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Vocational Education: Providing New Openings Toward Educational Excellence By George H. Copa*

At the present time, excellence in education is used very narrowly to mean performance in mathematics, science, social studies, English and foreign language. But, what if we were to think of excellence in education as referring to a student's quality of mind, manner of addressing a project, and way of dealing with situations in which they find themselves? Then, excellence of education would be talked about in terms of students' capabilities such as critical thinking, integrity, autonomy, fidelity, imagination, adventurousness, self-reflection, cooperativeness, moral sensitivity, persistence and strength of will.

And further, what if excellence referred to a capacity **and** its' expression? For if excellence was to require demonstrated expression, could it be learned if there was no space for encounters with the shapes, sounds and colors of real life? If there was no space for encounters with what it means to live in an inter-subjective world and no space for young people to find their own voices, to speak for themselves?

Also, if excellence referred to multiple capacities rather than only narrow intellectual skills, it would encourage educators to celebrate more energetically the diversity in young people's voices, perspectives and domains of human possibility? Perhaps with the above ideals drawn from the writing of Maxine Greene, a well known educational philosopher, we would have less fear of lack of productivity and our nation's standing in the world.

More than anything, our schools need new openings, new ways for young people to experience a sense of possibility, to become conscious of multiple realities, to effect connections in their experiences (both in and out of school) and create new spaces in which to move. Vocational education is one way to provide new openings for young people in our high schools in a way that is in keeping with the broader notion of excellence in education described above. My perspectives are shaped by a research study I recently completed with a team of others and focused on the purposes of vocational education in Minnesota's secondary

schools. The study described purposes based on an examination of present practice in a sample of selected vocational education programs in urban, suburban and rural high schools. What follows is a description of the purposes seen to be operating.

Vocational education is about developing a **feeling of competence** — about knowing there are some things you can do and do well. In this way, vocational education provides the opportunity to develop confidence in oneself — a sense of identity built on what you can do that is valued by others. For some students, vocational education is a unique, nurturing place (sometimes the only place) in the school where this self-confidence is acquired. It is a place where students can **express who they are** and who they might become in ways that have not always been traditionally available in the public school. This purpose brings to mind Tina who beamed because she was the best poultry judge in the region, John who was asked to assist fellow students with difficult welds, and Sara who had special needs but worked her way up to cashier in a model restaurant.

Vocational education in the secondary school is about **application** — application of what is learned in English, mathematics, social studies and science classes. It is about how to integrate what is learned in other places in the school — how to make it useful. I am reminded of the students who were using mathematics in calculating spray requirements or fuel efficiency or investment options. Or, students who were composing advertisements, writing business letters, preparing speeches, and doing oral histories. I am reminded of Ann who said, "Put it in terms of automobiles and I can understand anything." Vocational education can often be a **reason to learn** all of what the school has to offer. Surprisingly, students are very often unaware

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that this application is occurring; teachers do not often make this happening explicit although they see this as one of their important purposes.

Vocational education in the secondary school is about learning to **think through** practical problems of life — about figuring out for yourself, about considering options and about making decisions — all requiring higher order thinking skills. Simulated work and home environments provide a rich and immediately relevant context for these problems and practicing thinking and deciding skills. I am reminded of students who had to figure out why there were blemishes on materials moving through a sophisticated printing press or why a tractor engine wouldn't start or why a marketing strategy was not working. Vocational education does provide learning at a **wide variety** of levels.

Perhaps obviously, vocational education provides an opportunity for **learning technical skills** that relate to the specific tasks required in work situations, whether in business or industry or the home. It is immediately clear after sitting in a vocational education course and in talking to students that these programs are about preparation for life roles — they are teaching the adjusting of automobile brakes, balancing animal rations, synchronizing work flow in an office and the best way to care for an aging grandparent.

Vocational education **creates opportunities** for future education and life roles which may be beyond the expectations of some of its' students — it creates improbable destinies. Vocational education lifts the sight on life goals for these students. I remember Sue who was taking model office so she could support herself in college to study to become an aeronautical engineer and Bill who was a special needs student running a very profitable small engine repair business started in a marketing education class. On the other hand, vocational education can limit opportunities if, for example, it is perceived as not useful to those going on to college.

Vocational education in the secondary school is about developing **working relationships** among people — about how to compete and how to cooperate, how to lead and how to follow and the interpersonal skills that these behaviors require. Consider the learning taking place, for example, by the students who planned their marketing display together, who taught each other new roles as they rotated through the positions in a simulated office, who acted as shop supervisor. I remember an interview with a student who told me that learning to cooperate was one of the most valuable skills he was learning because later in life as a farmer he would need to cooperate with neighbors in order to have access to special farm equipment he could not afford to own by himself.

Vocational education is about **exploring life** — becoming aware of the work and life roles may

be of interest. This purpose involves becoming knowledgeable about who I am, what I can do, and how I can manage myself in the world. It is about trying out the job tasks in a commercial art business, the roles of single versus married parent, the multiple job applications of computers in the agriculture industry. It is about scrutinizing these experiences and developing "tastes" for what is most satisfying.

Vocational education is about **extending self** to the larger community. Students in vocational education experience planning and learning to provide service to others in the school and later to those outside the school. Services we observed included printing, typing, food service and repair. In addition to gaining technical and social expertise, students experience satisfaction and enjoyment resulting in increased confidence. They learn to think critically about their service, its place in the community, and their role and comfort in it.

