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Why Choose
the Liberal Arts?

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Introduction

What can my child do with a major in philosophy? That is the kind of question I received as dean every year during Junior Parents Weekend. Such questions are important and deserve a well-rounded response. Parents want to know that their financial investment will help their sons and daughters secure a livelihood. Students themselves want to know that what they are doing fits into a larger plan.

But students and parents all too rarely receive adequate answers to such questions. University leaders are busy solving the daily onslaught of myriad problems and trying to satisfy unquenchable demands for new resources; as a result, reflection on the ultimate purpose of education often takes a back seat. When academic leaders do speak of the liberal arts, for example, at first-year orientation or at graduation, they may speak in an abstract way, divorced from the practical needs and questions of students and their parents.

Students who major in philosophy, or in anthropology or chemistry or art history, have chosen the liberal arts. They are experiencing broad and versatile learning, and they are immersed in a distinctive element of American higher education

and a source of its great vitality. However, in an age of increasing specialization and ever greater emphasis on immediately practical goals, the number of students who choose this path has declined over the years, and a need has arisen to articulate the diverse values of the liberal arts. Not only administrators are silent. Faculty members, too, may neglect to speak with students about the broader value of a liberal arts education. Some are enmeshed in their own specific disciplines, with which they identify more than with the broader purpose of a college. To others, the value of a liberal arts education seems self-evident, but to students and families who are sacrificing time and money and are eager for a practical return on their investment, its value is not immediately apparent. As Carol Barker notes, "Students and families need help in understanding how the liberal arts contribute to personal development and career opportunity" (10).

A recent national survey revealed that "parents and college-bound high school students have very little familiarity with the meaning or purpose of the liberal arts" (Hersh, "Liberal" 31). Not surprisingly, in an environment where the value of a liberal arts education is no longer taken for granted, only a minority of undergraduate degrees are awarded in the liberal arts. In the United States today, almost 60 percent of undergraduate degrees are in pre-professional and technical fields, with business leading the way, accounting for some 21 percent of all degrees awarded.¹ In the early decades of the twentieth century, in contrast, pre-professional and technical majors accounted for fewer than 30 percent of the undergraduate degrees (Brint et al. 155–56). In response to this desire for more immediate relevance, some liberal arts colleges have created new programs in vocational areas to attract students (see Breneman; and, more recently, Baldwin and Baker). Of first-year students at colleges and universities across the United States, 73 percent identify "being very well off financially" as "essential" or "very important," a figure that has risen over the past decades from a low of 36 percent in 1970; it is now the highest value identified by stu-

dents. Related, only 51 percent of first-year students consider "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" to be "essential" or "very important," down from a high of 86 percent in 1968, when it was the highest value.² In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the 2006 report of the special commission on improving American higher education, appointed by then-U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, does not even mention the phrases "liberal arts" or "liberal education."³

The focus on "practical" pursuits may be even stronger in developing countries, where many new institutions of higher learning offer curricula only in those subjects perceived to be practical, such as business, science, or technology, a common practice in China, or where governments award scholarships primarily to students who are pursuing practical disciplines, such as engineering, science, and technology, as is the case in Uganda.⁴ As might be expected, the most popular fields of study for foreign students coming to the United States are, first, business and management, and second, engineering (*Open Doors*).

In 2006 I traveled to Asia for several weeks with a group of university administrators and professors. In addition to getting a better understanding of Asia and meeting with alumni groups and Catholic Church leaders, we wanted to develop new research partnerships and enhance study abroad opportunities for University of Notre Dame students. One morning we took a tour of a higher education park in Suzhou, outside Shanghai, China. We began in the welcome center, which had on display a model of the park. A guide discussed one impressive venture after another, most of them focused on independent technology programs or cooperative arrangements with American and European universities in the fields of science and technology. I asked if they had any humanities programs. "Oh yes," said the guide, "we have several M.B.A. programs." As we walked further around the center, I noticed a photograph of two young women jumping high in the air. The caption read in English, "Flappy

Youth.” I asked one of the Chinese professors from Notre Dame what she made of the caption. The term was related to the flapping of birds’ wings, she said, and, after briefly reflecting, proposed instead “Soaring Youth.” We passed the suggestion along to the guide, who insisted that the original translation had been done by the best translator in the area. It occurred to me, as impressive as their achievements in business, science, and technology might be, maybe they should teach more humanities.

