, we conclude by preparing you for socially and environmentally responsible activism. Our goal is to have you not only learn from reading this book, but to inspire you to apply what you learn to the conduct of your own personal and professional life. Only then will the book have achieved what we set out for it to do.

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I

KNOW THYSELF
Is College Worth More than a Buck Fifty in Late Charges at the Public Library?

*The Shoulds and Oughts of a Higher Education*

Karen Paisley
University of Utah
Salt Lake City, Utah

I have always loved “teacher movies.” It is a genre favored by many of us who have devoted our lives to higher education on both sides of the lectern. These films typically involve struggling youth and older, “wiser” teachers whose role is to facilitate passage through difficult situations. These success stories salve my ego and I sleep better at night knowing it has all been worth it. My favorites, however, have the teacher learning as much, if not more, from the student, as is the case with 1997’s *Good Will Hunting*, starring Matt Damon and Robin Williams. One of the best scenes in the movie occurs when self-taught Will (Matt Damon) chides a pretentious Harvard student, “You wasted $150,000 on an education you coulda got for a buck fifty in late charges at the public library.”

With tuition rising across the country, Harvard certainly isn’t the only high-ticket diploma anymore. More important than the money, though, are the other costs attendant to being a student. College requires time away from family, maybe even a move to a new city. Many students take on jobs, or work shifts they wouldn’t normally, simply because they fit into their schedule. While an undergraduate, for example, I was a hotline operator for “America’s Most Wanted.” Honest. Then there are all the stressors that come with being a student: exams, papers, group work, and egomaniacal faculty. The costs are phenomenal. So I think it really does boil down to the question: “Is college worth more than a buck fifty in late charges at the public library?”

I believe the answer is “yes,” but I also believe the quality of a higher education depends on three things: the university, the extent to which faculty members honor their moral obligation as professors, and students’ commitment to their responsibilities as students. Before I present my case, however, there are a few things you should know about me that may help you see these issues through my eyes. In contrast to the “banking theory” of higher education that suggests students are but empty vessels waiting to be filled, I see the learning process as an intellectual give and take between faculty and students. I also believe democratically engaged citizenship should be the result of a higher education. And yes, I am also a “word wonk.” I am fascinated by language and believe that words matter. How we choose to talk and write about issues and people and processes says something about us as human beings. Finally, I am passionate about the park, recreation, and leisure profession. I truly believe that parks, recreation, and leisure can, and should, make the world a better place. With that in mind, consider the university as a stage for learning.
The University

Why do universities exist? What “business” are they in? What product do they make, or what service do they provide? What is their real purpose or function? Universities, as agents of curriculum design and delivery, are unique. Their primary work is to make us think. So what do universities make? Certainly, faculty members generate research and writing. And certainly, students produce tangible goods in papers, exams, and the like. In each instance, though, it is not the product itself that has merit, but the caliber of thought that went into it. The intellectual content of pharmaceutical breakthroughs, mechanical devices, and critiques of existential fiction are examples of what is truly produced. And from a societal perspective, the university’s products are its graduates: enlightened human beings.

And what do universities provide? To individual students, universities provide access to the knowledge and skills needed to think. And to society, universities provide a stream of highly educated individuals with the capacity to become democratically engaged citizens and contributing members of their communities, wherever they end up. Democratic citizenship demands a set of life skills that reaches far beyond civility to include appreciation, curiosity, and engagement. And how do universities accomplish this?

Consider some history. In medieval times, the university focused primarily on the Trivium (literally “the three roads”). The Trivium consisted of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. Grammar respects and consumes the written word and its ability to create and represent ideas. Logic illuminates patterns and meaning in our surroundings. Skills in rhetoric empower students to articulate popular and dissenting opinions with effect and grace. The Trivium is mirrored, though perhaps not intentionally, in today’s institutions of higher learning as general education requirements.

