

Grinnell College

Office of Institutional Research Newsletter

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Issue 3, January 1999

A Culture of Confusion: Grinnell's Messages about Careers

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"I think [Grinnell's] more of a culture of confusion and indecisiveness."

"Grinnell allows me to feel comfortable about having no solid career plans."

"I chose Grinnell because it was a place that advocated the kinds of issues that motivate me."

"I would not be who I am without [Grinnell] and I will not be anything fulfilling if I am not able to use what I have learned."

"I try to push students to be aware of community and world events, to read a newspaper, but I feel like I'm pushing spaghetti."

"I think all the friendly people here have made me a lot more spiritual. I plan to go for a career in helping people and the earth. I will be poor but happy and will smile smile smile."

This is what we heard when we asked students and faculty members about the messages they heard at Grinnell and the ways in which these messages affect them. Our research has focused on the messages sent out by Grinnell regarding students' future career plans. This research was originally inspired by an email that an alumna, Sharon Doerre '89, sent to a Grinnell professor. She says: "I am sad to say that nearly every guy I've kept up with from Grinnell now makes good money (despite the fact that many of them had less than stellar academic records) while many of my female friends have either gone into academia and are just going on the job market, or took and kept very low-paying jobs with non-profits. Many of them seem stuck in a (Grinnell-induced?) attitude that business is evil...While at Grinnell, all of my friends were roughly equal in their anti-corporate beliefs, but once in the real world the men seem to have found the route to satisfying, well-paying work much easier than the women." Alumni data supported her observations, indicating that, while males and females are equally likely to rate their jobs as meaningful, interesting, and conducive to growth, males are more likely than females to also rate them as having adequate pay, benefits, and security.

This email and these data made us wonder if such connotations of business really do exist here and if there is a noticeable division in the ways in which men and women hear about and think about business. When we began our research, we expected to find gender differences in career plans and in students' connotations of business. We wanted to see what messages students were receiving about business careers, where they were hearing the messages, and how they were responding to them.

Methods

We began by interviewing twelve students and surveying sixty, asking about their connotations of business. We then conducted another round of interviews, asking students to articulate what Grinnell's messages about specific careers are. We consolidated respondents' answers into a list of possible career and post-graduate plans. This list became a survey that we distributed to 200 students, attempting to maintain a relatively equal balance of males and females and distribution among class years and majors. After analyzing the data reported on these surveys, we also looked at alumni data to determine what Grinnellians are hearing and what they're doing with the messages they've received.

Social activism and life-long learning

Many of the activities which students said were most strongly encouraged by Grinnell culture could be divided into two major categories, which could be labeled life-long learning and social activism. Life-long learning would include such survey items as "further your education" and "have a career that stimulates you intellectually." Social activism would include such survey items as "work towards the betterment of humanity," "take a stance in community and world events," "work for an environmentally friendly organization," "join the Peace Corps," and "be an activist." Survey respondents felt more encouraged by peers to be socially active, and more encouraged by professors and classes to continue their education. These messages coincide with the college's mission statement, which says Grinnell's ultimate goal is to "educate citizens and leaders for our republic and the world beyond our borders." Taking a stance in community and world events, then, is encouraged. Community service is also a main tenet of Grinnell and many feel encouraged to work towards the betterment of humanity. The emphasis on knowledge and the importance of learning as much as possible as a way of heightening one's awareness of the world around them is also obvious in the encouragement students feel towards furthering their education. These messages come out stronger in some majors. For instance, anthropology and sociology majors report feeling more encouraged to join the Peace Corps than do students in the other major groupings we looked at, which consisted of biology/chemistry, economics, and art/music. The top ranked message for anthro/soc was "work towards the betterment of humanity," whereas for bio/chem, it was "have a career that stimulates you intellectually."

Business and making money

"Have a career in business," "make money a priority in choosing a career," and "work for a big corporation" were the only activities thought to be more discouraged than encouraged by Grinnell overall. One reason for this negative attitude toward business may be a narrow vision of what working in business entails. When we asked students about the connotations of "business," most responses fell into the following categories: money/greed, hierarchical and rule-bound, exploitative of people and society, long hours of hard and boring work, and little contact with other people. One student says "we talk about business as an evil entity taking over the world with no allegiance to any country, polluting the environment, and exploiting workers." Furthermore, many respondents indicated that they thought working in business, working for big corporations, and making money are directly opposed to social activism. Social activism and business, therefore, are seen as mutually exclusive. Director of the Career Development Office Steve Langerud says, "I find that many students eight to ten years out call me and say, 'Steve, are you sitting down? I've gone into business,' or 'I'm enrolling in an MBA program.' Many of these students find that the best way that they can make a difference is by making money to give to whatever causes they choose and by working to change things within the system." Langerud's comments suggest that although students may have a narrow vision of business while here, thinking that it's not possible both to do well and do good, this vision is perhaps broadened after more experience outside of Grinnell.

Economics majors hear that having a career in business is more encouraged overall. Art and music majors feel it is more encouraged to make money a priority. We know that this message has changed over time. There used to be a business major at Grinnell. More recently, however, in 1968, an outside evaluator found that students wanted to go into business but felt that they were discouraged by faculty. Today, it seems more discouraged by peers than by professors. Mark Montgomery, Associate Professor of Economics, believes that careers in business are less discouraged now than they were a decade ago. He agreed that Economics encouraged careers in business more than other departments, but that they do not streamline their students into business careers. A senior econ major says, "when I first came here, I didn't

care about making money, but now, I feel pressure to get a job that will make me a lot of money."

