

I This chapter provides a rationale for the value of a liberal arts education, addressing briefly the recent history of the liberal arts, explaining the value of the liberal arts in diverse educational settings as opposed to simply residential liberal arts colleges, and exploring a contemporary rationale for the liberal arts.

The Landscape of the Liberal Arts

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The Liberal Arts

What are the “liberal arts”? The term has its origin in the medieval concept of the *artes liberalis*, the seven liberal arts that were appropriate for a free man (the Latin *liber* means “free”). On the other hand, the *artes illiberalis* or *artes mechanicae* were pursued for economic purposes and involved vocational and practical arts, which prepared young persons to become weavers, blacksmiths, farmers, hunters, navigators, soldiers, or doctors. The seven liberal arts included three basic arts focused on developing a felicity with language: grammar (or language), rhetoric (or oratory), and dialectic (or logic). These were known as the *trivium*. Added to these were the four advanced mathematical-physical arts: geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy, which were known as the *quadrivium*. The liberal arts were preparatory not for gaining a livelihood but for the further study of law, medicine, and theology. Today we understand the liberal arts to involve study of the arts and sciences, and we contrast the liberal arts with vocational education. Some college students major in the liberal arts; virtually all others take a certain percentage of their courses in the liberal arts, including basic subjects such as composition, mathematics, and history, as

well as electives in fields ranging from biology and economics to literature and philosophy.

The liberal arts today have fallen in prestige. In the early decades of the 20th century, about 70% of U.S. undergraduates majored in the liberal arts; today barely 40% major in the liberal arts. Research universities have seen movement of students to practical disciplines, such as business; many traditional liberal arts colleges are becoming hybrid liberal arts colleges, with a general education core but majors beyond the arts and sciences, such as education, nursing, and criminal justice; and community colleges have increasingly shifted their identity away from preparing students for college and toward developing vocational skills. More widely, we see American society reducing the value of higher education to its economic impact. The 2006 report of the special commission on improving American higher education, *A Test of Leadership* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), does not even mention the phrases “liberal arts” or “liberal education.” This loss of prestige is unfortunate for several reasons.

The liberal arts build on one of the oldest ideals of learning, which Socrates put into practice in ancient Greece. For Socrates it was clear that we learn more effectively when we pursue questions ourselves and seek the answers ourselves, when we embody what educators today call “active learning.” The student is actively engaged in the learning process, asking questions, being asked questions, pursuing often elusive answers in dialogue with others. Socrates also made it clear that learning is most important and most successful when students are engaged in meaningful discussions, asking questions that will determine who they are and what they think about life’s most significant issues. For example, what is human excellence? What is friendship? love? courage? How do we learn? What constitutes the just state?

A third pedagogical principle for Socrates, beyond active learning and meaningful learning, is that the Socratic method of engaging great issues through question and answer prepares the inquirer for further learning. Plato’s dialogues rarely offer answers; instead they leave the reader with an understanding of what she knows and does not know and the imperative to continue the path of inquiry on her own. To know something is not simply to mimic the truth but to be able to give reasons and arguments for that truth. This level of reflection ensures that the student will be able to defend a view against the arguments of future opponents instead of simply succumbing to their persuasive rhetoric; will be ready to apply knowledge in changing circumstances; and will be equipped to build on existing knowledge and extend it, via the same principles of searching inquiry and rational reflection, into new areas.

The idea that students learn more when they are themselves existentially engaged and active in the learning process, when they themselves generate their own questions, has been widely substantiated by empirical studies (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Liberal arts

students are frequently engaged in those kinds of activities that involve student-centered learning, such as small-group discussion classes, seminar papers, discussions outside of class with peers, essay examinations, and independent research projects.

Currently, a liberal arts education is most pronounced, and most prominently realized, at small residential liberal arts colleges. Such colleges offer a broad general curriculum as well as majors in the arts and sciences. They administer extensive extracurricular activities in an intimate and nurturing environment. The campuses are often idyllic, and classes tend to be small. Liberal arts colleges include such institutions as Amherst, Carleton, Pomona, and Wellesley. Most of the residential liberal arts colleges are private; however, public liberal arts colleges exist as well, such as New College of Florida and St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Community Colleges

Despite the frequent and indeed appropriate association of a liberal arts education with residential liberal arts colleges, a liberal arts education can also take place, not in quite the same form, but still in substantial ways, in other settings: at large research universities that house honors colleges or that have rich traditions of residential life; at comprehensive colleges with a high percentage of professional majors but with considerable requirements in the arts and sciences; and at community colleges, which now enroll over 40% of all undergraduates, by way of general education courses.