So what does the Trivium have to do with democratically engaged citizens? Let’s look at the stated outcomes for the general education curriculum at my academic home, the University of Utah:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world. Concerned with the “big questions,” this knowledge is the fodder for logic. It allows for critique, hypothesis testing, and an appreciation of the relationships between “contemporary and enduring” phenomena. This knowledge is the foundation of informed citizens.
- Intellectual and practical skills. This outcome explicitly includes, among other skills, written and oral communication as well as critical and creative thinking—fully inclusive of the Trivium. These skills are the foundation of engagement.
- Personal and social responsibility. This outcome includes the ethics and outward orientation (or the “shoulds” and “oughts”) of an educated citizen. These characteristics are the moral foundation of democracy.
- Integrative learning. This outcome focuses on “the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems.” As an experiential educator, I believe application is the hallmark of learning. The transfer of such learning beyond the University setting is the manifestation of citizenship.

I believe democratic engagement means far more than voting. Student experiences at a university should foster a series of democratic sentiments, “…the ability to think actively and structurally about people’s behaviors and social issues, to understand the perspectives of other people, and think about actions to resolve intergroup conflict.” The goal of democratic citizenship includes the compulsion to act on such sentiments. The purpose of the university is to prepare students for this active role.
Abraham Lincoln said, “Whatever you are, be a good one.” This charge adorns a plaque over the door to my daughter’s bedroom and serves as a parting challenge to my students. While a vocation is implied, I think Lincoln invites us all to be, first and foremost, good human beings. His invitation also embodies the charge of higher education: through curricular decisions, universities have the opportunity and obligation to produce democratically engaged citizens. A buck fifty in late charges may ensure that you are well read, but it does not ensure that you will be well prepared for meaningful citizenship. That responsibility falls on the faculty.

The Faculty’s Moral Obligation

Having been raised in a social science tradition, I find myself conditioned to avoid making any claim that hasn’t been supported by some kind of empirical evidence. When writing up research reports, I use words like “suggest” and “may” to soften my conclusions. I understand and respect the need to be sure of things before speaking, or to recognize the complexity in the worlds we are examining. But I wonder if there aren’t other ways of being sure. It seems to me that there are stances and conclusions about the world that are just right. They are judgments to be sure, but educated judgments. Toward that end, the “word wonk” in me needs to examine the responsibility of faculty before they exercise personal judgment about what is right or true. What is our relationship to the material you could read on your own? Is it our responsibility to lecture, educate, or profess?

To lecture generally means, “to read.” As an instructional strategy, lecturing was borne of necessity. Prior to being able to mass produce educational materials, lecturers read from original texts, oftentimes scrolls, to students, and the students took notes. It was a unilateral endeavor reinforced by the banking theory of learning mentioned earlier. Beyond that, “lecture” can function as an intransitive verb, meaning that it requires no object. To lecture doesn’t technically require an audience. The act of lecturing is not explicitly dependent on or influenced by anyone hearing it. The definition also implies that the lecturer need not have any special knowledge or qualifications, but only needs to be in possession of the text. This makes the case for the buck fifty in late charges argument. Lecturing, however, is not what I consider a faculty member’s responsibility to be.

A second approach to the relationship with material would be to educate. This verb is usually transitive, meaning that it needs an object (you) to occur. Definitions range from developing the innate capacities of [students], to providing information to [students], to fostering an understanding of material in [students]. From this perspective, a faculty member is essentially value added to the material. The value added is interpretation, explanation, and perhaps some meaning making. This implies some level of expertise in the subject matter, if not in its delivery. Some definitions also suggest a level of investment in the recipients of knowledge, making it a far more personal and, perhaps, bilateral process. It is certainly progress beyond a lecture, and I imagine many faculty members across the country function very effectively in this role. But I think even more ought to be asked of a faculty member.

I believe the faculty’s responsibility is to profess, or to declare openly, bluntly, and without shame to students. All faculty members, regardless of discipline, should profess that which they have judged and believe to be true. As you can see, this verb is transitive, too, but it evokes a different set of images than “to educate” does. Professing is fueled by energy, passion, and commitment. It thrives on presenting opinions and creating opportunities for students’ current beliefs to be challenged, reinforced, and, when appropriate, modified. The word conjures up images of professors we all have known, who make us want to do something, or be better at doing something, or stop doing something. They are the
professors we remember not only from our personal experiences, but from those favorite
teacher movies of mine, Finding Forrester, Dead Poets Society, and, of course, Good Will
Hunting. They are the professors we remember and look back on fondly years after we
have left their company (Keep this in mind when reading Dana’s chapter following mine.).

