Opinion
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At a time when faith in higher education is, at least according to some polls, at an all-time low, I find myself reflecting on how we reached this point as a society.

Long seen as a sure pathway to the middle class, a college education was a privilege parents desired for their children. And while there may be a growing population that is skeptical of higher education and the value of a college degree, that has not changed the basic fact that those with at least a bachelor's degree will make on average hundreds of thousands of dollars more than those with only a high school diploma over their lifetimes. There is, minimally, a material value to higher education.

As a college professor, I am obviously biased in favor of higher education. I have dedicated my life to the work of educating undergraduate and graduate students, researching and writing, lecturing and speaking. And as a theologian and philosopher, I believe in the importance of the humanities. I know firsthand the value of a liberal arts education, even for those who choose a professional career path beyond the humanities, such as in education, the health professions or business.

It is one thing to teach someone technical skills like how to make a spreadsheet or monitor vital health signs, but it is another to teach someone to become a critical thinker, writer and communicator. Regardless of one's ultimate career calling, the ability to think creatively and substantively about our admittedly complex world is a priceless value that supports and expands the intellectual and emotional horizons of all those who pursue such a path of learning.

But higher education, and the pursuit of knowledge more broadly, can also expand the spiritual horizons of the learner. This way of thinking, which is not exactly intuitive in our market-driven, transactional discussions of higher education today, was more common in the early Middle Ages.

Key Catholic thinkers in the 12th and early 13th centuries understood that academic study and intellectual pursuits are actually means to a greater end, a path toward holiness and restoration of the fallen experience of human nature (because we restore in ourselves the *imago Dei*, particularly that of divine Wisdom, the second person of the Trinity).

> There is a clear spiritual dimension to the practice of learning.

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In the 13th century, Franciscan theologian and doctor of the church St. Bonaventure (died 1274) expressed this most compellingly. But it is actually one of his intellectual forebears who has been on my mind lately: Hugh of St. Victor (died 1141), a significant 12th-century theologian and member of the religious community at the influential Abbey School of St. Victor in Paris. Hugh of St. Victor wrote a distinctive treatise on the importance of higher education and the role it plays in the spiritual life.

He has been on my mind partly because I am currently teaching a seminar that includes a focus on his life and work, and partly because I think his insight about education and the spiritual life can be instructive today.

Hugh of St. Victor, alongside others like Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Lombard, was one of the most consequential Christian theologians of the 12th century. His masterpiece is titled *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*, which is often translated as "On the Sacraments (or Mystery) of the Christian Faith." It is a comprehensive exploration of Christian doctrine, widely considered the first theological summa, which anticipated the popularity of the commentary on Lombard's *Sentences* in the 13th century that became the normative method for scholastic theology.

Hugh was also someone committed to the centrality of Scripture as a source for theological reflection and commentary, and he authored numerous spiritual treatises that are still studied today.

The text of his that concerns us here regarding the importance, role and value of education is his *Didascalicon*. The admittedly odd-sounding title comes from the Greek word *didascalica*, meaning, roughly, "matters relating to instruction." Written around the year 1128, the *Didascalicon* outlines Hugh's understanding of all areas of knowledge that are important to study. As the late medievalist Jerome Taylor explains, the work intends "to demonstrate not only that these areas are essentially integrated among themselves, but that in their integrity they are necessary for man [sic] for the attainment of his human perfection and his divine destiny."

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For Hugh, study — and not just study of "religious" things like Scripture or liturgy — was essential to be fully, authentically human and necessary to progress on the path toward closer communion with God. Rather than a merely utilitarian or practical exercise, studying the whole range of subjects from music and mathematics to medicine and theater to Scripture and theology helped people attain knowledge and pursue wisdom, which in turn advances us further toward our divine end.

Hugh understood wisdom to be inherently Christological, because for him, Wisdom (with a capital "W") was the Eternal Word, the second person of the Trinity. In pursuing wisdom, one opens themselves up to growing in knowledge, which is both an intellectual and a spiritual act.

Hugh believed that in our present, sinful state, we are ignorant and have lost our ability to fully reflect the image of God (*imago Dei*). For him, the pursuit of wisdom is the path to restoring the *imago Dei* and moves us along our journey toward holiness.

Because nothing is foreign to God, and all things come from and return back to God, there are no subject areas that are off limits for study. Hugh is distinctive in his time for this perspective, which is surprising to some, given his ardent admiration for and commitment to the study of Scripture.

Nevertheless, Hugh believed that all learning aids our ability to better reflect the image of God and dispel the ignorance brought about by sin. There is a clear spiritual dimension to the practice of learning.



Hugh of St. Victor writes his *Didascalicon* in a 14th-century miniature. (Wikimedia Commons)

Hugh was also pragmatic in his advice to students, focusing regularly on themes like discipline and humility (virtues that aid not only academic study but also one's

prayer life). At one point in Book III of the *Didascalicon*, he exhorts his readers:

> Now the beginning of discipline is humility. Although the lessons of humility are many, the three which follow are of especial importance for the student: first, that he hold no knowledge and no writing in contempt; second, that he blush to learn from no man; and third, that when he has attained learning himself, he not look down upon everyone else.

This advice is worth heeding today, especially in contexts where politicians and other activists are banning books and prohibiting certain subjects — like some uncomfortable truths in American history — from being taught in schools. This advice also invites a capacious sense of wonder and curiosity that is too often lacking in educational settings where mere rote learning and professional-skill acquisition is the only aim and an end in itself.

Hugh adds, "The wise student, therefore, gladly hears all, reads all, and looks down upon no writing, no person, no teaching."

In the preface to the *Didascalicon*, Hugh warns his readers against the sinfulness of willful ignorance. "Not knowing and not wishing to know are far different things. Not knowing, to be sure, springs from weakness; but contempt of knowledge springs from a wicked will."

And elsewhere he distinguishes between those who cannot or will not learn because they lack aptitude and those who disdain learning as contributing to this sense of wickedness related to willful ignorance.

This brings us back to the increasing skepticism among some people about the value of higher education, especially a liberal arts education. Hugh of St. Victor makes a compelling argument from the point of Christian spirituality that pursuing higher education is not necessary simply to attain employment, but that it also has significance for our spiritual lives and relationship to God.

Through study, especially broad and inclusive study across disciplines and fields, we draw more closely to that Eternal Wisdom, which is the source and goal of our lives. Along the way, we may become better people and neighbors to one another, learning from each other and building one another up in our pursuit of knowledge.

So, even if you are not convinced that higher education is worth your time, energy or money for the purposes of employment, consider Hugh's view that education may still help each of us become more truly ourselves while also deepening our relationship with God.