Education and artistic careers

Teaching K-12 and artistic careers seem to carry mixed messages. It seemed that students within these areas felt discouraged to pursue them as careers, while people outside the areas felt that these careers are encouraged by Grinnell in general. A student said that an English professor had told her "that it would be a waste for someone with my abilities to go into elementary ed., that I should do something more challenging that would actually use my talents and intellect...And though I do still feel I would be good as an elementary ed. teacher, I also still can't shake this feeling I'd somehow be wasting my abilities in this job." Another student reported, "I'm working towards my secondary ed. certificate in French and English and I've never felt encouraged to do this. In fact, I've felt discouraged, especially from students. They perceive it as too practical and therefore not intellectual enough." We interviewed two professors in the education department, Jean Ketter and Martha Voyles, about this issue. Both agreed that teaching is discouraged by Grinnell, but that this is a reflection of society's views. Art and music majors were the only group to respond that it is discouraged overall to have an artistic career. "A lot of people here look down on artistic careers. They're not academic enough. But, they have conceptions of artists as fascinating, interesting people," stated one student. Another student commented, "I'm continually frustrated by the lack of respect and encouragement for art students at Grinnell. There is so much pressure for students to enter into the sciences that it almost stifles other programs." We interviewed Professor Bobbie McKibbin about this issue. She argued that art majors are encouraged to pursue an artistic career and mentioned many alumni who have gone into this field. She thought, however, that there is a representation of art as an easy major for students and faculty so, in this respect, it is looked down upon.

First years vs seniors

For many messages, first years seem to have a more clear-cut opinion on what Grinnell is saying about that message. There is much more agreement among first years as to whether a message is overall encouraged or discouraged. Seniors, on the other hand, are a lot more divided on some messages. The data show that, where first years heard a message as either strongly encouraged or discouraged, seniors were hearing it both encouraged and discouraged, making the message an ambiguous one for them. Messages such as "have an artistic career," "[don't] have a career in business," "acknowledge your privilege," and "take a few years off before making a commitment" are all ones which are clear-cut for first years and ambiguous for seniors. Messages such as "further your education," "work for an environmentally friendly organization," and "[don't] work for a big corporation" are the most clear-cut and least ambiguous for both classes. They are also the messages that students overall said were the most encouraged or discouraged. These are the main messages at Grinnell and it is not surprising that they are the least ambiguous.

This lead us to theorize: Students told us they came to Grinnell because of the messages it advertises. When first years hear these messages, they may not be fully introduced to diverse viewpoints regarding these messages. They have a definite opinion of what they expect to hear, and, as the results indicate, they hear one side of a message more strongly than another. Seniors, however, have been around the messages for a while and have heard more points of view on the messages. They have more opportunities to meet a variety of people, take different classes, and participate in discussions involving both sides of the messages, thus exposing themselves to the full extent of Grinnell culture and its opinions. Results indicate they are perhaps realizing that there are more sides to the issues than they heard and saw as first years.

Gender

A comparison of which activities women and men thought were most encouraged did not show any major differences. Since alumni data from all class years show that strong divisions of labor exist along gender lines, it is possible that males and females are getting different messages but that our survey did not capture the evidence. However, it is also possible that males and females are, for the most part, receiving similar messages but interpreting them differently once they leave due to other outside influences or constraints. When the alumni data from the past ten years are broken down in terms of gender, however, gender divisions become smaller. For example, while 65.3% of the 1,147 alumni working in business are male, 54.1% of the 183 alumni from the classes of 1989-1997 working in business are male. Though there have been more women entering business careers, these data confirm Doerre's hypothesis.

While here, both males and females heard the same messages. After leaving Grinnell, however, males are more likely to take a job in business. As the alumna also noted, careers in public and human service and volunteer work are female dominated.

Alumni

The top five alumni occupations for all alumni, as well as for alumni graduating in the last ten years, are business, K-12 education, health professions, legal professions, and writing/publishing/communications. It is interesting that the top two alumni occupations, business and education, are either seen as discouraged or controversial at Grinnell. Either Grinnellians change their vision once they leave, or they used to receive messages different from those received by current students.

Through our research, we have discovered more than we thought we would about the messages sent out at Grinnell. Our initial focus on business led to many issues we might not have considered and generated some topics of discussion that are interesting not just to students wondering what other students are thinking, but also to faculty, staff, and campus offices. We are planning future research for spring semester focusing on alumni and the messages they took from Grinnell and how they're incorporating them into their lives. We feel that our research forms the foundations upon which further studies and research can be based.

Thanks to: Carol Trosset, Scott Baumler, Brent Jaeger, Christy Ellis, and all the students and faculty members who allowed us to interview and survey them.

Messages (score reflects the perceived level of encouragement for this option)

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| 1. further your education (346) | 13. acknowledge you're privileged (141) |
| 2. work to better humanity (344) | 14. have a research career (139) |
| 3. intellectually stimulating work (341) | 15. take a few years off (131) |
| 4. take stance in community/world (322) | 16. have an artistic career (122) |
| 5. maintain individuality (307) | |
| 6. environmentally friendly work (298) | 17. work in K-12 education (76) |
| 7. join the Peace Corps (285) | 18. have a prestigious career (61) |
| 8. be an activist (267) | 19. be self-employed (58) |
| 9. do something you excel at (250) | 20. own your own business (43) |
| | |
| 10. work in academia/higher ed (184) | 21. have a career in business (-85) |
| 11. work in human services (175) | 22. make money a priority (-169) |
| 12. internationally focused work (172) | 23. work for big corporation (-172) |