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The Promise of a Liberal Arts Education

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The Promise of a Liberal Arts Education

Abstract
It's an age-old concern. Just what is a liberal arts education supposed to be? It's far more than practical skills, argues Provost Dan DeNicola. Judging by the success of Gettysburg alums who majored in one field and now work in another, learning to think clearly and critically is key to the liberal arts.

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The Promise of

What's your major? The question everyone wants answered of an undergraduate — as if the major holds the key to success.

But does it? For many, the word "major" implies "practical skills" — the qualities we think will stand us in good stead in the world. But as Provost De Nicola points out in the following article, a liberal arts
education has always been — and always should be — more than a major and practical skills. And as seven Gettysburg College alumni testify, it wasn’t their majors that helped them most in their careers. In fact, none of these seven even works in the field of their majors. Rather, it was the broad knowledge gained from the liberal arts, the values, and the ability to think and solve problems that has enabled each of these graduates to succeed in a unique and satisfying way.

It has always been easy to misunderstand what a liberal arts education promises. Think of the many young men who arrived for study in Athens, the vital intellectual center of the Classical world. We might imagine young Cleanthes, for example, arriving by ship at the Piraeus with only three drachmae in his girdle. In his hometown, he was a well known athlete, but here is a poor and uncertain student attempting to arrange a work-study agreement. In ancient Athens, one learns through conversation with great teachers, and Cleanthes eagerly anticipates vigorous and witty debates on social and political matters. But then he finds the forbidding motto on the gates of Plato’s Academy: “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here.”

Or think of the eager student portrayed in a sixteenth-century dialogue by the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives. He is a haughty young fellow from a rich and noble family, full of self-importance and confidence; but when he first encounters his professor, he carries the heavy burden of his father’s hopes. He says:

[It is] the wish of my father, who strictly ordered me to come to you to discover whether you knew of any secret thing — or as we say, any sacred mystery — regarding education, so that we might even achieve greater honor. If you know of any such thing, tell it to me immediately, so that our family, already honored and most noble, may attain to even greater heights.

His father has defined his expectations for him, he wants instant gratification, and he is crushed when he learns that his first lesson must be modesty.

Finally, there is the novice student in Goethe’s Faust, who arrives to meet with his academic advisor and select a major. (Just imagine — Faust as your academic advisor!) The lad seems respectful and sincere, but he is clearly more interested in fun and sunshine than in the dusty libraries and foul-smelling laboratories of the academic world. Straightforwardly, he says:

Please sir, assist me. I have come with the best intentions, good health, and a little money. My mother didn’t like to have me leave her. I want to learn something here that’s practical.

Faust is a sardonic advisor — especially when confronted with a student who is looking for a lucrative career instead of a transforming education. He (or rather his devilish alter ego,
Psychology of the Sweet Tooth

Myrna (Speck) Ireland '61
Psychology Major
Owner, Creative Desserts
Corona del Mar, California

Serendipity — and a solid liberal arts background — can take you anywhere. Just ask Myrna (Speck) Ireland.

Ireland majored in psychology at Gettysburg College and envisioned a career in mental health. But when she began working, she discovered that her chosen field didn’t appeal to her. Consequently, she changed directions — worked in personnel for Ampex, recruiting engineers. Married and had children. And then started her own business, Creative Desserts.

The impetus for Ireland’s business came by chance. To earn money for a birthday celebration for her husband she baked and decorated several cakes for friends. She thought that would be the end of it, but her friends insisted she stay in the business — and eighteen years later Ireland is still making desserts. “Oftentimes as many as five to ten cakes a weekend,” she says. She prepares a great many wedding cakes, usually to serve 100–300 people. But she also once created a cake that served 600.

And how has a liberal arts education helped Ireland in a career she never anticipated? “I’m so grateful for the liberal arts,” she says. “It tapped my interest in so many areas which I might never have studied. In life you meet so many people with different interests. In fact, you can imagine the different people I meet in this job of mine. What I learned at college opened doors for me to meet and communicate with all sorts of people.”

Mephistopheles) makes cynical comments about each of the majors in the curriculum; then, not surprisingly, he advises the student to select Faust’s own field — medicine. The young man has switched several times and is still unsure. But the smug advisor counsels that medicine is practical, that a physician has a prestigious title and degree, and that a doctor enjoys intimacies with his female patients that are forbidden to other men. The young student sees immediately the keen advantages of this choice and promptly declares himself a premed major.

