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Educ 410
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The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

One meaning of the phrase “liberal arts education” refers to the knowledge needed by a *free* person (or a person with his or her *liberty*) in ancient Greece, as opposed to a *slave*, who needs a narrow set of skills. A liberal arts curriculum helps protect people from being reduced to just consumers or just producers. Members of a society ought to be citizens first, and cogs in the machine, second. Acting responsibly in society means knowing more than one’s own narrow role in perpetuating the status quo. The philosophy behind a liberal arts education provides students with the ideal preparation for at least four reasons. 1) A well-rounded citizen is prepared not only for *today’s* jobs (short term preparation), but has the ability to adapt to *tomorrow’s* as yet unknown needs (long-term preparation). 2) When taking classes outside one’s personal interests, college students sometimes surprise themselves and discover new interests and aptitudes. When these students become teachers themselves, they can recreate the climate for discovery that they experienced in their liberal arts classes. 3) Taking classes outside one’s major always presents students with new perspectives, and appreciating multiple perspectives is a perennial aim at all levels of education. 4) A broad-based liberal arts track helps students see their major field of study *in context*. Life is not divided into majors, and general education classes help bridge the gap between disciplines.

Liberal arts colleges seek to prepare students for more than their first job. Ideally, colleges prepare graduates to find meaning in the world, and shape the world, rather than just fit into it. As a junior, I felt the tension between short-term and long-term

Comment [s1]: You have demonstrated a deep understanding of educational philosophy here.

Comment [s2]: I like this!

preparation. After taking part one of a music-based humanities course, I had to choose between taking part two of the same course, and taking a course called “Computers in the Humanities.” Both courses fulfilled the same broad requirement, but the computer course would introduce me to simplified computer programming with many humanities-friendly applications. I asked myself if I should spend the next semester studying music and arts from the past 600 years? Or should I learn a skill that would improve my marketability the *following year*? After some soul searching, I chose to take the computer class, reasoning that it would provide me with cutting edge skills would allow me to promote the humanities through new media to benefit others, whereas the music/arts class would mostly enrich me personally. Fifteen years later, I cannot say that I made the wrong choice, since the computer knowledge *did* put me on a productive path that eventually led to study education, but today, those particular computer skills are completely obsolete.

As a teacher, I want my students to be curious. I want them to take risks in hopes of constructing new knowledge and making meaning. A liberal arts curriculum almost guarantees this kind of experience for college students, and college students with this experience are more likely to pass on lessons learned to their public school students. I began my college career as a science major. After a semester of science classes in huge lecture halls with 200 classmates, I began to lose my passion for science. The following year, I switched to a major in linguistics, but it wasn't until I took a GE physical science class years later that I rediscovered my love of science – the love I could not find in classes intended for science majors. Thanks to the college's commitment to broad learning, I was forced to revisit science, and happily I did not swear it off forever. That GE class focused entirely on *relationships* between variables in a way that the major

courses did not. No number crunching—just relationships. Today I feel confident in teaching science to elementary school students. I taught a weekly science lesson in my kindergarten student teaching placement. If a student asks *why* we are doing something that does not interest them, I am personally, painfully prepared to nudge them into discovering answers to that question.

Comment [s3]: 😊

Learning a new language is one of the best ways to acquire new perspectives. I already knew this, having grown up learning French in a bilingual education setting. However, I realized that to really jar my perspective, I needed to grapple with non-Western language and culture. I decided to fulfill my foreign language requirement by studying Japanese. I loved and anguished over the differences between Roman and Japanese characters. I had always enjoyed examining the roots of English words, but found myself completely enthralled by the nuances contained in each stroke of a single ancient character. The syntax also fascinated me because of the way it revealed information about Japanese culture. I still remember my professor lecturing on advertisements. We compared the Western command “Drink Coke” and its nearest Japanese equivalent: the indirect, polite, deferent: “Let’s all drink Coke.” Such hard-won lessons in different perspectives certainly find their way into my teaching.

For practical reasons, colleges divide subject matter into ever more specific, discrete classes. But I’m grateful for a GE biology class that blurred the lines between hard science and social justice. Even more than his entertaining gimmicks (e.g., rubber glove on his bald head, dressing up as a Muppet scientist), I remember the way my professor guided students toward current issues relating to life science. As we discussed everything from evolution to scarcity to AIDS, I often left class feeling empowered to

apply my slice of scientific knowledge in a charitable way. One day, a student gave voice to the question on all our minds: What can *we* do about this problem? The professor actually choked up briefly, and then facilitated a discussion on actions and attainable goals that would alleviate suffering. During moments like these, Albert Einstein's quote seems most appropriate: "The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks" (ASL & Associates, 1995).

One of the best ways to educate people is to transform them into individuals who can make their own judgments rather than rely on others' opinions (University of Berkeley, 2007). By preparing students to meet broad needs rather than narrow, short-sighted demands, liberal arts colleges help students take beneficial risks. The liberal arts lead students to confront a variety of perspectives and connect seemingly disparate facts and lines of thought. College students who experience this kind of growth cannot help but inspire their own young students to develop in these same areas.

Comment [s4]: Someone else in the cohort quoted Einstein, wise man.

Works Cited

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