In the United States, the better the students’ high school academic records, the more likely they are to pursue the liberal arts (Brint et al.). Many of the nation’s most selective liberal arts colleges and research universities offer majors only in the arts and sciences. Ironically, a recent study revealed that “liberal arts experiences and a liberal arts emphasis were most important for students of color and students with below average pre-college academic ability.”⁵ In other words, although students with the highest academic standing are more likely to pursue a liberal arts education, the impact of such an education is even greater for students who are likely to have experienced disadvantages or who have below-average academic standing.

Both in developing countries and among first-generation college students in the United States, we often encounter a tendency to focus on practical, often economic and technological, needs at the expense of a wider palette of needs, desires, and capabilities, including those associated with broader intellectual enrichment and a fuller sense of well being. This is understandable, deriving from a hunger for basic subsistence and security, but when this focus inhibits a broader concept of human flourishing, it can be disadvantageous. Social scientists and philosophers have developed more nuanced understandings of human development and human progress beyond the Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, such as the Human Development Index, which takes into account life expectancy, literacy, and educational attainment, and the Genuine Progress Indicator, which accounts for the costs of ecological destruction, crime, and di-

vorce. Such attempts, influenced by Amartya Sen’s pioneering work on human capabilities, remind us that development is more than simply an account of economic and technological progress; true development is related to what people are able to do and be and so is deeply connected to values, to emotions, imagination, thought, and play, and to long-term human flourishing.

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”) in contrast to the *artes illiberalis* or *artes mechanicae*, which 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*. Any Notre Dame student who passes through the Great Hall of O’Shaughnessy Hall, a space devoted to the elevation of the mind toward the transcendent, will find these seven original arts visualized in the set of seven stained glass windows. 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 include the study of the arts and sciences, and we contrast the liberal arts with vocational education.⁶

In a contemporary liberal arts education, in contrast to the specialized orientation of professional or technical curricula, students receive a general education that is a broad grounding in the diverse disciplines. In addition to a wide distribution of

courses, often with a core curriculum, liberal arts students major in an arts and sciences discipline, such as biology, history, or psychology, not in a professional or applied field, such as agriculture, criminal justice, or journalism. The exploration of a major provides depth and focus within the context of broader study, and this breadth aids specialized pursuits, as the more broadly educated we are, the better we are able to place new and specialized knowledge within a larger mosaic and to ask creative questions within our discipline from a range of alternative perspectives.

Beyond this curricular orientation and its high academic expectations, the liberal arts ideal entails the goal of educating the whole person, which presupposes a meaningful community of learning and a rich residential life experience. Its success demands intensive intellectual dialogue among students and between students and faculty across the diverse spheres of human inquiry and concerning the highest of human values. The formal dimensions of discussion and active student engagement are as much distinguishing characteristics of a liberal arts education as is the curricular content.

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. Knowledge cannot simply be poured, like water, from one larger container into an emptier one (*Symposium* 175d). 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? It is

not by chance that the questions in Plato’s Socratic dialogues often have life-or-death consequences, as in the question that forms the center of the *Euthyphro*: What is piety?

A third pedagogical principle for Socrates, beyond active learning and meaningful learning, is that the Socratic method of engaging great issues through a question-and-answer format prepares the inquirer for further learning. This is one of the reasons why Plato’s dialogues rarely offer answers, leaving the reader with an understanding of what she knows and doesn’t 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 modern classical writers on education—Montaigne, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant—all recognized these guiding principles. To educate, as in the Latin *educare*, means to lead out, to bring out from within. In his essays on education, Montaigne counsels that the student not simply listen and receive wisdom, based on authority, but instead grasp the value of doubting, learn to own knowledge independently, and be able to apply it in new and unexpected contexts; for that reason the student should avoid passivity: “We know how to say. ‘This is what Cicero said’; ‘This is morality for Plato’; ‘These are the *ipsissima verba* of Aristotle.’ But what have *we* got to say? What judgments do *we* make? What are *we* doing? A parrot could talk as well as we do” (154; bk. I, ch. 25). Locke elevates the student’s presentation of her own ideas and her engagement in back-and-forth discussions with the teacher, which leaves “livelier, and more lasting Impressions” than silently and sleepily listening to

