

A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR WALKER AND HIS LACK  
OF A LIBERAL VIEW

Ralph E. Hillman

Before we examine what appears to be the heart of Dr. Walker's viewpoint, let's take a brief look at his background. His background or lack of it may account for the apparent need for the change he indicates.

When I left graduate school, I had a job and had to report to work before graduation so my diploma was mailed to me. Anyone who carries it out under his academic gown has to be a little suspicious.

I continued my career in academia after I got my terminal degree. I did not leave graduate school looking to train ancient or medieval rhetoricians. I left hoping to train teachers to be better communicators. The university I went to work for even required its students to learn as much as they could about making good communication decisions so that their speaking would be more effective and proficient. Now believe it or not, the Communication and Theatre Department (affectionately referred to as CAT) was in the College of Liberal Arts. The whole college was devoted to training students to think, to make good life decisions, and to be able to handle themselves while at work or at play.

Before I leave my graduate school days completely, I must tell you that I, too, like Walker, was trained as a rhetorician, right out of Aristotle. But unlike Walker,

I chose to use those tidbits of ancient wisdom in pursuing a modern career. Even though Dr. Walker and I were educated within a decade of one another, there appears to be some difference in the main emphasis of the departments we attended. There is also a real possibility that the difference lies in the personalities, motivations, and attitudes of the two people currently being discussed. The emphasis Dr Walker came away with led him to pursue his career in ancient and medieval rhetoric. The emphasis in my graduate program led me to train people to communicate.

Leaving the graduate school background for a moment, let's move to the heated debate Walker refers to. As presented, one gets the feeling there are two extreme poles with varying positions between those poles. Basically, if I understand Walker's position, you are either in support of Liberal Arts as education for life; or education to train you for a job in life. Even more specifically, is speech a major to educate you for life in general; or training to educate you for specific jobs?

Following his statement of the problem, he then asks some of his "rhetorical" questions: Are Liberal Arts Departments declining because we've suggested students should take it to be well-rounded? Then comes the killer; if we were high school seniors entering college, would we enroll in our department with the curriculum it offers? And finally, What

can you do with a major in speech? I would like to respond to each of those questions one at a time, because I think they are more than just rhetoric.

Education for life was the watch word for Liberal Arts long before I took my first course in college. I have no trouble with that stance. The faculty did their best to relate "their" material to my life in most of the courses I took in my college career (including graduate). Most of my college courses were alive and exciting. Generally, instruction was related to real life activity. Yes, I was often told to take a course because it might be good for me, but later I learned that I had indeed learned some things I could use. Most of the time even I could see the relationship between what I was learning and how I could use it.

I do agree with the Walker assertion that some Liberal Arts programs are declining in enrollment because certain majors have not kept up the relationship between what students are learning, and why they are learning it. It is interesting for me to note that quite frequently faculty members from Liberal Arts programs that are declining, are from the training and attitudes often alluded to by Dr. Walker. So I would have to take a look at the personalities, motivations, and attitudes of the students involved. For that reason, I would answer the second question, Would I enroll in this department for a major? with a yes and a no. The yes

comes first: Because most of the faculty cares. Because many of the faculty are doing other things outside the department which helps make their department contributions more interesting and exciting. Because many of the faculty do exemplify the very things they are trying to teach. (Now, don't get me wrong, they are not perfect; yes, there are problems). Then there those whom I would not recommend majoring in our department. Those students who simply want the degree after 4 years; those who have no intention of getting involved in a college career; those who would graduate but not to their advantage or the school's.

Yes, we do need some curriculum changes, and lots of additions to match the talent and expertise of our faculty. Yes, we need to keep the rest of the Liberal Arts college on its toes by keeping alive the relationship between what they are learning and why they are learning it.

But since I'm urging high school seniors to major in our speech program, what can you do with a major in speech? The old canned answer to that question, particularly from Walker's viewpoint was "teach." A better answer to that question is "communicate yourself into a job." The old assumption has been (regardless of the training) if you have the skills as certified on paper we'll hire you to do that job." The world is changing. The labor force is bigger and employers can be picky and the simplistic argument doesn't work anymore. If it is used the classic rejoinder is "are you any good at those skills?" And if

those skills have to be talked about, obviously, the job seeker isn't very good at communicating his proficiency and the interview ends.

However, if as faculty, we have done our job, if we have made that student see the relationship between his/her learning and why he/she is doing it and motivated him/her to be good at what he/she is learning, he/she will be hired.

But what "job" can you do with a major in speech. Without making any attempt to exhaust the possibilities, let me list a few opportunities I've seen recent graduates take advantage of:

1. Advertising
2. Computer Interface
3. Journalism
4. Management, in almost any field
5. Public Relations
6. Sales
7. Tourism

The graduates that I'm thinking of here got their first out-of-college jobs not by just showing off credentials on a resume, but by exhibiting their communication skills and convincing the interviewer that they were the ones for the job.

To make this opportunity available to more of our college graduates, we as faculty need to be better communicators. Among ourselves, we need to revamp and continually

"work" on our courses and curriculum. Among our liberal Arts colleagues, we need to persuade for the changes and growth that will keep Liberal Arts with its world view and decision making skills alive. Among students, we must continue to work to make them see that what they are learning can be used, and insist on mastery so that the students are proficient. Among our peers in business and industry, we must continue to learn to educate: we must learn what they want and need for manpower and we must educate them so that they will discriminate and hire those who do communicate.

The question is not whether we should educate for life or educate for specific jobs. As educators, we are obligated to do both. If we are not making our courses interesting and exciting, the real problems are the teachers not the subject matter.

It is not time for us to throw in the towel, nor is it time to turn in Aristotle. Our job continues to be to so enlighten students that they can use the information provided by Aristotle and Goldhaber (and a few others between) to get jobs.