

The Rise of Careerism Among College Students

David E. Roland
Campus Minister

Brewton-Parker College, Mount Vernon, Georgia

Besides one's name and where he/she is from probably the next most asked question to a college student is, "What is your major?" Quite frequently that question serves as a conversation-starter in the lounges of a BSU center, the hallways of a classroom building, or the Sunday School rooms of a church. With the cadence one would have in the Armed Services, the student soon has the response down pat: Name—John Smith, Rank (Classification)—Freshman, Serial Number (Major)—Business.

Have you stopped to think of how students in your BSU or church are deciding upon the majors they choose? Have you as a minister with students thought about the vocational choices students are struggling with today? Have you seen any differences in the vocational direction of students during the last five or ten years? Some of you have been around longer and have seen the changes take place not only on the college campus but also in the lives of students. Vocational direction is one of the most vital concerns of college students which we as campus ministers and BSU's can have a major role in addressing.

Somewhere in the educational process, society has fallen into a rut. The game plan is this: go to college, graduate, get a job, and make plenty of money. The degree is simply the means by which one can get the most in the least amount of time.

By the sophomore year, the pressure becomes exceedingly great for the student to declare a major. For many, this decision is upon them before they graduate from high school. Barbara Walters spoke of this hidden pressure in a recent commencement speech at Hofstra University.

This is not only the day when you are most confident, it is also the day when you are most vulnerable. Look at me, I sound like someone who really knew what she wanted and got it. Baloney. When I was graduating from college, I hadn't a clue. You don't have to know now, and you probably shouldn't know exactly now. The next time somebody says, "And what are you

going to do?" try saying, "I don't know yet," What a relief. You may not even want a career. You may want a job and something else: more time for yourself, more time to write, paint, explore, create, The hardest thing you will ever have to do is to trust your own gut and find what seems to work for you.¹

The problem many college students face in deciding on a major/career is the pressure exerted by outside sources (parents, peers, society in general). As ministers to students, we often will have the opportunity to relieve some of that pressure.

Times have changed, from the rebellious yet challenging students of the sixty's to the quiet, run-of-the-mill, self-centered students of the eighty's. Education and the university have seen a major renovation. The university has progressed from its earliest beginnings when undergraduate curriculum was dominated by the humanities and the primary purpose of universities was to train young men for the clergy.

Herant A. Katchadourian and John Boli, authors of the newly published book, *Careerism and Intellectualism Among College Students*, address one of the major changes which has occurred in higher education. Their primary focus is on the rise of careerism among today's college students. In the midst of this rise in careerism, a severe decline in intellectualism has occurred. The authors though are quick to point out that careerism is not all evil and that universities/colleges must find ways to make liberal learning and career planning complementary to each other, not competitive.

As mentioned in the book, numerous articles and books have been published recently which explore the significance of this current rise in student careerism, but few if any have focused on the student perspective. It is precisely this area upon which these authors place their major emphasis.

The central purpose of the book is, "to investigate the meaning and significance of intellectualism and careerism for college students themselves."² Katchadourian and Boli look at the major factors which shape the academic and career attitudes of college students: parents, teachers, peers, and academic background.

Why does a student choose a certain major/career? How does a student feel about his/her education? Questions such as these are examined closely in the book to see what differences

careerism and intellectualism make with respect to the different variables, i.e. parents, teachers, peers, etc. Katchadourian and Boli also examine how colleges and universities can best utilize the book's findings in helping each institution to be a better field of education.

Cohort Study

This study of an undergraduate experience at Stanford University was initiated in 1977. The purpose was to provide an opportunity where one could learn about individual students in more detailed ways. The study set out to accomplish this task through questionnaires and yearly interviews. Its goal was to investigate the academic and career choices of a cohort of freshmen (Cohort Study) throughout their four years at Stanford. As a result of these questionnaires and interviews, Katchadourian and Boli divided the cohort of students into four general typologies: Careerists, Intellectuals, Strivers, and the Unconnected. Excerpts of interviews are included throughout their findings. The following is a brief synopsis of the different typologies.

Careerists

The first of the four typologies which the authors describe is Careerists. The careerist is one who is independent, self sufficient, and single-minded in pursuit of goals. The careerist, as the term readily implies, has a strong vocational orientation. The students who fall in this category are: determined, high achievers, narrow-minded, and materialistic.