Today, however, the community college suffers from an ambiguity. Whereas they were originally focused more on the idea of opening up the first 2 years of college to a wider clientele, with the goal of seeing students transfer to 4-year colleges, the colleges have increasingly turned toward vocational programs, viewing those as their primary distinguishing mission (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Both options remain available. However, to the extent that the transfer notion becomes supplanted by vocational programs and training for lower-skilled positions, especially for less prepared students, the colleges serve less their implicit goal of fostering upward mobility. Still, it remains possible for a student with a weaker high school record to begin advanced studies in a community college, to excel in that environment, and then to transfer to a 4-year college, in some cases a relatively prestigious college or university. Moreover, both groups of students have access to liberal arts courses.

The Value of the Liberal Arts

For community college students who may transfer as well as vocational students who take some courses in the liberal arts, I suggest three reasons for the value of a liberal arts education: first, its intrinsic value, or the distinction of learning for its own sake, the sheer joy associated with explor-

ing the life of the mind and asking the great questions that give meaning to life; second, the cultivation of those intellectual virtues that are requisite for success beyond the academy, a liberal arts education as essential to a flourishing career; and third, character formation and the development of a sense of vocation, the connection to a higher purpose or calling.

A liberal arts education can be defended first and foremost as an end in itself; that is, it is of value for its own sake independently of its preparing students for eventual employment. As an end in itself, a liberal arts education contrasts strongly with the increasingly common notion of education as primarily a means to an end. A liberal arts education not only asks about higher ends and ultimate values, it is itself its own end. Becoming engaged with a range of disciplines and meaningful questions is an intrinsic good.

Through the liberal arts, students explore profound and evocative questions, engaging issues that appeal to their curiosity and desire for knowledge and deepening the restless urge to see how ideas fit together and relate to life. Great questions naturally form themselves in the minds of young persons. Our broader society lacks a rich culture of conversation that would embrace, rather than cast aside, such questions. But complex questions such as these are essential to a deeper understanding of the world and ourselves.

Even as students bring great questions with them to college, the university cultivates in them a curiosity about questions they had yet to consider: How do planets form, and how did life on earth arise? Do animals have consciousness? How does the mind work? What were the great turning points in history? What are the great artworks of the ages? Why do some countries develop successfully and others stagnate? What are our generation's most pressing moral obligations? None of these questions permit simple answers, and they do not all have practical value in the truncated way in which we tend to define practical value, but they do *matter* to students. To understand our world as it is and to understand our world as it should be are values in and of themselves.

When education is reduced to the practical and the instrumental, the question, how do I achieve this or that end, is valued over the questions: What ends should I pursue? What ends are most interesting and which are more worthy? We commonly reduce what is valuable or worthy to what we call useful, but the useful is useful only insofar as it serves other ends. What is (or should be) even more valuable than the useful is what is valued as an end in itself, that is, what is often passed off as useless: For instead of helping us reach some higher goal, it is itself a most worthy goal; the exploration of nature, knowledge of the social world, engagement with art and literature, contemplation, dialogue, friendship, and love are prominent examples.

Modernity tends to underappreciate the concept of intrinsic value. Being so gripped by substantive works and so immersed in great questions that we lose ourselves in them and temporarily ignore the external world tends to be an activity reserved for college alone and even then viewed with

suspicion. Such learning for its own sake is also often scoffed at as being only for the wealthy. Not really. It is for those who are interested in ideas and are willing to devote time to the great questions. For the past 15 years, residents of the South Bend Center for the Homeless have engaged in discussions of great works with faculty members from my university (Bronner, 1999). If we believe that practical needs must always trump the intrinsic value of intellectual pursuits, we impoverish ourselves. Such a view can be patronizing when a contrary approach that awakens intellectual development can be empowering.

Some goods not only have intrinsic value, they are also useful for extrinsic purposes. The power of sight, for example, gives us immediate pleasure, but it allows us to do many other things, from undertaking crafts to reading texts. A liberal arts education is another such good, and so it is important to stress to students and their parents the second value of a liberal arts education, its practical value. A liberal arts education helps students develop an array of intellectual virtues, the ability to listen, analyze, weigh evidence, and articulate a complex view. It assists students in sharpening their analytical and verbal skills and expanding their creativity. Familiar with the enduring achievements of diverse cultures, the liberal arts graduate is at home in a world of ideas. The abilities to communicate clearly, think critically, and solve complicated problems; the capacity to draw on a breadth of knowledge while patiently focusing on appropriate details; the savvy to appreciate difference, complexity, and ambiguity; and the desire to continue to learn are all fostered in the liberal arts setting.

Above all the liberal arts develop in students a refined ability to speak and write. A liberal arts education seeks to bring forward a capacity for logical and graceful expression. Such an education is dominated by writing and rewriting, in some cases short and concise essays and in other cases larger, more complex essays. The annual employer survey in *Job Outlook*, sponsored by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, invariably lists communication skills first or second in its hierarchy of desired capacities.

