



A Well-Rounded Education: The Gateway to Successful Careers and Lives

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ABSTRACT

Michael Goldbloom explains how his education in Liberal Arts and Law has helped him pursue careers as varied as lawyer, newspaper publisher, community leader and now, Principal of Bishop's University. He believes that learning good communication skills in elementary and secondary school as well as interacting with others in an effective and respectful way are key elements to any future career. His family's emphasis on education and community involvement was critically important to the educational and career choices he made. He makes a case for the model of the small university as an ideal community for young people to develop their academic skills, participate in sports or artistic pursuits, contribute to student life and forge relationships with fellow students and professors. Lastly, Mr. Goldbloom supports the idea that entrepreneurship should be a key ingredient in postsecondary education, not just for business students, but for all students to have the ability to manage their careers.

What educational experiences that you have had, either formal or informal, have given you direction or inspiration for what you do?

now lead a liberal arts university and, interestingly, my own educational background makes me something of a poster child for a liberal arts education. I studied modern European history and literature in university. I went to law school and I'm now on to my fourth career. I practised law for ten years. I worked as a journalist and became a newspaper publisher. I ran a major community organization, the YMCA, and now I'm leading a university. I never realized when I was studying

history and literature in university or studying law, that that education was going to prepare me for these different careers. Each one of these learning opportunities is something that prepares you for the next challenge you're going to take on. Thus, I believe strongly in the value of a liberal arts education as it prepares you for a variety of different fields and work experiences.

Your career path has traversed some interesting terrain. Can you talk about the skills you have drawn out to navigate these contexts so successfully?

The most important skill that both my education and my work experience has given me is the capacity to understand what other people's perspectives and interests are and a way to listen to and to work with people to inspire them to give the best of themselves. If there is one thing in common about all my work experiences, it is that the organizations that I have worked for succeeded when there was a common understanding within the organization of our values and objectives as well as a real opportunity for individuals to give the best of themselves and to feel an ownership in our success. Whether it is a community organization like a YMCA or a newspaper or a university, the same basic formula for success applies.

There are many interesting similarities between a newspaper and a university, which I did not anticipate. One of the unique aspects of a newspaper is that the journalists are trained to be skeptical—not to take things at face value—and they bring that same skepticism not just to the outside world but to their own employer. They feel a greater loyalty to the truth, however they define it, or the pursuit of the truth than they may feel to the organization they work for. And if you are running a newspaper with journalists, you have to be able to be prepared to defend, explain and engage ... and it is much the same in university. Why do people become professors? They do so because they are interested in pursuing the truth, however they define it—and their sense of loyalty is first and foremost to their academic discipline, to the truth of their field, more so than loyalty to the institution itself. Given that we expect professors to be skeptical, which is part of their intellectual training, we have to be prepared to explain, defend and listen—and at the same time to inspire. There are undoubtedly some common threads to my work experience. Perhaps my time in law made me a better advocate, because you also have to be able to advocate for a point of view. Leadership is about listening, it is about bringing people together, but it is also about being able to have a sense of where you want to go, and being able to make a compelling case for going there.

What role has your family played in your career?

A very significant one as I came from a family where education was the top priority. My parents and grandparents placed the highest value on education, and they made significant sacrifices to send all three of their children to university in the United States. They believed that an outstanding education was one of the greatest gifts that they could provide to their children.

With regard to my education in a broader sense, my maternal and paternal grandparents were all actively engaged in community service. My paternal grandfather was Montreal's first physician to specialize in the care of children; my father is a physician, my mother is a social worker. Their professional lives were dedicated to providing service to the community. The pursuit of education, not just for personal advancement, but in order to contribute to society, was modelled for me and my siblings throughout our lives. In that respect my family was critically important to the choices I made and in preparing me to take on a variety of challenges.

What do you consider to be the key ingredients for providing a successful elementary and secondary education?

I believe the basic written and oral communication skills are absolutely critical. Elementary and secondary school education are comprised of many facets, but the capacity to write and express oneself in a coherent fashion is absolutely vital to success in virtually every field. As far as I'm concerned, those basic skills are essential.

Schooling is also about socialization. There are very few things in life that one can do solely on one's own—and this includes careers and other pursuits. Therefore, learning to interact with other people in an effective, respectful way is paramount to any human being's success in terms of career aspirations.

Do you have any memories of how these skills were acquired by you in elementary or secondary?