Careerists view the college experience as an opportunity to prepare for a vocation. They are not concerned about education for its own sake but rather are concerned and motivated by the advantages education will provide for their career. They have few intellectual and social interests outside those related to their careers.

In comparison to the other typologies, careerists are more willing to sacrifice their liberal education for the sake of their career aims than any of the other groups. The careerist represents the extreme end of those interested in vocational purpose and emphasis.

The careerist's attitude is actually formed before one goes to

college. Even the decision to attend college and the choice of which institution to attend weighs heavily on this orientation.

Careerists are more than likely to be men than women. They also are more likely to come from a middle to upper-middle class families. Students of higher socio-economic status are less likely to be careerists because of a desire to obtain a more liberal education.

Of the four groups, parental influence is strongest here. Many have parents who are themselves careerists. The parents want their kids to get their "money's worth" out of a college education. From the parents and students viewpoint, the investment of a college education is measured in terms of financial success upon graduation.

Faculty and academic advisor's have little impact on careerists and their decision-making. As one might expect, these students have a keen interest in the job market and they choose fields which are more likely to provide job opportunities following graduation. Careerists choose engineering more than any other major. Only six per cent major in humanities. Ninety-two per cent of careerists plan to pursue careers in one of the big four professions: business, medicine, engineering, and law.

The careerist does not ask, "What kind of work will I find interesting and rewarding?" but rather "What will offer me the greatest income, security, and status in the future?" As one can see, careerists are more likely to emphasize external rewards over intellectual interests and other sources of personal satisfaction. These students are set in their ways. They know what they want to do and are less likely to change their minds. Careerists work very hard. They take little time off and hardly have any time for social life and extra-curricular activities. The following excerpt of an interview will give you, the reader, an example of a "hard core" careerist.

Peter's immediate goal is money. Money is a substitute for happiness in the sense that it will "make comfortable the search for love and happiness." He isn't too concerned about his occupation—it can be anything that makes money and it seems that he wants to be in an occupation that has to do with handling money. He's also very interested in gaining power (he's really "into power") and will do this by making money.⁴

Intellectuals

The intellectuals are the opposites of careerists. The very title of chapter five, "Students as Intellectuals—Learning for the Joy of It," implies the different reasons why intellectuals attend college. To intellectuals, college is a place where they can broaden their horizons and develop intellectual capacities. Their reason for choosing a school such as Stanford is based more on its reputation for academic excellence rather than how it will help further one's career.

You may be quick to assume that this student is one who spends sixteen hours a day in the library reading Shakespeare or that intellectuals are always smarter than the rest of their peers. This, though, is not the case at all. What sets apart this student is his/her attitude toward intellectual issues. They essentially are looking for a strong liberal education.

Who is an intellectual? It is someone who is personable, thoughtful, intellectually curious, and academically serious. These students are mature and articulate. The intellectual has a *high* level of satisfaction with his/her educational experience.

Most intellectuals are women and come from upper-middle class families. The parents in most cases are more likely to be intellectuals. Where in careerism, parents tend to push students toward a specific career and faculty have little effect on the student's choice in a career, the reverse is true for intellectualism. Parents tend to take a more indirect approach and allow their sons and daughters to make choices on their own. These parents give the student room to grow! Faculty are more of an influence as well with the intellectual.

Of course, it is no surprise that thirty-one per cent choose a major in the humanities. These students, though, are least likely to go on to post-graduate school. Again, intellectuals choose majors/careers not for wealth and prestige, but for humanistic and academic reasons. As a result, these students tend to change their career plans more. Intellectuals are looking for a career where personal fulfillment is the goal rather than money.

Intellectuals have varied interests. Spreading themselves too thin, intellectuals are involved in more extracurricular activities than any other group. Intellectuals are involved in outside academic projects as well as volunteer service. The following excerpts are from some interview reports. They help illustrate

the extracurricular life of an intellectual.

Music and debate have been a big part of his extra-curricular life.

She is finding it difficult to reconcile her political and religious involvements, since many of the friends she has made through her political activities are antireligious and many of her Christian friends are politically conservative.

"If you have a day off, what would you do?" "I'd go to San Francisco and visit museums."⁵

Intellectuals are good students. They do well in the classroom. They feel good about their education. One can quickly see that the authors favor the intellectuals. To Katchadourian and Boli, intellectuals come the closest to fulfilling the aims of a college education.