Each of these three cases portrays a misunderstanding of the promise of a liberal arts education. That’s not surprising, of course, because — ironically — in a deep sense one requires a liberal arts education to understand fully the power and place of a liberal arts education. And that is true for both men and women. These three earlier examples happen to be young men, but the issue transcends gender.

To be sure, the aims and methods of education are affected by external factors, which in turn alter an understanding of the liberal arts. Chief among these factors are social changes, changes in technology, and increases in knowledge. All of these are at work in our contemporary climate. Traditionally, liberal arts education is thought to include knowledge, skills, and values or attitudes. I want to address each of these areas to see how they apply today.
From Social Forms to Finance

Kevin McManus '85
Sociology Major
Vice President, Citibank
New York City, New York

For Kevin McManus, the key to success is found in trial and error. “You should just follow your natural interests,” he advises. “Who knows? You may end up in a career you never anticipated.”

That is indeed what happened with McManus. “It was never my intention to direct myself toward working in a large bank,” he says. “In fact, such a job would have been a low-end choice for me when I was a student.”

McManus majored in sociology and thought he would work in a service field connected with fitness. But when he graduated, his first job was with Procter & Gamble as a sales representative. “I sold shampoos and deodorants,” he recalls with some amusement. From there, he moved to American Express Financial Advisers and discovered that he enjoyed “mapping out goals for people.” In 1989, he joined Citibank and now oversees asset management accounts, handling both banking needs and investments for individual clients — a job he enjoys very much.

“That’s what so great about the liberal arts,” says McManus. “It gives you exposure to a number of different areas so that you get a feel for what you like and don’t like. Then you try a position or two in the work world to see what you want to do. Then you can specialize. It’s definitely trial and error. But the liberal arts make it possible by giving you a broad-based education.”

Knowledge

Some folks think that a liberal arts education is defined by its content, by the subjects one studies. But this is surely false. The curriculum, the knowledge educators think is essential, has evolved. We needn’t go back to ancient Greece to illustrate this — we can stay within the timespan of Gettysburg College and look at the curriculum of 1840. If you enrolled at Pennsylvania College in that year, you experienced a balanced, liberal arts education by the standard of the day. This means you took a prescribed curriculum that included Greek and Latin, but also French and German; you studied the history and literature of Classical Greece and Rome, and also read the Bible. You took mathematics and such natural philosophy (i.e., scientific) courses as surveying, anatomy, navigation, and cartography. All this was capped by a course in moral philosophy taught by the president. Notice what was missing: there were no majors or minors or electives; everyone took the same courses for the degree. There was no study for credit for such “fundamental subjects” as English literature (that’s right, no Beowulf or Chaucer or Shakespeare); no American history, and indeed no European history after the Classical era; no courses in such disciplines as psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics (these subjects did not exist as recognized disciplines at that point); no courses in the arts; no Spanish, and nothing that could remotely be called “non-Western.” All this, of course, is different today.

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The Physics of Law

William Pouss '71
Physics Major
Chief Counsel, PA Game Commission
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

"Physics," says Bill Pouss, "provides an excellent background for law. In both, the process is similar. There is a presumed structure of physical law in physics, versus a structure of man-made laws in our legal system. In physics, you experiment to find whether physical laws or theories apply. In law, you search through precedents to discover what applies to a case at hand. For both, you arrive at a conclusion. And in both fields there is always some uncertainty."

Of course, Pouss didn’t intend to become a lawyer when he majored in physics. "I grew up in the Sputnik era," he says. "There was widespread interest in science at the time." But Pouss had other interests, as well — debate and history, for example. In the end, those other interests won out. And thanks to Pouss’s liberal arts background — "it made me comfortable with a wide variety of subjects," he says — he found it easy to move into law.

Today, Pouss is the chief counsel for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, which means he is responsible for all legal matters that pertain to the commission. This includes overseeing negligence or other suits brought for injuries that occur on the 1.4-milion acres of game lands in the state. His office also advises the agency and handles appeals of state hunting and fur-taking regulations, boundary disputes, employee discrimination suits, and a wide variety of other legal matters. "It’s a very varied job," says Pouss. "And I’ve never regretted the change from physics to law."

