MAKING A LIFE *SIGNIFICANT*: WILLIAM JAMES ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

For William James, a principal aim of education in a democracy is to prepare students to become responsible citizens of high moral character who help to counter adverse influences of popular culture, corporate practices, and powerful media on society. An important role of colleges and universities is educating young people to be responsible citizens by guiding them to choose worthy goals and ideals for themselves. In this article, implications of these ideas are presented for current educational practice in light of recent research in the areas of students' success, moral development, and service-learning.

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INTRODUCTION

William James's influence pervades much of contemporary American life, and higher education is one of the many areas where he has left his footprints. For James, a principal aim of education in a democracy is to prepare students to become responsible citizens of high moral character who help to counter adverse influences of popular culture, corporate practices, and powerful media on society. An important role of colleges and universities in educating young people is to guide students to create, pursue, and test worthy ideals for themselves while helping to provide them with the best means to achieve these goals. Contemporary research in student development and achievement supports James's claim. In this article, I will draw from James's writings to provide seven characteristics of a worthy ideal. I will discuss the implications of these ideas for current educational practice in light of recent research in the areas of students' success, moral and civic development, and service-learning.

In "Social Value of the College Bred," James (1987b/1908) compared a democratic society to a ship subject to winds of shifting forces produced by decisions, actions, beliefs,

and voices of its people. Citizens choose, for example, their own sources of information, entertainment, and edification, such as newspapers, journals, magazines, and books—what James called the "popular university" (p. 112). Through the choice of media, and the money spent associated with these choices, a nation's people creates celebrities and public intellectuals, as well as political leaders, who in turn promote other efforts relating to specific interests and values—forming complex interrelationships of influence.

James agreed that naysayers of democracy have properly identified its weakness: when choosing for themselves, individuals will tend to choose what primarily appeals to their self-interest or satisfies their hunger for excitement or both. Voters, for example, often elect leaders who promise them immediate personal benefits and who rouse their interest with convincing rhetoric and dazzling showmanship, so that what makes the *popular university* popular is that it provides amusement rather than illumination. Uncontrolled emotions can eclipse one's sense of what is fine, excellent, and moral, said James. The combination of "passion" and "prejudice," for example, led to the wrongful imprisonment of Alfred Dreyfus (1987b/1908, p. 110) in 1894. Paradoxically the will of the people can lead to enslavement, and unrestrained emotions can be devastating forces that hurl the ship of state to shipwreck.

As a means to steer the ship of democracy in favorable directions, James pointed to the "college-bred." While special interests pull and tug the ship in many directions "amid the driftings of democracy" (1987b/1908 p.110), college graduates, through their leadership and active participation in society assume the pilot's role. Colleges strive to provide a structure that educates citizens to promote, apply, and evaluate general standards, traditions, and values that were passed down to them, while at the same time, the colleges are a seed bed of new ideas and theories. In addition, the college experience can teach students to become worthy members of society by helping them (a) to recognize admirable goals and actions in others (1908/1987b) and (b) to choose noble goals and actions to which they devote themselves (1899/1983b). "Education, enlarging as it does our horizon and perspective," said James, "is a means of multiplying our ideals, of bringing new ones into view," (1899/1983a, p. 163). Thus, helping students to bring new worthy ideals in view that enrich their lives and those of others, that is, to create for themselves significant lives, is an important role of the university.

James did not offer many examples of worthy ideals in his writings, but in essays such as "What Makes a Life Significant" and "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," he provided his audience with some useful characteristics. First, an ideal must be stamped as

truly one's own as a result of personal reflection and experience; it must not be imposed from the outside because a person cannot be sincerely devoted to someone else's ideals (1899/1983a). Second, an ideal must point us into new directions, compelling us to view and experience things differently (1899/1983a). Third, a worthy ideal is something whose pursuit demands our focused attention and dedication (1899/1983a). Fourth, it must be feasible (1911/1979a) but yet pursued with some significant degree of struggle and thus not quickly nor easily attained (1899/1983b). Next, an ideal is something whose achievement must alter one's life in fundamental and constructive ways 1899/1983b). Sixth, an ideal's worthiness must be judged on the basis of its consequences in experience (1899/1983b) and is often altered in light of new knowledge and experience. Finally, the pursuit of a worthy ideal must at least be compatible with others' pursuits of ideals so that there is an achievement of balance of goods for all beings in the world (1891/1979b, 1899/1983b).

