The Significance of the Liberal Arts Education

The most commonly cited product of a liberal arts education is a “well-rounded” person. Prior to taking many courses at Manchester College, that term was too vague for me. Finishing the general education requirements and a math major, however, has allowed me to come to terms with what the well-rounded person looks like. That person did not coincide with my perspectives of a math teacher. Upon graduating from high school, I thought I knew just what the effective math teacher did; he or she puts examples on the board, gives an assignment, and only has to worry about one form of assessment. Due to my exposure to a liberal arts education, that viewpoint has changed dramatically in the past five years. Through a variety of courses and enriching experiences, I am better prepared to create inclusive and engaging instruction in my future classroom.

A liberal arts education has a profound impact on teacher preparation because it enables the enhancement of both instruction and the ability to plan for different learning styles or intelligences. For example, I can now tell my future students that the numeral seven is a biblical symbol of perfection or completeness because I have taken courses such as Ancient and Medieval Christianity. Seven then becomes more than an abstract entity about which they know little and yet with which they must work constantly. Many students likely connect to the humanities more than the unwavering curriculum of mathematics; if a teacher is able to connect the two, students will come to class with
engaged and anticipating minds because they will never know how they are going to encounter math. The Experiencing the Arts course exposed me to creative endeavors like painting, music, and dance; these are disciplines with which I was previously unfamiliar and perhaps even uncomfortable. Yet, incorporating them into my teaching will allow students to explore their creative sides and satisfy the variety of different learners that I should expect to teach. Not all students are just like me and enjoy doing math problems from a textbook for every assignment. Students will also see math from a positive and unexpected perspective because they likely have not previously been given a chance to imaginatively connect to the rigid and timeless rules of math. Without courses like Experiencing the Arts, my classroom would have coincided with my former notion of the effective math teacher. The result, an uninspiring and teacher-centered environment, would only serve to assist those who are comfortable with math and intensify the hatred so many students bring to the subject.

In addition to influencing my future classroom, the liberal arts education has contributed to my thoughts and understandings of diversity. Before beginning my college experience, I believe I was accepting of those who differed from me but not necessarily appreciative of them. During a January session trip to Bolivia to study pre-Columbian civilizations, I was given the opportunity to literally walk in someone else’s shoes. My class stayed overnight at a lodge deep in the heart of the Bolivian jungle. In order to get to this lodge, we had to take a raft across a river; the rafts consisted of nothing more than three logs and some twine. It rained heavily throughout the night, and we woke up to a rapidly surging river and missing rafts. We had to quickly figure out a plan because our flight back to the United States was the next day. Eventually we found
a spot to safely cross the river that was an eighteen mile trek from the jungle lodge. This path included rocky, uneven trails, tall, suffocating grasses, and water obstacles that were waist high. Most of our group, accustomed to the convenience of asphalt and automobiles, complained heavily. Yet, along the way, we passed Bolivian citizens who likely make this tiresome journey every day. This eye-opening event of living as another lives inspired within me a respect and admiration for the life experience of one who is not surrounded by the advantages and expediency that I enjoy. I am now more equipped to teach and connect with students whose stories are different than mine.

My perceptions of diversity have also been shaped by my participation in the diversity workshop at the college. It was here that I developed a sense of hidden diversities. Through the listing of my identity groups, I uncovered many traits that distinguish who I am. I would not, however, have used these to describe myself. These include my status as a brother, a math major, a saxophone player, or other qualities that are not apparent by simply looking at me. This appreciation for the self facilitates an appreciation for others. Prior to attending the workshop, I may have noticed and made judgments about others only with respect to their obvious identity groups such as race and gender. Underneath the surface of the individual lies a more complex and diverse person, someone whose diversity can never be fully admired unless we are willing to look beyond the topological identities. This experience, the direct result of a liberal arts education, enables me to both showcase my distinctiveness to my future students and foster within them a sense of their uniqueness and the value that brings to the classroom.

Finally, the liberal arts education moves one from a national to a global perspective. There is no escaping the necessity of this transition in an ever-changing
world. The United States becomes increasingly diverse every year. Through my trips to South America and London, I have discovered diversity and cultural enrichment from the front lines. Not all my students will have such opportunities, and yet they will still encounter differences in their school experiences. The liberal arts education has prepared me to introduce diversity as it connects to mathematics and therefore assist students in discovering the world around them.

The liberal arts education I have received at Manchester College has contributed to my latest and best perception of the effective math teacher. It is radically different from my initial notions. The math teacher allows students to make cultural and personal connections to the math; it is not a teacher-centered atmosphere. The environment I hope to create is one in which students feel their learning needs are being met and also requires them to progress beyond their comfort zones through active and enriching instruction. The liberal arts education has done that for me, and I believe my teaching will be strengthened because of it.