Strivers

The strivers try to have it both ways. They value a liberal education yet they are concerned about successful careers. A few maybe can have it both ways but for most it is not possible. It is simply too much to ask of one individual.

Strivers are abundant in enthusiasm and energy. They have a positive attitude toward college. The core of these students are very impressive and usually succeed in getting the best of both worlds. Yet it is important for the reader to know that this is only a minority of students.

Strivers seem to be equally represented between males and females. The men tend to lean toward careerism while the women favor intellectualism. Many of these students are likely to be from ethnic backgrounds and come mostly from blue-collar lower to middle class families. They have a strong drive for upward mobility.

In career decision-making, strivers are influenced by faculty and parents. This is a noticeable difference when compared to the careerists and intellectuals. Strivers are evenly distributed as to choice of major. Engineering and business are fields that attract many strivers. Because strivers try to have a liberal education with careerist-like of goals, they tend to overextend themselves. In trying to accomplish too much, strivers often accomplish too little.

As one might expect, strivers are less focused. It is hard for them to make up their minds. They do care about the quality of their education. Strivers are eager to finish college and begin work on a career.

While in school, they are active in extracurricular activities but not as active as one would tend to believe. Again, this is an example of their overextension. These students, who have a high energy level, do not do as well academically. Yet, strivers are less complicated and have clear educational aims.

Strivers tend to be very excitable and infectious students. Ambitious is an understatement in describing their future. The following interview gives an example of their high energy lives.

Brenda can move with ease from a vigorous tennis match at 4:00 p.m., to formal dinner at 5:30 p.m., and a pretest chemistry study section at 7:00 p.m. She runs two miles each day, she swims on warm days, hardly ever misses the flicks, goes to lots of speeches to hear "great people that you would otherwise only read about," plays tennis, practices the piano, plays the flute in her dorm musical production, yet she still worries a bit that she may be missing some opportunities here. She doesn't mind the whirlwind pace—life would otherwise be quite dull.⁶

Unconnected

Last, there are the unconnected students. This was the most difficult group for the researchers to interview and understand. In the authors words, "trying to describe this group is like trying to sail through a fog bank." These are students who fail to engage fully in their college education for no obvious reasons.

The unconnected student is difficult to understand. He/She is hard to put into one group because they are so different and unpredictable. They often seem aimless and lacking in enthusiasm. One student, when asked what his purpose was in pursuing a Stanford education he responded, "There isn't one. I have no idea why I am here. I am just here because I am here."⁷

Unconnected students are not as articulate and immaturity seems to be a factor. Yet there is more to these students than one would give them credit for. Many of the interviewers saw potential in these students.

Unconnected students are more likely to be men. They usually do not have good relationships with faculty or parents

(opposite of strivers) and as a result, neither have an influence on their vocational plans. This would tend to go along with their aimless approach to education.

Unconnected students are self-directed. There is a strong sense of individuality present in these students. Many of them though are uninspired, withdrawn, and don't care. One could quickly understand why the researchers had problems with some of these students.

One out of four of the unconnected major in humanities. History and English seem to be the most popular choices. Many of these students had no career plans during their senior year. For the most part though, the unconnected are only postponing career decision, not neglecting them outright.

The unconnected, in many ways, are looking for something to invest their lives in, but whether it is the inability to make decisions, parental pressure to attend college, or just that things have come too easily in life, they drift aimlessly through their college education. The following statement exemplifies what many unconnected feel: "I want to feel attached, I need to feel attached, I need to get outside myself."⁸

Summary

With these findings, the authors do not attempt to undergird the present undergraduate education nor do they try to offer checklists or guidelines explaining how a university or college could implement these findings into their current educational experience.

In the final chapter, Katchadourian and Boli suggest ways that this typology of academic orientation and its findings could be used in order to make improvements in a university's or college's undergraduate education. Changes are not going to occur overnight nor is a university or college willing to change its basic pattern of relating to undergraduates on the basis of a single book.

The authors' highest recommendation is that universities and colleges should conduct self-studies in order to understand what their curricular and extracurricular programs provide for their students.

Putting It In Perspective

How then do these findings pertain to our role as campus ministers? Does it affect the ministry of Baptist Student Union? As ministers to students, is it our "job" to help students with their vocational direction and if so how can we do so more effectively?

