

Quest Club

Liberal Education: What's Changed

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Mike Wartell

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Ladies and Gentleman, thank you for the opportunity to speak on the subject of changes in views on liberal education. I say “thank you”, but I really don’t mean it, because with this, my fourth Quest Club paper, I must tell you that on each occasion when I have opened the assignment letter, I wondered why I had been assigned this particular subject. Is this topic somehow critical to the expansion or contraction of the universe? Was someone on the committee out to get me? Or am I simply the butt of some great, cosmic joke? And why assign a chemist, a clearly narrowly trained individual, to discuss liberal education? Won’t I simply have a negative bias?

The answer to all of those questions is, of course, an emphatic “no”. But I do believe that the committee carefully searches out the arcane, the bizarre, and the marginally relevant, defines it by subject, and then, by coin flip, assigns that subject to some random club member who happens to be in the queue. So, here I am, ready to regale you with what passes for wisdom regarding a subject which is critical to you, your loved ones, to the existence of the republic, and to the future of civilization as we know it.

Liberal education and its connection with the classical liberal arts has long been a subject of interest and discussion among academics. So let’s begin by trying to figure out what a liberal education is, explore how to get one, then figure out why try to get one, and finally place that answer into a context to discover how liberal education has changed.

To describe liberal education, many turn to John Henry (Cardinal) Newman who wrote in “The Idea of a University” that education is about training leaders, teaching them to think, to reason, and to see to the heart of problems.

But to define liberal education, most turn to Thomas Henry Huxley, 19th century pundit who often wrote using a surplus of words, and expounded extensively on education and the liberalness of that endeavor. He wrote, and rather succinctly for old Tom, that education is “learning the rules of the mighty game.” In other words, education is the “instruction of the intellect in the laws of nature, under which name I include not merely things and their forces, but men and their ways; and the fashioning of the affections and of the will into an earnest and loving desire to move in harmony with those laws. For me, education means neither more nor less than this. Anything which professes to call itself education, must be tried by this standard, and if it fails to stand the test, I will not call it education, whatever may be the force of authority or of numbers upon the other side.”

Huxley further opined that if one’s life and/or fortune depended on our winning or losing a game of chess, we would certainly learn the pieces and the rules. Huxley would, therefore, say that our lives do depend on nature and the behavior of human beings, so we had better learn about them. To him, that was a liberal education. He also said, less succinctly:

“That man, I think has had a liberal education who has been so trained in youth that his body is the ready servant of his will, and does with ease and pleasure all the work that, as a mechanism, it is capable of; whose intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine, to be turned to any kind of work, and spin the gossamers as well as forge the anchors of the mind; whose mind is stored with a knowledge of the great and fundamental truths of nature and of the laws of her operations; one who, no stunted ascetic, is full of life and fire, but whose passions are trained to come to heel by a vigorous will, the servant of a tender conscience; who has learned to love all beauty, whether of nature or of art, to hate all vileness, and to respect others as himself.

Such an one and no other, I conceive, has had a liberal education; for he is, as completely as a man can be, in harmony with nature. He will make the best of her, and she of him. They will get on together rarely; she as his ever beneficent mother; he as her mouthpiece, her conscious self, her minister and interpreter.”

Others have been more crisp in their description, although perhaps, not more clear. For example, Carol Geary Schneider, past president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) said a liberal education “builds human capability.” AACU makes a more general statement as well, stating that liberal education is “an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with a broad knowledge of the wider world as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest.”

Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago in the mid-20th century and a respected authority on liberal education said “A liberal education frees a man from the prison house of his class, race, time, place, background, family, and even his nation”

But these pithy statements, while describing the results of a liberal education, do not define the term, nor do they give careful instruction on how to obtain one.

So, just for the sake of completeness, let’s consult Webster’s Revised, Unabridged Dictionary of 1913. Liberal education is there defined as:

“Education that enlarges and disciplines the mind and makes it master of its own powers, irrespective of the particular business or profession one may follow.”

That definition along with the one from AACU gets us a little closer to figuring out what a liberal education is, so that we might be able to figure out what’s changed. But we’re really not there yet. We could consult a few more education “greybeards” to determine the components of a liberal education or “what you must learn” to claim one, but another path is possible. Consider the history of liberal education in the context of the liberal arts.

