

Who Needs a Liberal Education?

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In a world increasingly shaped, for better and for worse, by technological advancement, how can we form people who are thoughtful enough and free enough to distinguish between what we can do and what it would be wise for us to do? Many hope that an education in the liberal arts might help us become people who are neither captive to technology nor dismissive of it. But, alas, it is becoming ever more difficult to find places where the liberal arts flourish.

It is hardly news that higher education in this country is beset with many problems. Students graduate—if they graduate—with more indebtedness than many of them can manage. Tuition continues to rise, aided and abetted, no doubt, by the availability of government-financed student loans. Graduate programs continue to produce freshly minted Ph.D.s, many of whom may not find teaching positions, and others of whom may find positions with which they are far from happy. The increasing use of adjuncts, understandable as a money-saving move, breeds considerable discontent among a growing faculty underclass. The proliferation of mid-level administrators, who increasingly make many of the decisions that shape college life, never seems to end. Online courses multiply even as fewer and fewer students seem interested in a traditional liberal arts education that emphasizes the humanities.

None of these trends, problematic though they are, really threatens the continued existence or well-being of the very best (and most highly endowed) colleges and universities. But these trends are widening the gap that separates the fortunate institutions from the rest of the academy. Schools are naturally disinclined to fold their tents and go out of business, so, whatever their pretensions, they become places that are in many ways (pretensions aside) indistinguishable from community colleges.

In the face of these pressures, educational traditionalists and defenders of the liberal arts all too easily turn to commending the need for core curricula and to bemoaning the rise of specialization among faculty. But gradually, over almost four decades of teaching, I have become persuaded that these are not useful remedies. Indeed, what we need is not core curricula but fewer general education requirements. And we should want our

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students—some of whom are our own children, after all—to be taught by people with genuine expertise in the materials they teach. What, then, should the student who wants a liberal arts education be looking for? The answer is a school that, whatever its size, has few required courses, thereby leaving students free to find their own way into the conversation about the meaning of our humanity that is at the heart of the liberal arts.

Most colleges and universities offer verbal respect to the liberal arts and emphasize their commitment to liberal learning. Often, however, their liberal arts departments function largely as service organizations, offering courses that meet general education requirements for students, many of whom do not really want to be in those classes and whose energies are focused mostly on other aspects of the curriculum. Moreover, for that smaller number of students who are truly interested in the liberal arts, these general education requirements tend to stifle rather than liberate the *eros* that draws them in search of wisdom.

It would be foolhardy to suppose that the liberal arts flourish at an academic institution simply because it talks about providing a liberal education. Selling a product by that name most often means providing an education aimed primarily at preparing one to make a living, and then adding courses in arts and sciences to serve as a little frosting on the cake. These courses may broaden a bit the horizons of people being trained to be future workers, may help those future workers learn to write coherent sentences, and may provide for at least a few students a little relief from the tedium of preparing to be workers. Sometimes vendors of liberal education will add a further claim to advertise their product: namely, that they are preparing students to be not only good workers but also good citizens.

None of this, however, is an education in the liberal—that is, the “free”—arts. The roots of the concept of liberal arts lie in a Greek word (*scholē*) that meant “leisure.” The liberal arts are free in the sense that they serve no goal external to themselves. Their purpose is not to make us (someday) capable workers who can earn a living. But neither is their purpose to make us dependable citizens, an alternative often attractive to traditionalists who reject careerism in higher education. Quite the contrary, in fact. The liberal arts should teach us to ponder the very old question of whether the good person is necessarily the good citizen.

Why Study the Liberal Arts?

Many students come to college to train for a career in business, nursing, engineering, communications, education, social work, or, quite often these

days, sports management. These are all honorable ways to make a living, and there is nothing wrong with going to school to be trained for such vocational paths. But even if these students also tack on some “liberal education” by meeting general education requirements in the arts and sciences, theirs is not an education in the liberal arts.

In part this is a matter of the content taught in these courses, but in larger part it is a matter of the students’ goals. Their academic study is not free; it is not undertaken for its own sake. Rather, it is in service to other, external goals, whether related to work or citizenship. We train nurses, engineers, or marketing experts because we need them to do some task or other. These may be important and necessary tasks, well worth doing. But in these instances we can always say what we need these people *for*, what purpose external to their study their education is to serve.

But why do we need students of philosophy, literature, history, or religion? What is their study *for*? The point of this sort of education is simply that we want to understand ourselves and to know the truth about human life, whether about individual lives as we might examine them in literature or philosophy, or life in society as we might examine it in political theory or sociology. To be sure, an education in the liberal arts will sometimes be more about the seeking than the finding of this truth. There are no guarantees. At its best, however, it draws us into a centuries-old conversation among specialists—scholars from various disciplines, each providing us a different angle from which to examine what it means to be human.

Students of the liberal arts learn from anthropological studies of human behavior. They read great literature and enter imaginatively into the ways of life it opens for them. They probe philosophical analyses of human consciousness and human values. They study biology and genetics, examining the “mechanics” of life. They ponder the human desire for God and the human capacity to transcend at least in part our finite location, as that desire and capacity are illumined and examined in religious texts, belief, and practice.

