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Career AND Education

This column has tried periodically to point readers to books, often fiction but also non-fiction, that describe professional careers in sufficient depth to be instructive. The most recent specific example was the column “Career Paths and Biochemistry Books” of March 27. The purpose has always been to offer insight, especially because that is such a difficult thing for young people to gain early on when approaching college choices. I know that from my own children and grandchildren.

Then, an article appeared in the New York Times by Bret C. Devereaux on April 2, 2023, whose title, “Colleges Should Be More Than Just Vocational Schools,” made me take pause. Have I, in my own words, tilted the playing field too much in terms of career planning, rather than developing a learned and learning mind?

Devereaux, Assistant Professor of History at NC State University, begins with this observation: “The steady disinvestment in the liberal arts risks turning America’s universities into vocational schools narrowly focused on professional training. Increasingly, they have robust programs in subjects like business, nursing and computer science but less and less funding for and focus on departments of history, literature, philosophy, mathematics and theology.”

He offers irony: “History majors had a lower unemployment rate than economics, business management or communications majors, and their salaries barely lag behind in those fields, according to a recent study. Art history majors do just fine, too, with strong projected job growth in the next decade. And despite the sneers, those with bachelor’s degrees in philosophy have an average salary around \$76,000, according to PayScale.”

His main point, one that we might all share, is that higher education must also serve good citizenship in a free and democratic society, that a breadth of learning and knowledge makes for success in a pluralistic society such as this country is, and in the mélange of global nations and national cultures.

That brings me directly back to public Libraries and the words spoken to me by longtime public Library leader Lois Albrecht more than once, that Libraries, as informal educators and as free resources for all, matter most as protectors of democracy. It is no stretch to say that for universities, too, in their roles as part of the formal education system, the primary focus should be on serving to build an educated and humble participant in democracy, and not just on career or vocational aptitude. Both matter, of course.

In an ideal world, we should all be seeking that broader education in books, too, and at all times in our lives. Perhaps, it is even fair to say that a university’s most important mission is to teach its students to be lifelong learners, including by reading books on their own. In that way, public Libraries and universities are natural partners in purpose.

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Devereaux has reminded me to say that, even while I have on these pages, in previous columns, spoken pointedly at times of only vocations and careers. So, this, in the spirit of true learning, is my course correction. Thank you, Bret C. Devereaux, for reminding me, and all of us, with your insight.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation