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The Liberal Arts as Guideposts in the 21st Century



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By Nannerl O. Keohane

The very broad, capacious form of education that we call the liberal arts is rooted in a specific curriculum in classical and medieval times. But it would be wrong to assume that because it has such ancient roots, this kind of education is outdated, stale, fusty, or irrelevant. In fact, quite the contrary. A liberal-arts education, which Louis Menand defined in *The Marketplace of Ideas* as “a background mentality, a way of thinking, a kind of intellectual DNA that informs work in every specialized area of inquiry,” lends itself particularly well to contemporary high-tech methods of imparting knowledge.

We all wrestle with the challenges of educating students who are used to multitasking, doing their homework while listening to music and texting on their iPhones. For such students, the Web-based facilities of exciting liberal-arts courses are particularly salient. What would Aristotle or Erasmus or Robert Maynard Hutchins not have given for a technique that allows one to tour the world’s greatest museums, looking closely at the details of countless masterpieces; explore the ruins of ancient castles and pyramids and forums; join archaeological digs at your desk, turning objects around to see all sides of

them; visualize problems in geometry or astronomy or mathematics in several dimensions and work out their solutions.

An excellent example of the power of multimedia coupled with the liberal arts is “Imaginary Journeys,” a general-education course sometimes taught at Harvard University by Stephen Greenblatt. The course is described as being “about global mobility, encounter, and exchange at the time that Harvard College was founded in 1636. Using the interactive resources of computer technology, we follow imaginary voyages of three ships that leave England in 1633. Sites include London’s Globe Theatre, Benin, Barbados, Brazil, Mexico.” With this kind of course in mind, it seems that the liberal arts could almost have been designed for sophisticated online learning, so far from being stale or fusty are these ways of knowing.

This kind of education has become more and more appealing to students and teachers at universities around the world. Donald Markwell, the warden of Oxford’s Rhodes House, recently gave a series of lectures in Canada entitled “The Need for Breadth.” He referred to a “surge of interest” in liberal education in “many other countries.” He cites a major address in London by Yale’s Richard Levin in which Levin noted that “Asian leaders are increasingly attracted to the American model of undergraduate curriculum,” specifically because of the two years of breadth and depth in different disciplines provided before a student chooses an area of concentration or embarks on professional training. Levin described liberal-arts honors programs at Peking University, South Korea’s Yonsei University, and the National University of Singapore; he also referred to liberal-arts curricula at Fudan University, Nanjing University, and the University of Hong Kong.

Yet, as we know, the trends in the United States are in the opposite direction, and this is not just a recent problem. Menand cites evidence that in the United States, “the proportion of undergraduate degrees awarded annually in the liberal arts and sciences has been declining for a hundred years, apart from a brief rise between 1955 and 1970, which was a period of rapidly increasing enrollments and national economic growth.” Thus, paradoxically, as a liberal-arts education becomes more appealing to leaders and families in Asia and elsewhere in the world, it is losing ground in our own country.

At least three factors are at work in this decline: a) the creation of increasingly specialized disciplines, and the rewards for faculty members for advancing knowledge in those areas; b) the economic premium that is thought to reside in a highly technical form of preparation for careers; and c) a growing focus on graduate education from the early 20th century to the present day. These developments have clearly not been beneficial for American undergraduate education.

“Liberal education in crisis” is a tiresomely familiar theme, and countless commissions, reports, and study groups have attempted to address it. I am under no illusions that I have the magic key to resolve a problem that has stumped so many brilliant educators.

But these are not just theoretical quandaries, they are the issues we confront almost every day: How do we defend liberal education against the skeptics—parents, potential students, the media, the marketplace, even some trustees and students?

The first, most practical defense is that the liberal arts (and sciences) are the best possible preparation for success in the learned professions—law, medicine, teaching—as well as in the less traditionally learned but increasingly arcane professions of business, finance, and high-tech innovation. So my first defense of liberal learning is what you are taught and the way you learn it: the materials a doctor or financial analyst or physicist or humanist needs to know, but taught in a liberally construed fashion, so that you look at the subject from many different dimensions and incorporate the material into your own thinking in ways that will be much more likely to stay with you, and help you later on.

This way of learning has several distinct advantages: It's insurance against obsolescence; in any rapidly changing field (and every field is changing rapidly these days), if you only focus on learning specific materials that are pertinent in 2012, rather than learning about them in a broader context, you will soon find that your training will have become valueless. Most important, with a liberal education you will have learned how to learn, so that you will be able to do research to answer questions in your field that will come up years from now, questions that nobody could even have envisioned in 2012, much less taught you how to answer.

The second, slightly less utilitarian defense of a liberal-arts education is that it hones the mind, teaching focus, critical thinking, and the ability to express oneself clearly both in writing and speaking—skills that are of great value no matter what profession you may choose. It's not just that you are taught specific materials in a liberally designed context, but more generally, the way your mind is shaped, the habits of thought that you develop.