Careerism and Intellectualism Among College Students should be read by those who work with college students because it informs us about what today's students are thinking and doing in regard to vocations/careers. As we work on the college campus, it is our responsibility to know where students are heading and if they need guidance we can be there to help them. By no means am I suggesting we take the place of vocational counselors yet we can be another resource for students to turn to when they need to talk with someone regarding vocational direction. The students are coming to the university/college for educational purposes. As campus ministers, we need to realize this is just another of the many hats we have to wear.

As times have changed so has college education and with it student interests. As the statistics pointed out in the book, today we see few English or History majors but Engineering and Business majors are on the rise.

This change, though, has been across the board. With the rise in careerism, we have seen a more conservative and self-centered student develop. This has occurred not only in education but in politics and religion as well. It is a feeling of how can I receive the most without having to give up much. It is no longer Yuppies but Yuppies. What questions are your students asking: "How can I give of myself?" or "How much will I get out of this in four years?"

With all of this in mind, I believe this issue of careerism versus intellectualism has affected BSU. To what extent it is hard to say, but I believe we have seen the beginnings of it in the decline of summer missions applicants. I realize that there are many other factors which enter into this recent decline yet one can safely say that this overwhelming careerist mind set has definitely affected not only summer missions but all areas of ministry where college students have been actively involved. Are more students staying home in the summer working in jobs related to their majors/careers? Are students more interested in

By no means am I trying to lump all students into one category nor am I saying that it is wrong for a student to pursue a career. Students today are more career oriented but they more than ever need understanding. The problem in careerism arises when career objectives compromise the prospects of obtaining a well-rounded education. English, philosophy, and music, to name a few, can provide an excellent background for law, business, or the medical field. Today's students need to hear this.

Whatever the type—careerist, striver, intellectual, or unconnected—we must not put them down. Within these different typologies are individual lives with individual concerns, goals, and dreams. Yes, we do need to take the time to help students in their vocational directions. It is another area of counseling where campus ministers will increasingly find themselves spending more time with students.

As we seek to provide a balanced approach of ministry to students in BSU, we need to be aware of these current educational trends. It may mean having a series on Vocation/Work. Invite counselors, college administrators, or faculty to come and speak to this topic. Have them simply share from a personal perspective. Students are not interested in fancy or colorful words; they are more interested in hearing how these individuals decided on careers and majors. It is interesting and comforting for students to know that highly trained professional people have also gone through periods of uncertainty or even failure.

It is easy for the average college student to listen to the voice of society. If anything, this book helps us to see that students can look to a variety of sources for help as they try to discern between the many voices which are vying for their attention. As campus ministers, we must not forget we are a valuable resource to the students. We must help them to see that there is more to life than money and possessions.

Frederick Buechner is right in his definition of vocation.

There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the Superego, or self-interest.⁹

How does one know? Buechner continues:

The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.

We need to be encouragers to some, discouragers to others. Many times we need to affirm or challenge a student. What Buechner says really goes well with the findings of Katchadourian and Boli's research. Many of our students need to be encouraged to take a chance. They need to branch out not only in their studies but also in their extracurricular activities. For the careerist, maybe he/she needs to be encouraged to apply for summer missions. For the striver who tries to do every thing at once, we need to say slow down. To the intellectual, we might need to encourage him/her to take a business course. To the unconnected, it may mean an extra year in school.

In essence, it is an attempt to help balance things out. Katchadourian and Boli said it well in the last chapter: "We need to create the context and learn constructive ways in which to maximize their assets and minimize their liabilities."¹⁰

Who are the students? Maybe you too would like to see more of a balance in their vocational goals. Make yourself available to the students as a resource for vocational counseling. Utilize the BSU program in addressing this vital need and concern of so many of our students. Let's help our students hear the voice of God rather than of society.

NOTES

1. Barbara Walters, in *Time*, June 9, 1986, p. 63.
2. Herant A. Katchadourian and John Boli, *Careerism and Intellectualism Among College Students*, (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985), p. 4.
3. Katchadourian and Boli, p. 83.
4. Katchadourian and Boli, p. 103.
5. Katchadourian and Boli, p. 146.
6. Katchadourian and Boli, p. 177.
7. Katchadourian and Boli, p. 185.
8. Katchadourian and Boli, p. 217.
9. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, (Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), p. 95.
10. Katchadourian and Boli, p. 221.