Beyond this fundamental responsibility to profess, I also believe there is a more spe-
cific moral obligation for faculty in parks, recreation, and leisure. When I speak of a moral
obligation, I mean that which is compelled by one’s ethical conscience. I also mean that
which leads to behavioral change. I’m talking about those occasions when I so completely
believe something is right that I must act on it. I am aware of three such occasions within
parks, recreation, and leisure: social justice, sustainability, and healthy lifestyles.

To be crystal clear, I believe faculty in parks, recreation, and leisure have a moral
obligation to profess social justice, sustainability, and healthy lifestyles in their classes
—regardless of more specific subject matters (like programming or sport management
or youth development). We are an applied field with roots in human service, dedicated to
understanding and improving the human condition and our connection to the larger world.
We exist to ensure that all populations have access to park, recreation, and leisure oppor-
tunities and to the benefits that flow from them. To that end, we must redress systemic dis-
advantages to achieve social justice. We also exist to ensure that our natural world remains
healthy. To that end, we must strive for sustainability in the name of environmental justice.
Finally, we exist to promote people’s physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being
for the sake of their quality of life. To that end, we must advocate for healthy lifestyles,
and prepare and challenge our students to become engaged citizens in their personal and
professional lives. That requires a lot from students themselves.

**Student Responsibilities**

I have faith in students or I wouldn’t be in this line of work. Indeed, I’m banking the fu-
ture on students. I believe students are developmentally capable and sufficiently motivated
to be the authors of their own educational experiences. I believe students are also capable
of reading. I believe they understand that paying tuition provides access to a higher educa-
tion and that the benefits of that education are within their reach. I also believe students
must stretch themselves to grasp those benefits. Finally, I believe students are up to the
demands of citizenship in a participatory democracy. So what should the students’ respon-
sibilities be in “getting their money’s worth?” Five responsibilities come to mind:

- Students should choose a course of study that authentically suits them. Their major pro-
  vides the context for learning the skills of a democratically engaged citizen. Relevant
  context makes for meaningful learning.
- Students should engage with faculty and other students outside of structured learning
  environments. Social and recreational settings provide unique opportunities for imme-
  diate feedback and informal learning.
- Students should engage in assignments to grapple with ideas of substance.
- Students should remember that the university is replete with learning opportunities
  outside a particular course of study. They should take advantage of what the broader
  campus community has to offer.
- If students are not getting what they need from classes, they should ask for it. Most
  faculty members are thrilled to help students find meaningful ways in which to engage
  the material.
This Book’s Challenge

There is a point in Good Will Hunting when Will chastises Shaun (Robin Williams) for reading and surrounding himself with the wrong books. The implication is that the right books are the ones that move us to think. Dan and I trust this is one of those books. It focuses on “shoulds” and “oughts.” We invited specific people to profess their opinions about issues that are important to them. We wanted these conscientious, self-reflective educators to have an opportunity to speak their minds without having to navigate the social science process. I believe their writing will resonate with you, and maybe even reinforce your own thinking. I also believe you will disagree with some of what they have to say, perhaps vehemently. That comes with the territory. I wish you the intellectual pleasure of being validated in your thinking and the intellectual discomfort of having your thinking shaken to its core. More than anything, though, I want this book to move you to action based on your moral convictions, and to make it unnecessary for you cough up that buck fifty in late charges at the public library.

Discussion Questions

1. Karen suggests that the primary purpose of a higher education is to prepare students for civic engagement in a participatory democracy. Students, on the other hand, often think of higher education as a “ticket” into the workforce. What do you think is the purpose of a higher education?
2. Do you ascribe to the “banking theory” of learning, or do you see learning as a give and take between faculty members and students? Given your answer, who, then, is primarily responsible for your learning?
3. Do you expect your teachers to lecture, educate, or profess? What are the differences? What are the potential costs and benefits of each approach to a higher education?
4. Think of your favorite and least favorite teachers. What are their differences? Why are some memorable and others forgettable? What advice would you offer a new teacher who wants to make a lasting, positive impact on students?
5. What, if anything, do you think a college education provides you that you couldn’t get for a buck fifty in late charges at the public library?