Creating Growth through a Liberal Arts Education

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What draws students into “the middle of a cornfield” to pursue their college education? For most students it is obviously not to save money, though Manchester College was the least expensive school that I applied to. Most students come to MC with high ambitions and feel that with a well-rounded education they will be able to accomplish far broader goals than their peers that attended state schools. An accounting, teaching, or pre-med biology-chemistry major seeks out a degree from Manchester because they are a well known college for those areas. Students seeking other degrees are probably looking for something else, something that Manchester strives to accomplish in their mission, whether it is to develop a strong sense of self-identity, a strong personal faith, a dedication to the service of others, or create a more responsible citizenship.

Personally, I chose to go to Manchester for very different reasons than most students. Growing up in a farming community in which neither of my parents held more than a high school diploma, I never dreamed of going to college. When the time came to apply for colleges, I chose a wide variety and had everyone guessing, even I wasn’t sure where live would take me at that point. When my acceptance letters came back with financial aid information, I knew that I was going to Manchester because it was the least expensive. It was close enough to home that I could see my family and friends on the weekends, but far enough away that I didn’t have to worry about my parents swinging by to check on me all the time. I also had a cousin attending the college that I could lean on for support and ask questions about classes when I was struggling.

I did not choose to attend Manchester College because of its liberal arts background. In fact, if I knew how liberal the school was, I probably would have paid the extra money to attend a college more suitable for my B.S. in Biology. I think that MC would have a lot fewer students attending their school if prospective students actually spent a few days on campus, living the
everyday experiences that a student deals with before accepting admission. Despite having family members on campus, I was oblivious to the extent to which my political, religious, and gender beliefs would be questioned.

Many of the Monday morning convocations I found appalling and simply took homework to work on during this time, in which I was forced to sit and assumingly support speakers that I did not agree with at all. I simply went to get my 80 convos over and done with so that I could use my remaining time at Manchester a little more wisely and to my liking. Never have I been forced to listen to so many one-sided stories in my life and I’m glad that those days are now over with. Science too can be one-sided, I have discovered, and that has caused many troublesome moments throughout my college career. I learned though, that some professors are better able to conceal their own beliefs and teach from an unbiased perspective, but it takes the right kind of teacher to pull this off. Those that were open-minded drew in the attention of a majority of their students, where as, close-minded professors often only captured the students that shared the same beliefs as themselves. As I spent my four years studying like crazy, I found some general education/liberal arts classes useful and applicable to making an impact on my everyday life, others are less deserving of that honor.

My First Year Colloquium class definitely had an impact on my life. Not only did I spend an entire semester in a class with my sole group, but I was able to grow and develop as a college student with them. The course title, “Imagining the Midwest,” lured me to the idea of learning more about the historical background of the region in which I had grown up and come to know as home. This class allowed me to explore novels, short stories, painting, and movies based on life in the Midwest region of the United States and prove that there is “more than corn in Indiana.” We viewed historical, social, and cultural aspects of the region and developed a
heightened awareness of the legacy behind the growth of the Midwest. A classmate and I even created a 3-D model of a Midwest town, which the professor took home for his daughters to play with.

Some classes are not so engaging and most students would agree that one in particular was extremely agonizing. Experiencing the Arts, is a class that tortures many students mentally as they struggle to maintain focus and interpret the differences between the music of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart or the art of Monet, Picasso, and Renoir. I spent many afternoons in the library listening to music and critically analyzing paintings before exams. A class like this is meant to create a deeper awareness of the depth of art and music around us, but art and music are not for everyone, myself included. This class neither created a deeper interest nor strengthened my long-term memory of the content. Because of the combination of the complex information and the lack of understanding as to why it would be beneficial to my life, I did not feel that my education truly benefited as a result of this class.

Intro to Philosophy was all about deep thinking and analyzing ethical decisions, another class which many students had difficulty grasping and staying awake for. The topics we covered were valid choices that we deal with in our society on a daily basis, yet talking about them and taking sides made students uneasy and unwilling to participate. Many times the professor divided the class in half, quickly reviewed the topic that we were assigned to read for that day, and forced us to develop reasons to support our side. This method of controlled class discussion was very ineffective as many students were able to get away with not reading. I feel this class would have been much more effective and centered if students were able to choose the topics discussed in class and focus their energy on supporting the view they stand behind. Another problem we also confronted in this class was students that were unwilling to hear others
viewpoints on a specific topic and simply skipped that class period. If my Manchester College experience has taught me anything, it is that you have to be open-minded and willing to listen to all viewpoints before taking sides.

The one and only interesting history class that I have ever had the privilege of being apart of was my Western Civilization class. This was the only history class that was able to effectively and efficiently cover all of the important historical events leading to the development and growth of the western world. For once in my life, a history class actually taught history up to the present time, instead of running out of class time for the World Wars. By taking the time to reach these important historical points, it showed that the professor cared about us. For the most part, we knew more about the recent past because of relatives or stories from relatives that lived through those time periods and were able to actively discuss the stories that we had learned. Despite what I initially expected, Western Civ. was well-worth the time spent studying for the challenging essay exams.

Introduction to New Testament was another incredibly interesting class. It was obvious that some students were only there to meet their general education requirements, while others were there to take the time to learn about the story of Jesus and his disciples. If students took the time, they could have had an easy “A” in the class because the professor provided all of the possible quiz and exam questions online for us to study from. I particularly enjoyed this teacher’s style of teaching because he taught the Bible in terms that we could understand. His translations were more meaningful than any I had ever heard before. Because of my hectic lifestyle and adjusting to a new college schedule, I had fallen off the church-going path and this professor inspired me to get out of bed on Sunday mornings to go to church. Needless to say, I
am grateful that this professor took the time to open my eyes and lead me back to the path of salvation.

The last intriguing class that I took as part of my general education requirements was African American Literature, a cultural connections class. Though I did not at the time enjoy taking the class, it really opened my eyes to a brief history of African Americans. Through the use of novels, poetry, art, music, and film, we were able to discover for ourselves what it may have been like during the years of slavery and continued oppression throughout the last half century. Reading *Kindred* and *Native Son*, two books that I likely never would have pulled off of a library shelf and read on my own opened my eyes to the severity of the problems our country was going through. It made me more aware of how the United States has defined “the land of the free and home of the brave.” Our class also created two quilts signifying safe homes along the Underground Railroad. This was the last thing I expected to do in this class, yet I went in with an open-mind and found that I truly enjoyed it. At the end of the project, the quilts were donated to area organizations that provided safe houses for men, women, and children caught in abusive relationships that are seeking a safer life.

Though I have mixed reviews about the liberal arts education that I paid hard earned money for, I’m attended and graduated from Manchester College. It was definitely an eye-opening experience of the political, religious, and gender extremes found in our diverse country. Many times I didn’t agree with things that were going on around campus, so I simply avoided the situations and found other constructive activities to spend my time on. I do believe that I have developed into a well-rounded member of the community because of my broad education and feel prepared to take on a career in a variety of fields, not just Biology or Secondary Education.