



Why Liberal Arts and Sciences Still Matter

by Ken Anselment, Lawrence University

“Nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be of the slightest possible use to you in after life, save only this, that if you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that, in my view, is the main, if not the sole, purpose of education.”

—John Alexander Smith, 1914

Even though it was nearly a century ago when John Alexander Smith, a moral philosophy professor, opened his course at the University of Oxford with this counterintuitive utterance, the core of his message is as essential today as it was not only then, but also for centuries before that.

Today, you’ll find few people calling out someone for talking rot. But the ability to identify shaded truth, logical fallacies, slanted rhetoric, even demagoguery—in other words, the ability to think critically—remains one of the most important things an education should develop and sharpen.

It’s something liberal arts and sciences programs—either liberal arts colleges such as Lawrence University in Appleton, WI, or Williams College in Williamstown, MA, or liberal arts core curricula at universities such as Marquette in Milwaukee or Notre Dame in South Bend, IN—have been doing for generations.

But the liberal arts and sciences had been around for centuries before those colleges started delivering them. Since the time of the Roman Empire, the liberal arts were, as the name suggests, those things studied by free persons—grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy—as opposed to the manual skills studied by slaves. Today’s liberal arts and sciences typically comprise the humanities (such as literature, languages, philosophy, history and fine and performing arts) and sciences (such as math and natural and social sciences).

A liberal arts and sciences education tests our ability to investigate and understand the nature of an organism, the application of a theory, the behavior of a crowd, the principles of a political system, the meaning of a poem, the causes of an event, the consequences of an argument or the composition of a symphony.

At its best, the study of the liberal arts and sciences develops the abilities to find



similarities among dissimilar things, common ground among the uncommon and meaning in the midst of meaninglessness. As Lawrence University Provost David Burrows has said, it can transform you from merely reflecting the light of others to generating your own light; it makes you an independent thinker.

From degree to job

Regarding a liberal arts degree, people will often say, “That’s the nice stuff you find in college admissions brochures. But will it help you get a job?”

And the answer is, “Well, sort of.”

It has always been the particular challenge of a liberal arts and sciences program to answer the question “What can you do with it?” The question has become increasingly pointed in a sluggish—some might say stagnant—economy, especially as college costs continue to rise. The problem has been exacerbated by presidential administrations of both stripes that often equate college education with professional preparation.

The Obama administration’s drive to put the United States back on top of the list of nations with the highest percentages of college degree holders by 2020 illustrates this. According to the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development, the United States is currently No. 12.¹

At a 2010 address at the University of Texas in Austin, President Obama told the assembly:

It’s an economic issue when the unemployment rate for folks who’ve never gone to college is almost double what it is for those who have gone to college. Education is an economic issue when nearly eight in 10 new jobs will require workforce training or a higher education by the end of this decade. Education is an economic issue when we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that when countries that out-educate us today, they will out-compete us tomorrow.²

It is necessary to have a well-trained, technically proficient citizenry. We need engineers, scientists, accountants, developers and others who can solve problems. But we also need people in these professions to be able to explain to others how they solved the problems—and even to teach others how to solve them for themselves. Purely vocational training may not get you all the way there. Strong writing, speaking and thinking skills can separate merely good

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problem solvers from the great ones.

A blend of professional preparation with the liberal arts and sciences should be an essential component of any initiative to have a more broadly educated workforce. But limiting the discussion to the world of work is only part of the story. What about our lives outside our jobs? What about being informed citizens who can say not only what they believe, but also make a compelling case for why they believe it? What about being a critical consumer of media, one who is less likely to believe something just because it's in a newspaper or magazine, or on television or the internet?

In other words, one who can detect when a man is talking rot.

The whole person

The liberal arts and sciences can play an important role in developing the whole person—professionally and personally.

In a study released this year, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa attempted to address questions about the amount and type of learning occurring in American colleges, based on a five-year longitudinal study of 2,300 students on 24 diverse campuses.³ One of the questions they addressed—“Are students improving their critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills during college?”—found a positive correlation between academic rigor and the amount of gains seen in the development of this set of skills.

Their Collegiate Learning Assessment used performance tasks and holistic assessments, rather than surveys, to measure not only what students know, but also what they don't know. In the study, students in the liberal arts and sciences fared far better than their peers in professional programs, such as business, engineering, communications, education and health.

According to Arum at a recent address to more than 100 college enrollment officials, one of his and Roksa's hypotheses is that the traditional arts and sciences is where the most academic rigor is and, as a result, where the most learning occurs largely because of the heavier requirements for reading, writing and intensive study—three activities that tend to be more independent endeavors.

The study found that students who spent more hours of independent study per week on average during college fared far better than those who spent more hours in group study with peers during their college careers. An interesting side note to the study is that those students

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who spent more time studying independently also were far more likely to read print or online news daily, and to discuss politics and public affairs.

So back to that question, “What can you do with the liberal arts and sciences?”

In an uncertain world where the commonplace idea is that the most in-demand jobs 10 years from now don’t yet exist, being a nimble, flexible, adaptive learner equipped with finely tuned reading, writing, speaking and thinking skills can be advantageous.

A liberal arts and sciences curriculum can prepare you for your first job, although vocational experiences such as internships will undoubtedly enhance that preparation. Perhaps more important, a liberal arts and sciences curriculum should prepare you for all of the jobs you’ll have after that.

And lest we pigeonhole ourselves merely as workers, a liberal arts and science curriculum can broaden the skills essential to a meaningful life outside the world of work—such as being able to detect when a man is talking rot.

References

1. Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development, www.oecd.org/home.
2. President Obama, address, University of Texas in Austin, Aug. 9, 2010.
3. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

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