lectures (§98). With Rousseau, the matter is even more pronounced, as active learning and existential engagement are among the overriding principles of his pedagogy. Although one can easily criticize Rousseau for his views on education, ranging from his naïve optimism to the impracticality of many of his ideas, he stressed throughout *Emile* that we learn more when we are actively engaged in the learning process (instead of simply receiving answers). He also emphasized that when topics have existential importance for learners, that is, when students see a connection between the ideas and the questions that animate them as persons, they learn more effectively.⁷ In addition, Rousseau recognized “the desire to learn” (117) and the “faculty to acquire learning” (207) as being among the highest values of education. Kant, too, elevated the idea that the learner should be actively engaged in the process of discovering meaningful truths: “One learns most thoroughly and retains best that which one learns, so to speak, from oneself” (12: 736). For Kant, to be educated, indeed to be enlightened and free, is to have developed one’s own capacity for reason and to be willing to use it “without direction from another”: “Sapere Aude! [Dare to know!] Have courage to use your *own* understanding! That is the motto of the Enlightenment” (11: 53).

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 substantiated by recent empirical studies. Liberal arts students are frequently engaged in those activities that involve student-centered learning, such as small discussion classes, seminar papers, discussions outside of class with peers, service learning, study abroad, and independent research projects, including senior theses (Kuh, “Built” 126–30). Indeed, many innovations in undergraduate learning, such as first-year seminars, honors programs, and senior theses, were pioneered at liberal arts colleges (Rudolph 230–32, 237, 240–42). Other modes of fostering active learning in the liberal arts include essay examinations, oral ex-

aminations, and tutorials. Liberal arts students also tend to receive extensive feedback on their advancement toward learning goals. Empirical research makes clear that when students actively participate in the learning process, when they connect what they are learning to what they already know and find meaningful, and when they engage faculty outside the classroom on substantive topics, they learn more deeply and fully, and they enjoy the college experience more. One scholar sums up the matter concisely: “The greater the student’s degree of involvement, the greater the learning and personal development.”⁸

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 offer extensive extracurricular activities in an intimate and nurturing environment. The campuses are often idyllic, classes tend to be small, and faculty devote themselves exclusively or almost exclusively to undergraduates. Campus populations are commonly fewer than 2,500 students. Liberal arts colleges include such institutions as Amherst, Bowdoin, Carleton, Pomona, Swarthmore, and Wellesley. Most of the residential liberal arts colleges, including all of the examples just noted, are private; however, public liberal arts colleges exist as well, such as New College of Florida and St. Mary’s College of Maryland.

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; or even beyond college itself, among those who experience opportunities to discuss a wide range of substantive issues in a communal setting. To deny

that moments of a liberal arts education can transcend the liberal arts college would be analogous to suggesting that research and the discovery of new knowledge occur only at so-called research universities, such as the University of California, Berkeley or the University of Michigan. Students in computing or business, architecture or engineering, nursing or education can in principle take courses in their majors or in the arts and sciences that give them elements of liberal learning. Noting their small classes, intensive faculty mentoring, and cultivation of intellectual curiosity and research skills, leaders of small colleges whose curricula no longer match the traditional liberal arts curriculum, but which offer instead more career-oriented majors such as business, criminal justice, or nursing may still see themselves as part of the liberal arts tradition (Glenn).

Even in graduate school, aspects of the liberal arts can resurface. Graduate students, for example, may be encouraged to explore broader questions, and a graduate program may foster a community of learning, such that not only academics, or future faculty members, are developed, but also intellectuals. Whereas academics have the skills to research specific questions within their disciplines and to convey to students the knowledge of their fields, intellectuals, broadly defined, pursue learning for its own sake and stretch well beyond their own disciplines in engaging the great questions.⁹

In this book, I consider three partly overlapping grounds for a liberal arts education: first, its intrinsic value, or the distinction of learning for its own sake, the sheer joy associated with exploring 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 preparation for a career; and third, character formation and the development of a sense of vocation, the connection to a higher purpose or calling. Ex-

ploration of these three values—the intrinsic, the practical, and the idealistic—constitute the first three chapters of the book. The values are interwoven with one another in often complex and subtle ways; my analysis concludes, therefore, with a fourth chapter that reflects on the integration of these values. In an effort to offer examples within the broader discussion, I address the study of literature as a recurring thread throughout my reflections, suggesting how the reading of literature has intrinsic value, how the interpretation of literature fosters intellectual virtues, and how the engagement with literature helps students develop a sense of meaning and purpose.¹⁰ One could easily substitute any number of liberal arts disciplines for literature.