My point here is that the promise of the liberal arts is now to be defined in terms of content, specific areas of knowledge that are essential. As we end the twentieth century, new developments in knowledge are occurring at the intersection of disciplines (e.g., biochemistry), in a multi-disciplinary focus on issues (e.g., environmental studies) and areas (e.g., Latin American studies, East Asian studies), and in ethnic and gender studies (Women’s studies, African-American studies). Without eroding our disciplinary commitments, which have given the educational program structure, control, we’re likely to see more of a focus on these new approaches. Moreover, any contemporary education, any attempt to "prepare students for a changing world," needs to be global in its perspective and its grasp. This is a problem for small colleges. We need to teach more areas — not just European and American history, but also Latin American, Asian, African, etc. — yet we cannot simply add another faculty specialist in each area. Instead, each faculty member must work to bring a global perspective to courses in every department.

Adding to the complexity is the knowledge explosion within every field. This has two important educational consequences. (1) We know that much of the informational content of undergraduate education will be obsolete at a rate much faster than ever, and certainly within, not beyond, the lifespan of the graduate. (2) The "coverage" model of the undergraduate curriculum is no longer credible. Because of the expansion of knowledge, it is no longer possible to say with a straight face that one is offering an introductory survey of biology (or chemistry, or art history, or philosophy, or psychology) that covers the field. All introductory approaches are now
Suzanne Fauber majored in art history, and today runs a seasonal garden center and produce stand in Arlington, Virginia — not quite what she aspired to do when she graduated from Gettysburg College. "If you'd asked me then if this is where I thought I'd be twenty years later, I'd have answered, 'no way','" Fauber said. "My career took turns I didn't expect."

With plans to become a zoo designer or park planner after graduation, Fauber went on to earn a master's degree in landscape architecture from the University of Virginia. She then worked for several landscaping and architectural firms in Baltimore.

Eventually, Fauber earned a name for herself, serving as the urban designer for the city of Alexandria, Virginia, and planner for Arlington and Fairfax Counties. In time, however, she found herself less and less enamored with the administrative, political atmosphere in which she worked. "My life really got away from me," Fauber said. "That wasn't where I wanted to be. I did the job well, but the passion was missing."

To regain the "passion," Fauber quit her high-powered job in 1990 and opened Morning Glory Farm. After moving three times, her venture is now located in an old art-deco gas station that she revitalized and renovated. Business is good — so good, in fact, that Fauber is preparing to open an adjunct business, Morning Glory Design, through which she can provide services for building and community design, landscape architecture, and small business start-ups.

And how did the liberal arts prepare her for these careers? "Gettysburg College gave me the big picture of the world, and the context for my life within that world," Fauber said. "It gave me a sense of community and understanding of the big picture. Gettysburg College provided the context — that you play a unique, small part of this great universe."
Margaret Meade to Major Crimes

Linda (Goekte) Hoy '85
Sociology Major
Trooper, Pennsylvania State Police
Fogelsville, Pennsylvania

Having majored in sociology, Linda (Goekte) Hoy had little intention of following in her father’s footsteps and becoming a police officer. She considered a career in counseling after graduation, thinking that she might serve as a high school guidance counselor. But then she landed a job as a temp with the Pennsylvania Crime Commission, where she was exposed each day to the criminal justice world. With encouragement from her colleagues and family, Hoy took the test to become a police officer — and is today a state trooper working in the investigative unit.

Hoy’s current position entails following up on major investigations — “anything that needs more than a short initial investigation by the primary officer,” she said. She then presents her cases at preliminary hearings, which includes playing the role of attorney for the commonwealth. She also serves as a peer counselor to fellow troopers, meeting with colleagues and families concerning personal and job-related problems and conducting debriefings on critical police incidents.

Hoy credits much of her success to her liberal arts education. “It helped me become a well rounded person,” she commented. “It prepared me for everything from testing and interviewing for the job to performing varied investigations and filing considerable paperwork. My sociology major and courses I took in psychology have proved especially useful in providing a background in understanding and dealing with people, which is the essence of investigating.”

we’re resistant to technology. Quite the opposite, in fact. Gettysburg in particular is on the forefront of the educational use of computers but we’re interested in using technology to bring us together as a community as well as to give us unprecedented access to the learning resources of the world. This requires new skills — and I’m not simply talking about an easy facility with complex software.

You see, in the 1840’s professors had the problem of giving students access to information. Today, our students are drowning in information. What they need is the skill to evaluate and assimilate information, to select good information relevant for the purpose at hand, to marshal that information effectively for presentation of ideas and for the solving of problems. This is a new focus for the curriculum.