I went to Selwyn House School, an independent school in Montreal. I remember that every second weekend we were required to write an essay—so we did a great deal of writing. I used to feel that I was cheating a bit because I used to review my essays with my father. But in fact it was the best education I could have

had. It was through those sessions with my dad that I learned to write. I remember in fourth grade we had a test in class where we had to write an essay. We had a double period, it was 80 minutes, and I wrote three sentences. Afterwards, everyone was panicked about the fact that “Michael can’t write.” Meanwhile, four years later I won the Royal Commonwealth essay competition, because my teachers were so committed to helping me learn to love writing.

I remember Ted Phillips, an interesting teacher I had at Selwyn House School. Most of us can point to a teacher or two who had a critical influence on our lives. He was my English teacher, and rather than doing whatever we traditionally did in English class, I remember that for several classes he read to us Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. We thought we were getting away with something, because we did not have to write essays or learn vocabulary or grammar ... I still identify my love for literature very much from Ted Phillips. I strongly believe that teachers have a capacity to inspire, and we are very fortunate when we are exposed to that type of teacher.

Based on this most recent experience that you’re having as Principal of Bishop’s University, what are the advantages and challenges for a small institution?

I had not thought much about that before taking on this role, but it has struck me that it is surprising how few universities there are in Canada like Bishop’s. The small, 2,500-student, undergraduate, primarily residential, liberal arts university is a rarity. That may sound like a lot of qualifiers, but there are only three or four similar institutions in the whole country. It may be hyperbole, but one could argue that Bishop’s is Canada’s western-most university of that profile. Lennoxville is only 40 kilometres from the U.S. border and if you throw a dart at a map of New England it would be hard not to land on a university like Bishop’s: Williams, Amherst, Middlebury, Swarthmore, Skidmore, Bates, Bowden, and so on ... We know that the model works. In the recent National Survey of Student Engagement senior students in universities across Canada were asked to evaluate their experiences in their universities. Bishop’s was the only university to be ranked in the top six in the five different categories. The students were also asked “If you could start over, would you go to the institution you are now attending?” Bishop’s placed first in the country. I don’t say that just to boast about Bishop’s. I think what it speaks to is that for a large majority of 18- to 22-year-old students, the smaller university where they can get to know each other and their professors, where there is an opportunity and virtually an obligation to participate in class, an opportunity to play on a sports team and write for the student newspaper

or perform in the play, is a better model for undergraduate education. I'm not saying that Bishop's is better at undergraduate education than anybody else, but rather that we are following a model which works. The United States recognizes that the small, liberal arts, residential university is a great environment for undergraduate education. And yet it is very much an exception in Canada because our funding systems make it very difficult to sustain. If I could launch a debate in Canada, it would be: "Are there ways that we can provide this type of undergraduate experience to more students?" That is not to say that the bigger universities with forty, fifty and sixty thousand students don't offer special advantages and opportunities to undergraduates. But I think for most undergraduates, if asked to choose between attending a class with four hundred students and a Nobel Prize winning professor or being in a class with 25 students with a less renowned professor, the latter option would be preferable. Most undergraduates will learn and grow more in a smaller environment than in a bigger one. I think we should have a discussion in Canada about whether the small undergraduate model is one that we wish to sustain and expand.

Universities talk about collegiality; it's one of the things that distinguish us from other organizations, from corporations, from other ways that humans govern their activities. Traditionally, universities operate in an environment of collegial governance. I think there is a lot strength that comes with that. There are, at the same time, significant challenges. One of the risks is that too many people may spend their time focusing on the internal politics or administration of the university, as opposed to putting more time and energy into improving their teaching, recruiting more students, or focusing on their research. I think one of the challenges that one has as the leader of a small university is to help strike that balance, to make sure that the community is able to continue to be fully engaged and invested and listened to about the evolution of the institution. But at the same time, that it does not become so preoccupied about its internal politics that it loses sight of what its most important mission is.

If we took that idea a little further about liberal arts colleges, what are the things you would envision in an ideal world for postsecondary education?

I believe that the world is going to require more and more people who are able to innovate, and that innovation is generally going to be driven by people who are able to draw on learning approaches from different disciplines, bring them together, and out of that something new will emerge. I believe in a liberal arts education because it encourages science students to study literature and history, and history

students to study science and math. It is through exposure to the different intellectual disciplines that the truly creative ideas are going to emerge. That is why we must maintain the breadth of learning that we are providing in our liberal arts institutions.

What else would I like to see? One of the terms I would use is *entrepreneurship*. I would like to see more of our students exposed to the principles of entrepreneurship—because through my career I have seen that the ability to develop and execute a plan is an essential skill that is critical to success in virtually any field. It is not just those people who want to go into business who must be entrepreneurs. I can say from having had a closer opportunity to observe academics that a great many professors are in essence running their own small business in which they are the “product.” These professors have to think about what they wish to achieve, how they will market themselves, where they want to get to, what resources are going to be required to get there, and how they can mobilize other people to support them.

