

Liberal education and the over-justification effect

The Cranky Professor

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Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

One of the actions in the proposed academic plan is to create “co-curricular transcripts recognizing extra-curricular activities that contribute to academic development.” Creating such a thing is a bad idea for a whole host of reasons.

One is that extra-curricular activities that contribute to academic development are already recognized on students' transcripts. Anything that contributes to academic development will do so by having a positive effect on a student's ability to concentrate, for instance—or on her ability to follow complex trains of reasoning, on her ability to write well, her ability to see fallacies, her ability to appreciate an insight, or on her ability to stay on topic. If something isn't contributing to one of these abilities, it isn't contributing to her academic development. But the abilities I've listed are just what a student needs to do well in her courses. Thus, a student's participation in extra-curricular activities that contribute to academic development will be recognized in that student's higher grades.

Put the other way, if participating in an extra-curricular activity makes no positive difference to a student's grades, participating in it doesn't contribute to that student's academic development.

Of course, the abilities I described above give just my view of academic development. Others might have a different view. That fact points to a second reason co-curricular transcripts is a bad idea. Just about anything a student does outside of classes could, in someone's mind, count as contributing to her academic development, whether in fact it contributed or not.

The action is framed as having to do with academic development, but its effect will be to bring onto the transcript whatever those who compile it are keen to see on it. “Contribute to academic development” is just window dressing.

Third, certainly among the activities favoured by whoever compiles the co-curricular transcript will be volunteer activities: helping out at a food bank, say, or reading to children. But it's not a volunteer activity if it is done to earn an external reward. Those who really mean to volunteer their time and effort can, of course, simply not have the activity recorded on a transcript. And then they can compete for jobs with those whose volunteer activities are on display for all potential employers to see.

The point is that recognizing volunteer activities on co-curricular transcripts devalues true voluntarism and encourages students to take a mercenary attitude toward helping others.

Each of these three criticisms is, I think, sufficient for removing co-curricular transcripts from the academic plan. But let me explain a fourth strong criticism.

Some things we do in order to obtain a reward (or to avoid a penalty), other things we do for their own sake. No one does laundry for the joy of doing laundry, but lots of us play hockey just for the sake of playing hockey. Some of us write poetry for the sake of writing poetry, some of us engage in conversation for the sake of engaging in conversation, some of us feud and fight for the sake of feuding and fighting. It's what we enjoy.

Psychologists have noticed something interesting that often happens when we are encouraged by the promise of a reward to engage in something we think we should value, or that we might have enjoyed, for its own sake. They've noticed that our motivation flags, that we find we don't value or enjoy it for its own sake.

Some call this phenomenon the over-justification effect. Quite often, a person who enjoys gardening but then begins to receive money or praise loses interest in it except as a source of money or praise. A person who used to enjoy helping out doesn't enjoy it so much once it's the source of an external reward. Children who like to read don't read as much once they can earn stars or quarters for reading.

The effect doesn't always attend the introduction of an external reward, and sometimes (very rarely) a person will find herself enjoying for its own sake something she was tempted into by an external reward.

Yet when the effect appears, it is destructive. It robs people of a sense of what really matters to them.

The move to have Saint Mary's introduce a co-curricular transcript is an invitation to the over-justification effect. It's bound to affect badly the sense students have of what really matters to them.

One might respond that we've got external rewards all over the place already. Students are looking for good grades on papers and in courses, they're looking for approval from peers, they're looking to get on the Dean's list, they're looking for credentials, and on and on. That's true, and all of it is worrying.

The fact is, we cannot as an institution do without systems of external rewards. Still, whenever we think to introduce a new one, we need to be careful that it not diminish the student experience. Right now at Saint Mary's, as our university in ethos and commitment becomes an institution concerned primarily to prepare graduates for the work force, we don't need anything else to come between us and what matters to us for its own sake.