Of course, no student can or should try to enter into all of these disciplinary approaches. Each must find the language and forms of thought that he or she really cares about. We should not seek to produce well-rounded students. Rather, our aim should be to form people who care and know about our humanity from within a particular discipline. Bringing such people together in a common space and shared life requires, then, that they learn to talk with others who likewise care and know, but who do so from other disciplinary perspectives. Thus, to study the liberal arts

is to enter into an ongoing conversation among scholars who examine the meaning of our humanity from differing disciplinary perspectives.

To understand the liberal arts in this way is also to see why the notion of “interdisciplinary” study, currently so popular in liberal education, is misguided. It imposes a kind of top-down combination of disciplinary perspectives, attempting to produce in cookie-cutter fashion something that can only happen gradually, if at all, in the minds of students who are learning to think about our humanity within a range—sometimes complementary, sometimes clashing—of approaches. The would-be student in the liberal arts is well advised to look for schools where the specialized academic disciplines are valued and cultivated—and equally well advised to steer clear of schools touting new interdisciplinary initiatives. This also means that much of the criticism of academic “specialization” one hears all too often from purported advocates of the liberal arts is missing the mark. No one’s knowledge is narrower than that of the non-specialist, who knows a very little about a very lot.

Consider an example that is not, I fear, as rare as we might hope. I know an institution at which the first-year experience, as it is often known, involves a two-semester course that constitutes roughly a third of a student’s credit hours in that year. This course has no disciplinary perspective. Its readings, grouped under broad themes, are shaped largely by the ideological leanings of the faculty committee that selects them. It will probably surprise no seasoned professor to be told that many of its sections are taught by adjuncts, some of whom themselves lack a Ph.D., for the faculty that structured this first-year experience does not really want to teach it. Even when a section is taught by a regular member of the faculty, the odds are very good that he or she will have little or no expertise for many of the texts read. Thus, a student spends roughly a third of the first year being taught by someone who is likely to have no specialized knowledge of what is being taught. And for this course, imagined by administrators to be an asset that should enhance the attractiveness of their school, the student pays thousands of dollars.

As students of the liberal arts, we need and want teachers who are specialists, who are skilled in a particular way of thinking about the meaning and significance of human life. Even when these professors do not specifically engage in an exchange of viewpoints, students will have to negotiate in their own minds the relation of their different perspectives. This cannot be done in the top-down, ready-made fashion that interdisciplinary curricula seek to provide; rather, this work of intellectual integration is the fundamental task of students of the liberal arts, and the attempt to do it

for them betrays a misunderstanding of its liberating function. Sometimes students succeed in this task; sometimes they do not. That is a risk we must take. But there is nothing more rewarding for college students than those moments when they themselves begin to see and to create connections among their work in several disciplines, when the conversation actually takes place within their own thinking.

But that is not the same thing as amassing a total number of credits in different subjects. Indeed, prospective students should be leery of academic programs that will necessarily require taking too many courses at one time, dispersing one's intellectual energies too widely. A genuine education in the liberal arts, one that aims to invite students into the kind of conversation among disciplinary perspectives that I have described, probably cannot happen if a student takes more than, say, four courses at a time. If they are really thought-provoking courses in the liberal arts, they will draw the student into serious thinking about our humanity; but no useful work of integration can take place if one is simply running from subject to subject, meeting requirements but not really thinking.

Of course, one cannot spend one's entire life immersed in this conversation. Even college professors themselves cannot, for they do what they do in part because they too have to make a living; none of us is freed from that necessity. The "eternal undergraduate" is, as Michael Oakeshott once put it, "a lost soul." But for a few short years students are offered what Oakeshott nicely called the gift of an "interval"—a short time in which they are free to try to understand themselves and the world, free from the need to become competent workers or good citizens. The point, we might say—upending Marx upending Feuerbach—is to understand the world, not to change it.

The Sciences' Contribution

This vision of a liberal arts education raises many questions, of which at least two need some attention: First, is there really any place for the natural sciences in the liberal arts as I have depicted them? And second, have I not envisioned an education in which few will have interest, and for which few may be suited?

When liberal arts majors are required to take courses in the natural sciences, members of the faculty who teach physics, chemistry, biology, and so forth often have to exercise a good bit of ingenuity devising courses that students will want to take and be able to take. So, for example, students might take a course on the physics of sports, addressing questions

like whether a curveball really curves. Or students might take a course on chemistry and crime, thinking like a young Sherlock Holmes with his exhaustive knowledge of poisons or (updating things a bit) like Abby on *NCIS*. Nevertheless, scientists themselves are unlikely to think that such courses provide an adequate entryway into the real nature of their work.

We have to recognize that the “arts” and the “sciences” are quite different things, no matter how often we speak of them together. No one can study the humanities without attending to historical change and development—without, for example, reflecting upon how Plato’s sense of *eros* for the divine is transformed in Augustine’s theology and reclaimed in Iris Murdoch’s philosophy. But a physics undergraduate need know very little about the history of physics. Indeed, to study that history is to engage not in natural science but in humanistic endeavor—the history or philosophy of science. It is therefore no surprise that students drawn to the humanities may resist science requirements, while students drawn to the sciences may have difficulty writing the sort of papers required for classes in philosophy, religion, or political theory. Moreover, in our time the sciences have so many astonishing technological applications that it is hard not to think of them as being studied for those reasons rather than for their own sake, for the sheer wonder of what they explore.