Vocational education in the secondary schools of Minnesota is about **preparing to "go-on-stage"** with the work aspects of one's life — learning to manage time, the need for practice (sometimes tedious) to develop skills, the consequences of talent and lack of talent, the need for appropriate authority, and the handling of disappointment and success. Sometimes, tragically, this stage can be perceived by students and school staff as "off Broadway" or "second class" in relation to the other options available in the school's curriculum. What comes to mind is the teacher who said everybody in my class has been labeled a "loser" and some of the counselors and administrators who described vocational education as being for those who can only work with their hands. These perspectives foreshadow the plural meanings of excellence I noted in my introduction and the possibilities in multiple intelligences.

Vocational education provides a **change of pace** in the secondary school's curriculum. Vocational education classes are structured in different ways in terms of the use of time, student physical mobility and the role of the teacher. These programs are an opportunity to **learn in another** way. Students said vocational education classes are different because "I can move around, I can talk to other students, I can see a reason for doing, others depend on me."

Last, vocational education in the secondary schools as now practiced is about **equity** — not only the stereotyped notions of sex or race equity, but about equity with respect to access to learning and individual learner needs. Vocational education is about concern for every single student. Because of the structure and atmosphere in these classes and because of the teacher's knowledge of these students (including their home situation), students stop to help teach other students. Students who are falling

behind are quickly evident. Consideration is given to all aspects of a student's life in setting expectations and understanding achievement or lack there of. There is likely to be time and means and concern enough to "pull up" all students.

In summary, our findings confirm that vocational education programs are not of single purpose but rather have multiple purposes, some shared by other components of the school's curriculum and some more unique and perhaps more feasible through vocational education. Vocational education can be a place to learn, a way to learn and a reason to learn. Vocational education is an integral part of the idea of a comprehensive school — a place where the educational needs of **all** young people in a given geographic area can be met effectively and efficiently. Vocational education does contribute to educational excellence, meaning a quality of mind, a manner of addressing a project, a way of dealing with situations in which students find themselves. Vocational education does provide the space for encounters with the shapes, sounds and colors of real life, for encounter with what it means to live in an inter-subjective world, for young people to find their own voices required for excellence meaning a capacity **and** its' expression. And, vocational education energetically celebrates the diversity in young peoples' voices, perspectives, and intelligences. For all of these reasons it provides new openings, new beginnings for the young people in our schools.

Footnotes:

1. For more about the thinking of Maxine Greene on the topic of excellence in education see her article, "Perspectives and

Visions: Rationale for 'Foundations' in Teacher Education" in J. Derham, W. Peters, and T. Savage, (Eds.) *New Directions in Teacher Education: Foundations, Curriculum, Policy*, Texas A & M University, 1984.

2. For a more complete report of the study of purposes of vocational education in secondary schools, write for the report, *An Untold Story*, available from the Minnesota Research and Development Center for Vocational Education, Department of Vocational and Technical Education, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108.

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Some Statistics on Students in The College of Agriculture

The decade ahead may be the first in which trained manpower in agriculture is in critically short supply. The recent news about agriculture training programs in this state and in others has not been bright. Secondary vo-ag programs are being closed. Post-Secondary agriculture programs have been having a real struggle attracting enough students to justify continuation. Several programs in the state have closed. The College of Agriculture, University of Minnesota, has not been immune to the decline in interest in professional agriculture. In Minnesota, as in many other states, enrollments have declined since the peak years of the late 1970s.

Since the College of Agriculture is the only 4 year college of agriculture in the state, you may be interested in where the students come from. The following statistics help describe the character of the student body. They were shared recently by Gene Allen, Dean of the College of Agriculture.

- I. **Number of Undergraduate Students (Fall '84)** 1,192
- II. **Number of Graduate Students (Fall '84)** 578
- III. **Degrees Awarded (1983-84):**
 - B.S. 339
 - M.S. 101
 - Ph.D. 56

IV. Age Distribution of Undergraduates:

Age (years)	Fall 1983 (%)	Fall 1984 (%)
≤ 24	64.6	71.0
25-29	23.6	17.3
30-34	7.4	8.0
> 34	4.4	3.7

V. Students From Seven County Metropolitan Area

Fall 1983	58.2%
Fall 1984	58.7%

VI. Students From Seven County Metropolitan Area

Fall 1984 - Female	36.7%
Fall 1984 - Male	63.3%

VII. Summary of Students Who Transferred to College of Agriculture From Other Colleges (Fall 1984):

A. Twin Cities Campus		number
	College of Liberal Arts	197
	General College	30
	Other Colleges	79
	Subtotal	306
B. Coordinate Campuses		
	Duluth	11
	Morris	15
	Crookston	26
	Waseca	64
	Subtotal	116
C. Minnesota AVTIs		6
D. Minnesota Community Colleges		
	N. Hennepin	24
	Minneapolis	23
	Worthington	12
	All others	70
	Subtotal	129
E. Minnesota Private College		62
F. Minnesota State University System		44
G. Transferred from Colleges in Other States		
	Wisconsin	33
	South Dakota	9
	North Dakota	7
	Iowa	7
	Other States (27)	57
	Subtotal	113
H. Transferred From Colleges in Other Countries		
	Morocco	3
	Nigeria	3
	Other countries (24)	29
	Subtotal	35

I. Percent of Students Who Transfer Into The College of Agriculture = 68%