BARRIERS TO HELPING STUDENTS TO PURSUE THEIR IDEALS

Helping students to pursue their ideals and interests is a difficult challenge for the college and university, however. For one thing, because an *all-inclusive* knowledge and appreciation of others' inner lives are impossible, what we see is only "partial," and we fail to understand many significant aspects of experience in various venues and versions (1899/1983a), including those of our students .

Second, as "practical" persons, we are in the business of taking care of our own responsibilities, and we tend to value what relates to our lives over what relates to others' lives (1899/1983a). Concern for the other as an individual tends to decrease in the context of an institution or organization, argued James. As the size of an institution increases, so does its individuals' preoccupation with institutional responsibilities and the myriad policies and practices that are involved, a phenomenon that James often called *bigness*. In his essays on education he frequently pointed a critical finger at unyielding institutional structures with their fragmentations of disciplines and emphasis on technical rules and procedures that suppress those students who envision alternative and more creative ways of looking at the world (1903/1987c; 1903/1987a). Consequently, determining what the students' interests, needs, and aspirations are, as well as helping them to realize those aspirations, is increasingly neglected or impeded (1903/1987a).

For example, James often expressed concern that he saw young scholars in the US aping their professors who had been trained in German institutions. He indicated his

displeasure that in some institutions where departments of philosophy had become so professionalized, professors talked only to fellow professors and others who were sympathetic with their own theories and models (1909/1977), thus encouraging students merely to repeat the ideas of others without questioning them or thinking for themselves. He noted that students who were not encouraged to think for themselves simply followed the bad habits of their professors by making the merits of any claim dependent, not on the degree of empirical truth of the claim, but only on the prestige of the one who pronounced it.

In contrast to playing these "rules of the game" as James called it, he often challenged and went out of his way to encourage his students to think for themselves (Angell, 1996), and he bore criticism from young people of his own ideas with "inexhaustible patience" and "*human* attention" (Miller, 1996, pp. 125-126). While at times younger students criticized James for his informal approach because they had little chance of merely repeating lectures on tests and assignments, they would later praise him because he had moved them to think on their own (Boodin, 1996).

James also argued that students should be exposed to worthy actions and goals of others in many different contexts in order that they might emulate a general sense of worthiness—but in distinctive ways that they choose for themselves. One way students can be exposed to pluralistic notions of worthy goals and aims, he noted, is through the study of biographies, histories, and literature. These works abound with examples of heroes and heroines from all walks of life, social classes, ethnic groups, and cultures (1908/1987b). Adding human elements, what James called "humanistic values" (p. 107), or the historical-biographical-cultural-dimension of human life, to various disciplines such as geography and mathematics provides insights into the struggles, failures, and accomplishments of human experience.

Another way that young people can be exposed to pluralistic goals and aims is through the involvement of community service. Although James did not suggest in his essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910/1982) that civic engagement be a requirement of a *college* education, his call for a non-military national conscription of youth in this essay expresses an attitude that would be sympathetic with such a requirement. James proposed that young people go to work side by side with those in the community who perform heavy physical labor or menial tasks and that doing so would "get the childishness knocked out of them" (p. 172). Instilling in young people the habit of aligning with some worthy cause, James argued, is a means of building their character, increasing their hardiness, and

expanding their tolerance of others' perspectives. By learning to sacrifice for others and becoming part of a larger force with which they can identify with pride, youth would be able to nurture virtues in themselves such as responsibility, cooperation, unselfishness, perseverance, courage, and self-discipline.[1]

Assuming various roles in the community helps to prepare them to be citizens and leaders in a democratic society, which requires contributions from many different sorts of leaders, activists, thinkers, and doers. James cautions that it is crucial to understand that superior individuals come in various "wrappings" and labels or without any labels at all (1908/1987b, p. 111). And new ideas can ferment in the least expected locales and from the most surprising people (1899/1983a; 1899/1983b). Providing students opportunities to learn from others without judging those others on their outward or superficial packaging such as appearance, lack of sophisticated language, or other accidental properties can teach them to take the time to uncover the excellence in human beings that may be hidden (1908/1987b).

James, therefore, argued for a holistic educational experience that exposes students to many different kinds of activities, fields, disciplines, courses, and resources.

