



Reflection on a Liberal Arts Education

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In recent years, higher education has sharpened its focus on professional education, job training and programs that lead to employment. In part, this strategic shift has been driven by the rising cost of higher education and the need for constituents to know that the cost to pursue a degree is a worthy investment and will lead to gainful employment. Given the current economic climate, it is easy to understand this focus on job readiness—in particular from the student perspective as they contemplate their future opportunities.

But the movement toward this professional education has caused some to think the philosophy of a liberal arts education is dead. In fact, a recent *Newsweek* article, “The Death of Liberal Arts,” suggested the recession was making schools rethink the value of education in the humanities.¹ In fact, the humanities—along with math and social and natural sciences—play a critical role in a liberal arts education and aid in developing a student’s intellectual capabilities.

The economy has indeed caused some schools to look at the vast programming they offer—in particular within the humanities—and make strategic cuts where enrollment trends no longer support the programs. These cuts are not about eliminating liberal arts education, but rather are about fiscal responsibility. For some institutions, these cuts have resulted in a refocus of the liberal arts as liberal learning across the arts and sciences.

In a recent letter to the editor in *Newsweek*, Geary Schneider, Association of American Colleges and Universities president, wrote the article “missed the larger story” and that “liberal education is, in fact, dramatically expanding its reach to include all parts of the educational experience and community.” Indeed, a recent special report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* highlighted the new liberal arts with a series of articles and commentaries that stress the value of a liberal arts education in this world of professional education.³⁻⁷

Philosophy and preparation

At large research universities, colleges of arts and sciences are the primary providers of the general liberal arts education for students. As an associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, I have the opportunity to speak with parents and students about an education in the liberal arts tradition. Within our general



education curriculum, we emphasize quantitative and qualitative skills, communication, critical thinking, world cultures and a foreign language.

When speaking to parents and students, I emphasize the philosophy of a liberal arts education and the preparation of students that embodies not only good written and oral communication skills, but also the ability to analyze and synthesize information, the capacity to critically think through problems individually and as part of a team, the appreciation for the richness of a diverse and global society, and engagement as a civic participant and leader. This education provides a vital foundation and the essential skills for the student to compete in the professional arena and in the global marketplace.

A 2009 National Association of Colleges and Employers study shows that for new college graduates, becoming the job candidate of choice in this economy can be an uphill battle.⁸ Not only must candidates meet the employer's basic criteria of having the appropriate major, course work and GPA, but they also must be able to demonstrate many of the characteristics mentioned earlier that are found through a liberal arts education. This includes good communication skills, a strong work ethic, an ability to work on a team, initiative and leadership. Thus, a liberal arts education provides a gateway to many jobs and careers.

Personal experience

As someone who attended a liberal arts institution as an undergraduate, I often reflect on how that educational foundation has helped me as a scientist and educator. I recall my first foray into the liberal arts my freshman year when I took a course called "Modes of Thought and Methods of Inquiry" at Juniata College in Huntingdon, PA.

As you might expect from the title, the course provided an opportunity to understand the thought processes used and inquiry methods employed in and across a variety of disciplines. The course forced us to ask critical questions, probe for richer answers, analyze the outcomes and debate the philosophy of the approaches. It was difficult because most of us had never approached a subject in such a way. But the effects were everlasting, and all of us grew intellectually as a result.

The true impact of that course and the entire liberal arts approach to education became clearer throughout time. Through graduate school, post-doctoral fellowships and into my

educational career, the liberal arts foundation has served as a catalyst for the way I approach issues or problems, analyze and communicate information, and work with various constituents. Whether I am formulating a hypothesis; writing a grant proposal, a position statement or a college report; working with faculty, staff and students to achieve common goals; crafting an exam; or guiding a thesis or dissertation my liberal arts background shines through.

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