Traditionally, meaning since the beginning of higher education history, a liberal education and the study of the liberal arts have been synonymous.

Socrates, who imparted knowledge to students slightly before universities were invented, purveyed ideas that formed the basis for liberal education when he argued that technical skill could be used for good or evil. Education (read liberal education) according to Socrates insures its use for good.

In late antiquity and in the medieval world, the seven liberal arts as defined by Martianus Capella in the 5th century became the standard for higher learning. The seven liberal arts were divided into the Trivium (three roads) and the Quadrivium (four roads). The Trivium consists of grammar, rhetoric, and logic and the Quadrivium consists of arithmetic, geometry, music (harmonics and tuning theory), and astronomy (including cosmology). Philosophy was thought to be a metastudy that united the liberal arts.

In the first century BC, Marcus Terentius Varro had argued for the inclusion of architecture and medicine for a total of nine liberal arts, but his argument was rejected. Additionally, some including Leonardo da Vinci, Leon Battista Alberti, and Giorgio Vasari later argued for inclusion of the visual arts: architecture, painting, and sculpture. In the end, the purists prevailed, and they were not included.

Interestingly enough, there was even a hierarchy among the liberal arts. Acquisition of language facility (speech and reason) were thought to be paramount, followed by the abstract reasoning of mathematics, only having acquired these facilities could one begin a study of ethics, politics, or theology, all of which required experience in order to comprehend and practice.

Even in the modern context, the ability to communicate (both with the written word and orally) and to cipher are considered the lynch pins of a liberal arts education.

At this point, it is worth pointing out that the rest of liberal education is no longer as tightly defined. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find courses in grammar or rhetoric in the general curriculum, or music and astronomy as required courses for a liberal education. So it's clear, at least counting from medieval to modern, that the liberal arts curriculum has changed.

It is interesting to consider some other background information on the liberal arts. The liberal arts were seen as the studies appropriate to free individuals. Those who are not free are subject to the wills and purposes of others. Such people, it was believed, have no use for liberal arts since they do not need to make the choices associated with free individuals.

Further, other arts like economics and war are forced upon us by the need to stay alive; whereas, the study of the liberal arts helps us not only to live life, but also to lead a "good" life. The study of the liberal arts frees humanity from ignorance, prejudice, and the influence of passions.

All of this development of the liberal arts was predicated on the idea that liberal education led to not only to the answer to any given question but also to the realization of an answer in human behavior as to the highest purpose of human beings. By the nineteenth century, a debate had arisen as to whether liberal education was meant to result in living well or to expand mankind's power over the universe. One could argue that as long as it accomplished both,

it was worth pursuing. But whatever your belief about its purposes, a liberal education should equip one to deal with the world outside the individual.

How does one get a liberal education? No expert that I can find claims that liberal educations are available in K-12. We have no schools, pre, high, or otherwise which claim to liberally educate their students. They do, however, promise to prepare students for the rigors of higher education...liberal or otherwise.

So, in order to determine what a liberal education is, not what it does, let's consult the catalogues of colleges claiming to provide a liberal education.

It's interesting that liberal arts colleges are rated separately by several organizations, so let's take a look at several of the top ones as rated by U.S. News and World Report. Mission descriptions typically expose an institution's approach to liberal education. Amherst's mission statement for example emphasizes "distinguished faculty members and exceptional students together in a ...setting conducive to personal and intellectual development." It also mentions "breath of study," "critical thought," and "creative achievement."

Carleton College does little to define liberal education in its mission statement, but claims to "liberate individuals from the constraints imposed by ignorance or complacency and prepare them broadly to lead rewarding, creative, and useful lives."

Haverford College speaks of its "rich curriculum," "commitment to excellence and concern for individual growth," flexibility "in form and content," and strong faculty.

Middlebury College, hidden away in Vermont, strives to "engage students' capacity for rigorous analysis and independent thought" and to "cultivate the ...qualities essential for leadership."

Swarthmore College "seeks to help its students realize their fullest intellectual and personal potential combined with a deep sense of social concern."