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Teaching students to recognize human flourishing, by adding what James called "humanistic values" in a field or discipline, as in historical-biographical-literary contexts (1899/1983b), has large support in contemporary research (Glanzer & Ream, 2009; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). What James seems to have meant might be explained by *identity formation* (Glanzer & Ream, 2009). Each individual has many identities that are connected by a guiding identity or *meta-identity,* which gives meaning and purpose to one's lived existence, while ordering other identities in one's life. In times of identity conflict, it is the meta-identity that guides the individual to choose the identity to which she is most loyal. Meta-narratives (in stories, histories, and so on) help to shape the moral identity by means of their influence on what qualities, virtues, and beliefs the person thinks would make up the ideal self.

Frequently administrators and faculty do not focus on this type of identity formation because they often cannot agree on what aspects define human identity and what it means to be a good human being. Instead, institutions, on the whole, focus on those aspects that define the more narrow identities (on which they can agree): for example, a trained mathematician or geologist. University leaders and faculty can also largely agree on what specific values,

methods, and role models can aid students in their development of these narrow forms of identity. In turn, the majority of universities have shifted away from "fully human" educational approaches (Glanzer & Ream, 2009, p. 3), which were a central focus of education institutions in the past. The approaches included those policies, curricula, and practices whose purpose is to help students to become good human beings.

While narrow types of identity formation are necessary for educating young people to succeed in various vocational aspects of their lives, Glanzer and Ream argued that educational institutions who promote *only* these forms of identity formation fail to address the multidimensional aspects of human experience. As a result, universities communicate to students that an educated and thriving person's meta-identity is, for example, reduced to successful student, scholar, or professional, not good human being, and thus all other identities are subsumed under the narrow identity. When moral conflicts arise, the meta-identity takes over, and its powerful influence may cause the individual to seek to succeed in a vocation at all costs—including condoning or performing actions that are unethical.

Glanzer and Ream (2009) wrote that higher education leaders and faculty should make choices about policies, programs, and curricula based on a deep appreciation of the rich and complex concept of human flourishing that would result in offering a wide scope of *human* approaches—such as curricula and co-curricula that would be rich in the historical, biographical, and literary narratives (as James had argued for), which help to shape the human meta-identity of students

James's determination to coax from students their own ideas and encourage them to choose ideals for themselves also receives much empirical support from contemporary research in college student development theory. Baxter Magolda's research on *self-authorship* (e.g., 1992, 2009, 2009b, 2009c) examined the different stages of development of college students in relation to the way they process and construct information, deal with ambiguity, and contend with authority, and she proposed ways that programs and practices, both inside and outside the classroom, can help students to become more independent thinkers, learners, and actors.

Baxter Magolda (2009c) asserted that self-authorship is evident when individuals can have confidence in themselves to analyze and evaluate information from external sources and deal with uncertainty—not just rely on perceived authorities—in order to make wise choices. Those who author their learning have the ability to perceive the complexity of knowledge while seeing the need to apply their own perspectives, at the same time collaborating with

others—acts that add personal meaning to the learning process. Crucial in this stage is the ability to have "interdependence," that is, being able to rely on others for various reasons, to share opinions, consider others' perspectives, while being willing to change one's own perspectives and to challenge others' ideas or expectations without the fear of losing one's own self-identity (Baxter Magolda, 2009a; Parks, 2000). Encouragement of self-authorship of students' learning is furthered in the following ways: showing respect for students' ideas and feelings; encouraging them to interpret their experiences as educational opportunities; collaborating with them in problem solving while sharing the learning experience with them; focusing their attention to the complexity of their life's work and decision-making while discouraging simplistic resolutions; empowering them to make choices about their lives; and helping them to work interdependently with others to solve common problems (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; 2009c).

Students must not only make academic decisions in college, but they also must make independent choices about how to live with others and what sort of career paths they take, as well as how to prioritize their personal values. But Baxter Magolda (2004) argued that students' complex transformation from merely depending on external authority to relying on internal judgment takes the whole university community—faculty cannot do it on their own.

Baxter Magolda (2004) suggested that faculty and student affairs leaders form *learning partnerships* that can help bring about the conditions that encourage students to develop self-authorship. Student affairs leaders work with students in various facets of college life: community service and civic/political engagement; multicultural affairs; residence living; leadership; judicial rights and responsibilities; sororities and fraternities; interfaith cooperation and dialogue, and so on.

These partnerships are needed in all higher education settings but especially in public universities, with large class sizes, the type of educational institutions that are much more financially accessible to the majority of students but whose lack of attention to individuals' needs and interests has been found by researchers to be detrimental to student success and well-being (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Dalton, 1998). These findings that measure what is referred to as human scale and psychological size reflect what James referred to as the harmful effects of bigness.