These skills were well described by a former dean of the Harvard Law School, Erwin Griswold, cited in a recent speech by the current dean, Martha Minow. Griswold was discussing an ideal vision of the law school, but his arguments fit a liberal education wherever it is provided: "You go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts or habits; for the art of expression, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual position, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time; for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage, and mental soberness."

My third argument is that a liberal-arts education is the best education for citizenship in a democracy like ours. In her book, *Not for Profit*, Martha Nussbaum points out that from the early years of our republic educators and leaders have "connected the liberal

arts to the preparation of informed, independent, and sympathetic ... citizens.” Nussbaum argues that democracies need “complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements.” Among the skills a liberal-arts education fosters, she notes, are the ability “to think about the good of the nation as a whole, not just that of one’s local group,” and “to see one’s own nation, in turn, as part of a complicated world order.” At a time when democracy is struggling to be born in countries around the world, and countries that have long enjoyed democracy are struggling to sustain it against pressures of multiple varieties, this may be the best of all the arguments for a liberal-arts education.

My fourth argument I borrow from Michel de Montaigne, who thought of his own mind as a kind of tower library to which he could retreat even when he was far from home, filled with quotations from wise people and experimental thoughts and jokes and anecdotes, where he could keep company with himself. In his essay “Of Solitude,” he suggested that we all have such back rooms in our minds. The most valuable and attractive people we know are those who have rich and fascinating intellectual furniture in those spaces rather than a void between their ears.

Virginia Woolf used a different spatial image to make a similar point in her book *Three Guineas*, when she talked about the importance of cultivating taste and the knowledge of the arts and literature and music. She argues that people who are so caught up in their professions or business that they never have time to listen to music or look at pictures lose the sense of sight, the sense of sound, the sense of proportion. And she concludes: “What then remains of a human being who has lost sight, and sound, and a sense of proportion? Only a cripple in a cave.” So my fourth argument for a liberal-arts education is that it allows you to furnish the back room of your mind, preparing you for both society and solitude.

My final argument is that the liberal arts admit you to a community of scholars, both professional and amateur, spanning the ages. Here I would quote one of my predecessors at Wellesley, Alice Freeman (later Alice Freeman Palmer). When she presided over Wellesley in the last part of the 19th century, it was quite unusual for girls to go to college (as indeed it still is today in some parts of the world). In a speech she gave to answer the repeated question she got from girls and their families, “Why Go to College?” she said: “We go to college to know, assured that knowledge is sweet and powerful, that a good education emancipates the mind and makes us citizens of the world.” The sweet and powerful knowledge imparted by a liberal-arts education is specifically designed to fulfill this promise.

But how can college presidents today best go about making the case for the liberal arts? First and most obvious, they should use the bully pulpit of the college presidency deliberately and effectively—at convocations, commencements, groundbreakings for new buildings, in speeches to the local Rotary Club or the state 4-H club convention, and

addresses to alumni clubs. This is a truly precious opportunity that few other leaders have, to address the community in situations where there is likely to be respectful attention to their message, at least for a while! They should use the opportunity with zest!

The second way is by using their fund-raising skills and obligations to raise money for exciting programs like Greenblatt's "Imaginary Journeys." They can make this case effectively to foundations and generous alumni who remember their own liberal-arts education fondly, and thus enhance the resources available for this purpose.

Presidents can demonstrate their support of the liberal arts in how they honor faculty members. With the teaching awards and other distinctions their colleges offer, they should single out for praise and support those who have been most effective in advancing the liberal-arts mission. And then they can ensure that these awards and recognitions are appropriately highlighted in college publications and in messages to parents and prospective students.

And perhaps the most effective way presidents can use their leadership to offer support is to speak from a liberal-arts perspective in their own discourse, both formal and informal, by citing examples of fine literature, drawing on instances from history, referring to the arts, and describing learning in the sciences in liberal terms. Rhetoric was one of the original *artes liberales*, and it can still be one of the most transformative.

Taking my own advice about larding language with liberal learning, I will conclude with a poem by Imam Al-Shafi'i, which I discovered in a brochure on a recent visit to the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, in Doha, Qatar:

*According to the measure of hardship are heights achieved,
And he who seeks loftiness must keep vigil by night;
As for he who wants heights without toil,
He wastes his life seeking the impossible—
So seek nobility now, then sleep once more (finally),
He who seeks pearls must dive into the sea.*

As this poem reminds us, a liberal-arts education is not always easy; it involves paying close attention, taking risks, exploring uncharted territory, diving into the sea. But despite these challenges, the deep rewards of a liberal education are surely worth our best efforts on its behalf.

Nannerl O. Keohane, a former president of Wellesley College and Duke University, is a visiting professor in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and the Center for Human Values at Princeton University. This essay was adapted from a speech she gave this year at the Council of Independent Colleges' Presidents Institute.