I present an ideal vision of a liberal arts education, focusing on what such an education can and should become.¹¹ Much of the popular literature on higher education has vigorously criticized our colleges and universities. Beginning with Allan Bloom's bestseller in the 1980s, *The Closing of the American Mind*, an unrelenting wave of critics has lamented the state of higher education, whether attacking it from the right for succumbing to political correctness or from the left for having adopted too much of a corporate model. Many of the voices raised against Bloom and others have justly countered that there never was a golden age of education and that there have always been contrarian voices, arguing for the inclusion of this or that course or this or that text in the canon. A lack of consensus on a common vision of education has been the norm in America. But neither a harsh critique without a compelling and workable positive vision nor a simple suggestion that our ideals have always been conflicted will inspire students to pursue a liberal arts degree when the more "practical" disciplines beckon. For that reason, I have tried to give a strong defense of the liberal arts ideal, while noting some of the challenges and struggles that necessarily take place as we seek to realize that ideal.

Why Choose the Liberal Arts? interlaces broad theoretical reflections with empirical studies of what liberal arts students

learn and what prospects exist for them after graduation. An entirely different level of argument arises from my own experience. I have occasionally interwoven personal and anecdotal reflections, partly to illustrate individual points and partly to give greater life to my overarching reflections. My own experiences have spanned an unusual range within higher education. I received an undergraduate education at one of the nation's premier residential liberal arts colleges, Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. I had the benefit of pursuing a graduate degree at the University of Tübingen in Germany, where I experienced a model of education radically different from any institution in the United States. My doctoral work was undertaken in the Ivy League, at Princeton University. Having experienced both small and large private universities, I spent the first twelve years of my career as a faculty member at one of the nation's largest public universities, The Ohio State University, serving as a chairperson for my last five years. In 2008, I completed my eleventh and final year as dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Notre Dame, arguably the world's greatest Catholic university and a university with an unusually distinctive identity and ethos. Drawing on experiences in the course of more than thirty years in higher education, as a student, faculty member, and administrator, I can give further shape to some of the ideals and some of the frustrations associated with the vision and reality of a liberal arts education.

These reflections may interest undergraduates who major in the liberal arts, many of whom worry about their choice. Among such students, self-doubt and unease about life after college are not uncommon. *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* also addresses the parents of liberal arts students, some of whom believe that their sons and daughters should instead major in something practical, such as business. It may also appeal to administrators who champion the liberal arts, as they seek to develop their own distinctive institutional vision. Faculty mem-

bers teaching in the arts and sciences may find in these pages an evocation of one of their highest callings. Moreover, those who work in fields that are losing students and who worry about surrendering faculty positions might encounter strategies that could help them attract students to their courses. Students majoring in vocational and technical fields but who must take selected courses in the arts and sciences might, after reading this book, see in those general education requirements distinctive opportunities.

Part of learning is being motivated to learn; an articulation of possibilities and outcomes that are desirable can motivate students to learn better. A student in one of my recent senior seminars told me that he recognized the true value of college only as he was nearing graduation: in some ways, he wished he could start all over again, and this time go through college with greater awareness and more meaning. Perhaps such a volume can help students see the purpose of college at an earlier stage and thus help them make more of their time there. The need for such understanding has been recognized by others. A 2009 survey on *Trends and Emerging Practices in General Education* reveals that well over a third of institutions surveyed are placing increasing emphasis on "orientations to the purposes and value of liberal education" (9). Finally, while many businesses understand the value of hiring liberal arts graduates, many hire business majors and then lament that their new employees lack the most important quality they seek, communication skills. This trend has been documented for at least the past six years, with the most recent survey indicating that 50 percent of employers found their new hires to be lacking in communication skills (*Job Outlook* 15, 24). With a bit more awareness of what liberal arts graduates could do, businesses might avoid this unfortunate problem.

Hiring liberal arts graduates in business does not mean simply enhancing the communication skills of employees; it

also involves having employees whose education has encouraged them to develop a moral compass and ask searching questions. In an age that has suffered tremendous financial crises—partly as a result of a failure of managers and leaders in business as well as in government to grasp the larger picture—the liberal arts are more essential than ever.