One particular type of campus partnership that has been highly successful in many ways is service-learning. Service-learning involves linking academic and student affairs

efforts while connecting the inside-outside classroom experience. Butin (2010) defined service-learning as a "linkage of academic coursework with community-based service within the framework of respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection" (p.1).

Service-learning is distinguished from other outside-the-classroom experiences such as co-op education, internships, and practicums because its aim is to promote civic skills and attitudes (Battistoni, 2000; Bringle &Hatcher, 2009). It is distinguished from community outreach and volunteer programs, as well as student service clubs and organizations, because it integrates academic practices and course content with community service activities in the framework of structured learning outcomes (Zlotkowski, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). James's essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" is often cited as a major theoretical influence on service-learning programs. On its website, National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (NSLC) pointed to James in its timeline as helping, along with John Dewey, in "developing intellectual foundations to service-based learning" (NSLC, n.d.) and specifically cited "Moral Equivalent" as a primary inspiration of the establishment of service-learning organizations. The essay was credited with inspiring the founding of the training camp for the Civilian Conservation Corps, which in turn served as a model for the Peace Corps, VISTA, and Americorps—and subsequently many national service organizations that exist today (Gower, 1965; Roland, n.d.).

Along with an increase of service-learning courses, programs, disciplines, and initiatives (Butin, 2010), research on the effect of service-learning involvement on students' ethical decision-making, civic engagement, and appreciation and toleration of difference in others provides a window into its role in student development and learning. Jones and Abes (2004) connected the potential of service-learning experience with self-identity reflection and self-authorship; service-learning experience can help form a more integrated identity while encouraging personal and social responsibility.

By and large, service-learning engagement impacts educational, personal, social, and civic behaviors (Conway, 2009), promotes teamwork and leadership skills, and fosters intergroup relationships (Svinicki, 2004; Levesque-Bristol & Stanek, 2009). Service-learning has been an important means of re-igniting civic and political engagement in college and university students (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Butin, 2010). In terms of attitudes, it brings about changes in perceptions regarding those whom one serves (Conway, 2009). For example, in one study those who participated in an immersion service trip indicated that they experienced a considerable

increase in compassion toward others in contrast to those who did not participate. Students who demonstrate considerable empathy as a result of such activities may do so because they have undergone more tangible ways of experiencing how varying conditions of individuals' lives may affect their ideas and behaviors (Plante, Lackey, & Hwang, 2009).

In addition, service-learning can often position students in roles where they assume more responsibility in their learning experience while maintaining supportive interactions with faculty and fellow students, and the combination of autonomy and nurturing relationships contributes to positive effects of service-learning (Levesque-Bristol & Stanek, 2009). One of the most significant aspects of this type of engagement is the continuous interchange of ideas and conversations that cut across perceived differences which occur during the time of the experience as well as during the reflection afterward, involving those being served, fellow-students who serve, and supervisors, faculty, and peers with whom students are connected (Keen & Hall, 2009).

Confronting difference can also create conditions where students challenge traditional beliefs that they have taken for granted. Questioning assumptions often changes attitudes and points of view (Mezirow, 1991). In addition, when students' engagement is at particularly high levels, their ethical decision making abilities are positively affected (Hoyt, 2008).

The Women's Studies Program at the University of Central Florida is an example of a service-learning program where civic engagement much as James describes in "Moral Equivalent" provides a fundamental link between the program's undergraduate academic interdisciplinary approaches (similar to James's account of historical biographical studies, i.e., the "human element") and the Orlando community and beyond. To complete their service-learning requirement for each course, students spend fifteen hours in community service and design a project, present their work to their fellow students, and write a reflective essay relating their community experiences with course context. Participating in a weekly blog allows them to share their reactions with their fellow students and instructor (Crosby, 2010).