Liberal arts educators have always advocated life-long learning. Today, of course, we understand that life-long learning is an option; it’s a necessity. But the explosion of knowledge, the rapidly changing modes of accessing that knowledge, leave the finite human being in need of another skill: we need the skill to decide wisely what not to learn. We can’t learn all the fields, not even all the areas of one field — gee, we can’t even keep up with the deluge of new versions of our favorite software. We have to choose to learn some things and ignore others. But how are we to choose wisely? That’s fast becoming one of the ultimate goals of liberal arts education.
Trading Music for the Net

Dawn (Nelson) Ussery '85
Music Education Major
Communications Specialist, Evaluation Associates
Norwalk, Connecticut

With a degree in music education, Dawn (Nelson) Ussery went on to teach music, right? Well, not quite.

After graduating in 1985, Ussery became interested in the communications field and pursued a master’s degree in communications from Fairfield University. Since then, she has followed several career paths, all within Evaluation Associates, a leading investment consulting firm located in Norwalk, Connecticut. There, she has served as editor-in-chief of two investment manager publications, and also has been an international equity analyst.

Ussery recently switched career directions again, and is currently the communications specialist for Evaluation Associates. “I’m responsible for the marketing communications activities of our firm,” she explained. “This involves advertising and publicity, along with Web site and other marketing systems development. I also work on company identity development through design and the implementation of appropriate marketing materials, such as brochures and newsletters.”

Ussery appreciates the liberal arts education she received at Gettysburg College and believes that she will utilize and develop skills learned there for the duration of her professional life. “Research abilities, solid writing skills, creativity, organization, flexibility, and the ability to work under pressure are just some of the skills that were born and developed at Gettysburg,” she said.

And what about the four years of music courses? “I’m still involved in music through performance, composition, and private teaching as outside interests,” said Ussery.
Wider, Herr Schmidt

Scott Ruvo '90
German and History Major
Dentist
Sparta, New Jersey

Scott Ruvo was born with dentistry in his blood — his mother and father met at dental school, and two uncles and cousins are dentists. He always knew that he’d take over his father’s dental practice after college and graduate school. What he wasn’t prepared for, however, was his disinterest in the many required courses needed for a science major. After considerable thought, Ruvo decided to pursue a major in history and German. “I just thought I’d like to try something else — something that interested me,” he said.

As a German major, Ruvo spent a semester in Heidelberg, Germany, where he lived above a dentist and babysat for his family. It was there that Ruvo began to realize that he was destined to follow in the family business. “I saw that I liked the life of a dentist,” he noted. “I like to work with my hands, to create things. And I have always wanted to work for myself.”

A double major in German and history proved to be no deterrent to Ruvo’s future plans. In fact, he believes that his liberal arts education gave him the opportunity to explore a variety of interests and careers — and then decide what job he really wanted. “I became aware of the other things that I might have been able to do,” he said. “Gettysburg College allowed me to compare these other career options to dentistry.”

Ruvo eventually fulfilled his destiny and took over his father’s practice after dental school. Although content with his career choice, he confesses that he might like to teach dentistry someday.

Ruvo points out, too, that he’s able to pursue his interest in German through his work as a dentist. “A couple of families in my practice are German,” he said. “When they come for appointments, we converse in German.”

educational difference (one worth the financial cost) to live on this campus with other students. It’s not a rite of passage through a gauntlet of vices. It is among the effective means of learning, especially of developing one’s values. (2) Public service, which is so characteristic of Gettysburg and draws upon its Lutheran heritage, will grow in importance as a form of learning that shapes attitudes and links intentions with actions. (3) Yet another hallmark of the small liberal arts college is what some have termed the pedagogy of the personal. It’s the view that good education, especially in regard to skills and values and attitudes, is personal. It occurs in the interactions and conversations of persons, and it involves master-apprentice relationships. This we have always had, and we’re likely to see it promoted and reinforced in the future. (4) Advising is in a sense the key interpersonal contact. The advisor is a teacher who understands the student longitudinally, developmentally (not just in a specific course); who interprets the student’s immediacy within the context of the four-year process and beyond; who treats the individual student as a universe of one. The values and attitudes that are transmitted in such personal, advising interactions are transmitted indirectly, not taught didactically.

These traditional strengths need reformulation and renewed attention in the next few years, both to forge an educational experience that is effective for a new century, and to explain to a wary and often badly informed public what we are and why it’s still worth its cost.

More than ever, our society needs liberal educated citizens; more than ever, individuals need this kind of education to flourish in a complex world. Though new knowledge, technological developments, and societal changes demand new educational responses, the promise for the liberal arts is strong and bright.