The ability to speak well is partly fostered in well-orchestrated discussion classes. With extensive feedback from faculty members and often from peers, students learn to participate meaningfully in the give-and-take of discussion, listening attentively and asking other students to clarify their points, articulating their own perspectives and offering evidence to support them, and asking good, searching questions that take discussions to higher levels. By engaging such issues, listening to others, and learning to organize and articulate their ideas, they develop the skill of communicating clearly and persuasively. This intense dialogue, fostered by the asceticism of the intellectual life, nonetheless makes the students more worldly and better equipped to engage others when they leave college.

Students who enjoy a liberal education develop critical thinking skills. They learn to unearth and question their own assumptions as well as those

of others. The common practices of one's own culture are subjected to a higher measure, namely, reason. Students quickly learn that this *modus operandi* is not simply an abstraction; it affects everything they do and choose to do.

A liberal arts education fosters independent thought, thereby encouraging students to challenge ideas that may be widely shared but which lack merit.

Breadth follows from the variety of subjects to which liberal arts students are exposed, giving them an array of resources to help them understand issues across the spectrum of human knowledge and activity. The variety of subjects helps foster the attitude that we can approach any problem in the historical or contemporary world with a range of appropriate questions, a curiosity that makes all events interesting, and wonderment at the ways in which issues relate to one another. In addition, it cultivates resistance to the widespread overspecialization that prevents us from seeing any particular issue from a wider array of relevant perspectives, including ethical ones.

Students learn to think issues through from every angle, and as new evidence is uncovered, they have the suppleness of mind to adjust their conclusions. In exploring the liberal arts, students see complexity where others see simplicity. They become more versed in the arguments for and against the important choices that face today's intellectuals and tomorrow's policy makers, giving them intellectual experience and confidence. By seeing all sides of an issue, they expand not only their intellect but also their capacity for understanding.

A liberal arts education fosters, not least of all through its discussion format, a hunger for knowledge and an innate curiosity, a love of ideas and a passion for meaningful information, a fascination with new discoveries. Liberal arts students gain an interest in ideas and intellectual puzzles for their own sake, and as they develop new knowledge and skills, their palette of problem-solving skills expands and their desire for even more strategies increases. A love of learning that encourages the capacity to continue to learn is the greatest hallmark of a liberal arts education.

Liberal arts students understand how to adapt to a rapidly changing world, which gives them confidence as they tackle projects in new areas. The capacity for change and innovation is especially important in an environment that requires dramatic shifts in employer and employee tasks and projects as technology, cultural contexts, and market forces change. A young American today with at least 2 years of college can expect to change jobs at least 11 times before retirement (Sennett, 1998). Not surprisingly, a 2013 survey revealed that the four areas where employers most want to see associate and bachelor graduates focus even more are "critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills"; "the ability to analyze and solve complex problems"; "the ability to effectively communicate orally"; and "the ability to effectively communicate in writing" (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p. 8).

For the ancient Greeks, education was not only about cognition but also about longing, motivation, and inspiration as well as attaining self-knowledge and developing virtues. A liberal arts education is very much about articulating ideals, recognizing one's responsibilities to those ideals, and awakening a sense of wonder about future possibilities for oneself and the world. In short, it is about understanding, through the asking of great questions and the development of new capacities as well as through other formative experiences, such as conversations with faculty members and fellow students, what kind of person one is and what kind of person one wants to become. Late adolescence through early adulthood represents a privileged time in our lives for the exploration of new ideas and the formation of personal and social identity; as a result, for many students, the college years become crucial markers for who they are to become. During these years students develop, or fail to develop, capacities for integrity and courage, for diligence and self-sacrifice, for responsibility and service to others. They also develop, or fail to develop, a love of knowledge, a capacity to learn from criticism, and a sense of higher purpose.

We sometimes reduce the development of character to residential life and extracurricular activities, which are more likely to be fostered at liberal arts colleges, but intellectual pursuits can also help to foster character. For example, to prepare well for each class by completing all assignments, rereading materials, making appropriate notes, and reflecting thoughtfully is to elevate study over other available pleasures and is as such an illustration of temperance.

Discussion classes test and develop many additional virtues. To listen carefully to the views of others and to weigh them honestly, even if they should contradict your initial inclinations, is to practice a form of justice. To encourage effectively the participation of others and successfully draw good ideas out of them is to exhibit intellectual hospitality. To challenge the views of interlocutors without making the attack personal and thus without drawing their eyes away from the search for truth is to practice diplomacy. Humility is evident whenever I recognize that I must withdraw an idea from discussion in the face of decisive counterarguments. To hold on to a view even against consensus when one is convinced of its validity is to experience social isolation for one's belief in truth and is an act of courage.

Besides developing a range of capacities and virtues, liberal arts students are encouraged to ask: In what ways does the world as it is differ from the world as it should be, and how can I, with my abilities and interests, help to bridge that difference? In short, a liberal education involves helping me discover who I am and how I ought to live my life.

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