Williams provides liberal education by "nurturing in students the academic and civic virtues and their related traits of character."

And Grinnell College, made great by an infusion of high fructose corn syrup available only in Iowa, supports "free inquiry and the open exchange of ideas." The college "aims to graduate students who can think clearly, who can speak and write creatively and even eloquently, who can evaluate critically both their own and others' ideas, who can acquire new knowledge, and who are prepared in life and work to use their knowledge and their abilities to serve the common good."

Notice that only Grinnell focuses directly on the values that Newman, Huxley, and Hutchins described. The others do so tangentially, if at all. But we'll give them the benefit of the doubt and assume the education available at those august institutions absolutely oozes with "liberalness".

We then have the obligation to ask, "Exactly, How do they do it?"

In such colleges as these, there are two common paths to a liberal education. Either a student engages in a smorgasbord of studies designed in

collaboration with an advisor to supplement or complement a chosen major (basically a general education approach made liberal by the influence of a trusted advisor) or a student studies the great works dredged from the archives of antiquity. Grinnell and St. Johns are especially known for the latter approach.

It is interesting to note that the general education approach depends more on a student's ability to comprehend and integrate a broad range of information and thought process while the "great books" approach purports to educate students by acquainting them with history's great thinkers and the thought processes of those wise ones.

Of course, the strength of either approach depends on the quality and choice of courses and the quality and choice of great books. In terms of coursework, the problem is partially solved by requiring programs of study consisting of a distribution of courses among the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences, as well as courses in written and oral communication, and mathematics. Academics argue incessantly about the number of courses assigned from one area or another, but it is clear that emphasis is placed on breadth of education. A seeming weakness of the approach relates to how one course or another is taught. If any "liberal arts" course is taught by rote, as a memory exercise, or as formulaic problem solving, it can be just as stultifying, just as confining as a standard training regimen in welding or carpentry. Conversely, welding and carpentry taught from a problem solving, critical thinking point of view can be just as liberating as a standard liberal arts course.

What about the "great books" approach? The greatness of any book is certainly in the eye of the beholder, so the book choice is critical. Attached (Appendix A) is a compendium, a collection, of nine different lists of books thought to be crucial reading for any educated person. They range from the required reading lists of St. Johns College and Mercer University to a list compiled by the College Board to lists developed by an individual like Kenneth Funsten, author of "100 Books for the Modern Person."

If one compares lists and assumes that a book's frequency of appearance is related to its importance (for one purpose or another), then the column labeled "T" or Total gives good indication and which lists a given book appears on might give further evidence of importance. Take The Bible as an example. It holds the record for most appearances in this particular compendium being on seven of nine of the lists. (By the way, "The Bible" could have many meanings. New Testament, Old Testament, both, neither, The Koran, or any of a number of others. So one might infer that "liberal education" also has a cultural basis). The lists where "The Bible" does not appear are Funsten's "Modern" and the list developed by the College Board. And these omissions will give us a hint about changes in the nature of liberal education which will be discussed in more detail later.

Another aspect of this compendium of lists which contains the 58 most frequently cited books includes 55 books written by long dead white males (Of course we could have an argument about diversity among authors of The Bible

or that of God, him or herself), one book written by a long dead white female, and two seeming anomalies written by not so long dead white males. These data might indicate that the path to a liberal education has changed little in the last two centuries. Interpretation will, once again, be left for later discussion.

But, indulge my curiosity for a few moments. How many of you, clearly well and liberally educated Questors, have read most of the 58? How many have read more than half? How many have read just a few? (And that admission takes real courage in this group.) Whatever your answer was, later in this discussion you will be assured that the insecure among you can still consider yourself to be a liberally educated person, even if you have read just a few books on the list.

Those, then, are the two most common paths to a liberal education. And now that we seem to know what a liberal education is, its purpose, and how to get there, we must also figure out why anyone should get one.

Fortunately, the University of Minnesota's James E. Mills, in 1993, formulated a list of 25 reasons why one should get a liberal education (Appendix B) and saved us a good deal of trouble. While, after reading through them, one gets the impression that some are trivial and redundant, they all point to a belief that liberally educated people can lead fuller, more aware, more productive and positive lives. Remember Huxley's assertion about "learning the rules of the mighty game."