We have outstanding drama students here at Bishop’s. When some of them graduate they’re going to go back to their home town and they’re going to start a little theatre troupe, performing Shakespeare in the park. Well the reality is you’re going to need some basic entrepreneurial skills in order to be able to do that. My hope for Bishop’s is that we are going to be able to take some of those entrepreneurship skills that we teach in our business school and provide more of an opportunity to students in other disciplines to have exposure to it. Equally, the ability to talk to 200 hundred people or to advocate effectively in a small group are skills that our business people require. Perhaps our drama department can help students in other disciplines enhance their communication skills—how you carry yourself physically, how you use your voice, how you marshal your arguments, all of those things. Although we already do a lot here, I think there is an opportunity to do much more, to help our students learn from the different disciplines that are available in the university.

How might educational institutions and businesses partner in innovative ways?

As in most things in life, successful partnerships are ones in which everyone is both giving and receiving. The university must go beyond turning to the private sector and saying, “We want you to give real experience to our students.” While it is true that some businesses will do that, we must find a way so that the businesses also benefit from the involvement of our students. There can be a virtuous circle between the professor, the student and the entrepreneur where all three can benefit. That’s where I think we can continue to do more, and in order to do that we need to reach

out more to the business community. We need to have a better understanding from the local business community: Is there teaching that we can provide to their current employees? And what are the skill sets they require in their future employees? The more that we can bring the external community on to our campuses, and the more that we can have our students go out into the external community, the better off we all will be.

In your next commencement speech, what advice will you give to graduating students?

It's so hard not to fall into cliché at convocation time. From my own career, one important lesson is that every experience has somewhere within it a learning opportunity that can help you discern what you should do next and help equip you to succeed. Some students will know precisely what career they wish to pursue. But many will not. And there is nothing wrong in that. I started out to be a lawyer and ended up as a newspaper publisher and the principal of a university. So no matter how uninspiring one's first job or graduate program may be, the key is to learn from the experience and then to move on.

Most of our graduates are not going to work all their lives for one organization or one company, or even in one field. Therefore, I would advise students to immerse themselves in whatever they are doing, to learn as much from it as they possibly can, and to take risks. That's classic commencement advice but people should not become too conservative too soon. I look back on my own career and realize how fortunate I was. I practised law for ten years. I learned a lot but I should probably have left earlier. I stayed at it because I was more conservative and more concerned about long-term security than I should have been. I would encourage young people to take some risks. I'm a big believer in taking a year off, travelling or getting a job in another part of the world. I don't think people have to rush into becoming permanent members of the workforce.

In conclusion do you have any additional comments about education for the future?

We must have universities whose *raison d'être* is first and foremost the teaching of undergraduates. That being said, I don't think that many young professors are embarking on academic careers with teaching as an exclusive priority. Therefore,

institutions like Bishop's are going to have to adapt to preserve what is best about us and at the same time make this environment sufficiently attractive so that a young professor, even if she is more interested in teaching, will have an opportunity to pursue a research career as well. That's a significant challenge of change for an institution like Bishop's and it's one that we are taking on.

The world is becoming more and more specialized. Again, for a smaller university, we need to make sure that we maintain the breadth of our liberal arts program so that we can provide our students with the full range of the *intellectual buffet*. At the same time we must focus on where we can provide significant strength, particularly if we are going to develop a more intense research agenda. Those are challenges for this institution. My hope is that we will continue—and all Canadian universities will continue—to draw students from across the country and around the world. It is a smaller world today and it is that much more important that the world meets on our campuses, that our young people have an opportunity in the relatively safe environment of the university to interact with people who are different from themselves. The capacity to interact effectively with people from other backgrounds and traditions will be critical in the world that our students will be stepping into.



Michael Goldbloom is Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Bishop's University in Quebec. Born in Montreal, he completed his undergraduate degree in 1974 at Harvard University (Modern European History and Literature), and completed law degrees at McGill University in 1978 (Bachelor of Civil Law) and 1979 (Bachelor of Common Law).

Mr. Goldbloom began his professional career in 1981 as a labour lawyer at Martineau Walker (now Fasken Martineau). In 1991 he became President and Chief Executive Officer of the Montreal YMCA, Montreal's oldest and largest community organization. In 1994 he assumed the reigns of another Montreal institution as Publisher of *The Gazette*, a position he held until 2001. In 2003, following a year as a Visiting Scholar at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, Mr. Goldbloom was named Deputy Publisher of the *Toronto Star*, and became Publisher one year later. In 2007 he was appointed Vice-Principal (Public Affairs) and Senior Fellow in Media and Public Policy at McGill University.