Still, we should not suppose that natural scientists cannot offer their own kind of perspective on what it means to be human. I noted earlier that biologists and geneticists examine the “mechanics” of human life, forcing us to think from that perspective and consider whether by itself it can be adequate. Physicists, who from my unscientific and somewhat anecdotal observation are the natural scientists most susceptible to religious awe, invite us to think about our place in the universe and the nature of contingent being—that is, why there should be anything at all. Indeed, the science majors I teach, most often in a course on bioethics, are frequently quite perceptive in bringing their studies to bear on humanistic questions. (They also tend to be more organized than non-science majors and more likely to turn in papers on time.)

Moreover, in the cultural circumstances in which we find ourselves today, the natural sciences can make a peculiar contribution that is not likely to be made by many of the other academic disciplines. If students ought to study the liberal arts for no extrinsic purpose, but simply because we desire to know the *truth* about human life, then the sciences remind them that there are in fact right and wrong answers to some questions. They teach us that the world is not “our” world to shape and form as we please. They do not invite us to offer our opinions about one or another

“prompt” on an exam. After all, Plato’s recommended approach to education called for the study of mathematics well before one was ready to enter into philosophical dialectic. Not the world as we would like it to be but the world as it is in truth is what the student of the liberal arts seeks, and the natural sciences will not let us forget that.

Another Path to Freedom

Finally, have I envisioned an education suited only for a few, with the rest of us simply immersed in the world technology provides and imposes? If college at its best offers the kind of free reflection in the liberal arts that I have described, would not many prospective students have little reason to attend? And how then would they find a kind of freedom essential to being human?

In part, we can respond to this legitimate concern by restating what I noted earlier. There is nothing wrong with seeking training to become a social worker, an engineer, a nurse, or an elementary school teacher. If some colleges and universities are the best places to do that, there is a reason for them to exist and for students to attend them. Whether there is good reason for such schools to add to their vocational training various general education requirements in the arts and sciences, however, is doubtful (apart from the benefit of providing work for Ph.D.’s unlikely to find gainful employment elsewhere). It adds to the time and cost required to learn what a student with such vocational goals needs to learn, but it does not really enrich these students with a liberal arts education. Of course, it may do some other useful things—help students find a friend or a spouse, give them a chance to continue to play competitive sports for a few more years—but these are hardly integral to the liberal arts. We might be well advised, as some have suggested, to question whether the college “experience” as it has developed in this country, with its accompanying financial indebtedness for many students, is really desirable.

Moreover, it may simply be true that education in the liberal arts is not intended for or needed by many students. There is, in fact, at least one other way to get the most important benefit, the free self-transcendence, it offers. The liberal arts should help us to understand the truth about our lives—which means, in part, the truth of our contingency and neediness, and, ultimately, our dependence on the divine. An openness to what transcends us is what the “leisure” that is study of the liberal arts should, at its best, cultivate. It seeks not power but wisdom, not to change the world but to know it in truth. And to know the world truly is to know

it as creation, as a gift that invites our gratitude more than our mastery. This gratitude can be cultivated not only in the liberal arts but also and most especially in the words and actions of worship. People who are honest, disciplined workers and reliable citizens immersed in a world shaped by technology may regularly be drawn out of themselves into a world of leisure separate from what Abraham Joshua Heschel called “technical civilization.” In resting from our attempts to remake the world, our goal is, as Heschel put it, “not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”

In an essay titled “The Lost Mariner” (from the 1985 collection *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*), neurologist Oliver Sacks described the life of one of his patients, Jimmie G., a former sailor who now suffered a severe form of amnesia. Jimmie could recall everything up to the end of the war in 1945, but nothing of the thirty years thereafter. Unable to form any new memories that would last more than a few seconds, still thinking of himself as nineteen years old, every moment was for him a new present moment. Yet when Sacks asked the Sisters, who provided nursing care in the home where Jimmie lived, if they thought he had a soul, their answer was simple: “Watch Jimmie in chapel.” “I did,” Sacks writes,

and I was moved, profoundly moved and impressed, because I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him or conceived him capable of. I watched him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass. . . . He was . . . absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity.

Sacks could only conclude that the Sisters were right. Jimmie did “find his soul here” with a “depth of absorption and attention” that study of the liberal arts might be hard pressed to emulate.

If the ultimate aim of education in the liberal arts is to draw us out of ourselves, to teach us the language of praise and gratitude, then Jimmie attained it in worship. Education in the liberal arts—if we can still find it in our world—is one important path to finding one’s soul. But it is neither the only nor even the most suitable path for many people. Were we really to absorb this truth, we could stop pretending that the liberal arts are important frosting on the cake of an education that is in fact designed for other purposes. In so doing, we might free the liberal arts to set us free.