One focus of the academic/service-learning experience is the examination of women's roles in both historical and contemporary life. At the same time students are studying the ways social and political structures are understood in terms of how they shape and are shaped by women's roles in society, students actively engage in experiences in the community that directly relate to the subject matter of their courses. As students interpret what it would be like to assume the roles of the women with whom they engage in service, they are also

exploring what roles they see themselves as assuming in the complex society in which they live.   Opportunities for service experience range from tutoring at-risk young girls to serving as a victim advocate, to engaging in campus and community activism (Crosby, 2010*).*

Not all scholars support the argument that service-learning or any other higher education program should include moral and civic development of college students as a focus. Some critics, such as Stanley Fish, argued that thinking that a college education can prepare one for a moral life is confusing one set of values (i. e., academic ones) with another set of values, and this confusion can be detrimental to the quality of education (Fish, 2003, 2008). Egger (2008) maintained that service-learning is a practice that by means of appealing to students' emotions indoctrinates them to behave in certain ways according to a pre-accepted value system. A university's purpose is to train the mind, not to promote emotional reactions (Egger, 2008).

Exley (2008) contended that the downside of requiring students to become involved in community work is that supervisory adults who are involved, such as faculty, staff, or administrators, are often unqualified to deal with student developmental issues that arise when students encounter emotionally charged settings. Some faculty admit that sometimes neither students nor their teachers are always able to handle effectively the consequences when students confront the darker side of life—which can happen when they volunteer in the community (Welch, 2010). Exley (2008) argued that service-learning experiences may often center on conventional, prescribed outcomes such as voting and volunteering, but may not be intellectually stimulating to the point that ignites students to think critically about their responsibilities to society.

Furthermore, it is a challenging task to measure outcomes of service-learning experience. Research points to the fact that such involvement may influence students in numerous ways, in many different degrees, and at different points in life. Deeley (2010) emphasized that any sort of educational change from any college experience may not be noticeable or realized until years after the involvement; on the other hand, what may be construed as transformative in the college years may be only momentary.

Finally, the wide range of service-learning programs includes those with little structure to those that are highly organized academic programs, and research continues to compose a larger and more detailed description of the most effective characteristics of program types and leaders and others involved in the process (Butin, 2010).

CONCLUSION

James, in responding to critics such as Fish (2008) and others who insist that academia should not focus on creating moral civic leaders, would argue that in order to seek to have a deep understanding of the meaning of *student*, and of the education needs of a student, one must consider what the student experiences in her day-to-day world as a physical, emotional, social, and rational being. As we have seen, research in effective educational practices increasingly supports the Jamesian notion that the educational environment should cultivate the multi-dimensions of the self—helping to integrate self, world, others, and notions. Astin and Astin (2010) argued that universities should recognize that in addition to an exterior life of students that can be observed, measured, and tested, students also possess an inner life of emotions, anticipations, values, and ideals, as well as rational judgment, and much contemporary research suggests that one's academic performance both shapes and is shaped by this inner life. In turn, research also points to the necessity for educationists who serve different roles in the campus community to enter into partnerships that nurture students' confidence in their own individuality. Student development scholars contend that most young adults enter college life just at the point when they are trying to discover who they are and how they fit into a world much larger than they had earlier experienced.

Service-learning programs, as well as other campus-wide programs that have the potential to influence the development of students' critical decision making skills at higher levels, can lead them to consider the interests, wants, and needs of others while building in them the confidence and maturity to make decisions on their own. These types of program also help to increase the human scale of educational institutions that is vital for students' well-being. Like many other educational initiatives, service-learning has "an implied character development dimension that is defined by particular core moral values" (Dalton & Crosby, 2010). These core moral values, similar to those James described in "Moral Equivalent," include respect for others, appreciation of human differences, service, citizenship, and industry. In addition to recognizing that the education of young persons is a vital end in itself, James argued that education is also an instrumental good for democracy because it can provide qualified and knowledgeable leaders and participants in civic life.

The higher education setting is an organic whole of complex structures and processes, where persons have multiple interrelationships, needs, and perspectives. It has the potential to offer students the rich pluralistic experience for which James pleads. Once responding to a

student who thought James would be pleased that he was going to enroll only in philosophy classes to obtain his degree at Harvard, his wise professor quipped: "Jones, don't you philosophize on an empty stomach!" (Palmer, 1996, p. 31).

In a sense, James's vision of a pluralistic *universe* (1909/1977) is reflected in the pluralistic *university*. The college campus, he would say, should be a place for young people to try out their thoughts and ideas in a living laboratory that includes the guidance and support from caring adults who demand from students their best efforts. With such guidance, they can create and test for themselves the ideals that they hope will make their lives and those of others significant.

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NOTES

[1] James tended to refer to admirable virtues as "manly" in many of his writings (Townsend, 1996). The virtues he extolled in "Moral Equivalent of War" (1910/1982) are examples of "manly virtues" of the "military party" (p. 172).