The question we are asking and possibly answering today is "Have the rules of the mighty game changed"? Consider several primary sources for possible answers. Hardin Aasand, the chair of IPFW's English and Linguistics Department begins by quoting Pericles, who opined, "What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others" According to Aasand, "a liberal arts program provides one with the threads for the tapestry you weave into the lives of others." To weave that tapestry, one must be able to communicate with others, to relate to them, to function in a context. This would argue that parts of liberal education change with the times. And as time goes on, classical sources may be eclipsed by more modern authors. According to Aasand, "It's not so much what you read, but the way you use it."

Doug Townsend, a mathematician by training and an associate academic vice chancellor sees liberal education more practically. In the 1960's many viewed liberal education and the courses associated with it as fodder to "impress our friends" with cocktail party conversation. But, he observes that even though many employers emphasize clear and accurate communication, teamwork, respect for others, and commitment to work ethic and ethical work, such ideas and approaches traditionally gleaned from the classics can be wrung from other sources. As an example, should it be *The Odyssey* or "O Brother, Where Art Thou" that one studies as basic.

Steve Sarratore, a former associate academic vice chancellor and playwright by training, claims that the "pinnacle" of liberal education for its own sake was reached in the mid-twentieth century, waning with the post-WWII

higher education boom when business majors and emphasis on technical education (STEM education) grew and overshadowed liberal education. However, as the realization sank in that both changes in business environments and technological changes have occurred at amazing speed, liberal education has assumed its place as critical enhancement to technical and business education. The liberally educated can adapt as technology changes and as the global environment changes. The liberally educated have “learned to learn.” They are able to function ethically and professionally in the modern environment.

And finally, our last primary source is Bill McKinney, IPFW’s vice chancellor for academic affairs, who has credentials resulting from having earned an undergraduate degree in engineering from Tufts University and a PhD in Philosophy from a fly-by-night university in Bloomington Indiana. Who could be better qualified than he to comment? In discussing changes in liberal education, he quotes Alan Greenspan, an economist beloved by all, who believes that in our conceptual-based, information-driven economy, “critical awareness and the ability to hypothesize, to interpret and to communicate are essential elements of successful innovation.” He further states that “the ability to think abstractly is fostered through exposure to philosophy, literature, music, art, and languages. Liberal education is presumed to spawn a greater understanding of all aspects of living”. According to McKinney, “practice in such higher order skills as written and oral communication, valuing, and critical thinking “are the results of liberal education. And liberal education comes in the context of current cultural content.

So what does all this mean? The liberally educated have acquired communication skills, the ability to think critically, a set of values, the ability to apply them contextually, and the ability to learn. All of these are important, no critical, to success in modern society. However, rather than education in those skills and abilities being the sole goal of baccalaureate education, such education has become the core of a much broader education. Because, as knowledge has increased, so has the need for a more expansive core of technical information to use within the context of liberal education. That core knowledge is necessary or the ability to continue to learn can be lost. That’s the primary change in liberal education...liberal education has become an enhancement to core information rather than simply an end in itself.

The second change is also contextual. If one believes that reading the ancients is important, who’s to say how ancient “ancient” is? Is it more important to read Darwin and Newton or will Einstein and Hawking do? Is learning from Shakespeare better than learning from Philip Roth or James Baldwin or Isaac Asimov? Can you learn as much from the Koran as from the Bible? And are Asian philosophers, poets, novelists, and scientists important sources of liberal learning. While in the 1960’s, ancient really meant ancient (and western), current thought allows that as long as the basic values and means of critical thinking are understood and effective communication is part of education, the works that are studied can cover a much wider spectrum.

Finally, I will leave you with the thoughts of Wilson Talley, an engineering professor at UC Davis. Professor Talley believed fervently that engineering is, in fact, the only liberal art. He argued that engineers solve problems in the context of whatever environment exists, and to do that they must think clearly, communicate well, behave ethically, and, in the end, satisfy the problems poser. And after all, isn't that what liberal education's all about?