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Liberal Arts in the World After College

I chose to pursue a degree in education at Manchester College for many reasons, one of which being that it provides knowledge through a liberal arts tradition. The Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary describes a liberal arts education as, "studies in a college or university to provide general knowledge and develop intellectual capacities." Here at Manchester, students are required to complete credit hours in course work that would not be studied in their major field at another type of college. These requirements include courses in: speech, writing, math, history, arts, science, social sciences, non-European civilizations, cultural connections as well as a diversity workshop and various topics in convocations. The components of a liberal arts education, along with the community it creates, provide the necessary tools for students to develop the ability to problem solve, use a global perspective, and acquire the well-rounded education necessary to becoming valuable community members as lifelong teachers and learners.

Problem solving and flexibility are essential qualities to possess, no matter what a person's major or occupation may be. In order to survive in today's world, people need to understand how to solve problems that are thrown at them and be able to change their plans for a better outcome. A liberal arts education provides versatility in problem solving by giving examples of different ways to look at situations. Cardinal John Henry Newman gave an analogy for the importance of liberal arts in problem solving in his

work *The Idea of a University*. He stated, "When the only tool you have is a hammer you tend to see every problem as a nail" (qtd. in Harris). By taking courses that vary from our usual methods of thinking or working with students from other fields, we can build a bank of knowledge on problem solving ideas and perspectives.

The small liberal arts community provides many opportunities to use problem solving skills. In a small liberal arts college, courses are not set up to fit evenly into a student's schedule. They are placed in time slots that seem to be the most logical. Unfortunately, this comes as a problem for many students. It is often difficult to get certain types of classes to fit into their schedules. I myself have come upon many road blocks in trying to incorporate Spanish courses into my education and receive a Bachelor of Arts degree. Despite the frustration this experience forced me to use my problem solving and communication abilities to determine the best solution. In the case of the Spanish class, I had to take a course in a non-traditional way but it worked out in the end. This is one example of the difficulties that prepare us as students for similar situations once we move into the work force. There will always be scheduling conflicts with co-workers or family members, and we need to be prepared to work with these difficulties.

We also learn interpersonal problem solving skills while working with peers. My Expository and Critical Writing class ended the session with a class mock trial. We were instructed to come up with the details of a background scenario and participate in the trial following the guidelines of our specific roles. Difficulties arose due to our limited knowledge of trial proceedings, but by pooling our various backgrounds and knowledge we worked together to complete a successful, well-run trial.

A liberal arts education also provides exposure to varying perspectives and new methods of thought. Many classes have opened my eyes to concepts and ideas that I would not usually have considered, and provided class discussions which enabled me to hear other people's opinions. Philosophy forced me to think in-depth about morality and how our seemingly fixed moral rules change depending on the culture and time period. Sociology introduced me to the wide scope of grievances in the world, which put my own meager problems into perspective. For example, I grew up thinking that a teacher's salary was not that great--and then I discovered that it places a person in the upper middle class when compared to a factory worker, who lives from pay check to pay check. Class discussion and group work gave me the opportunity to hear how the priorities of a business major differ from those of a peace studies major and why. Each new contact or piece of knowledge caused me to rethink my theories or values and better understand the opposite side of an argument.

Knowledge becomes the culmination and most revered aspect of a liberal arts education. In studying various topics outside of your major, you become a well-rounded individual. An accountant can point out the differences between Monet and Picasso, compliments of Experiencing the Arts, or a history major can discuss the sleep patterns we as humans go through each night because of a psychology course. This type of education empowers the student to think for his or herself, using old knowledge to piece together the new or by using a creative side that was hidden away. My history and sociology courses provided me with background knowledge about the world and our country that enabled me to develop my own political views, through knowledge which I feel gives me the right to hold those views. As Newman stated, "A truly great

intellect...is one which takes a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and which has an insight into the influence of all these on one another without which there is no whole and no center" (qtd. in Harris).

Each student has the ability to look at the rewards of a liberal arts education and connect it to a major academic field or life in general. The Teacher Education program at Manchester prides itself on "preparing teachers of ability and conviction." This is accomplished through the ideas depicted in the acronym CARE, which focuses on curriculum, assessment, relationships, and environment. I feel that by completing the requirements of such an education I will have enhanced my strengths as a future teacher, with tools that enable me to be the best teacher I can be.

The objectives outlining the education program provide a basis for the skills and knowledge we need to be effective teachers. Many of these criteria directly correlate to the goals of a liberal arts education. Multiple "curriculum objectives" such as curriculum objective one and curriculum objective two stated in Manchester College Teacher Education Program: Student Handbook, require students to understand subjects outside of their usual field of study; "C1-relates content knowledge to other subject area, C2-teaches subject matter accurately." By completing various courses such as psychology, sociology, astronomy, Greek architecture, and Experiencing the Arts among others, I have prepared myself to stand in as a knowledgeable educator in fields that I would not normally be equipped to teach. I have the tools to incorporate such varied fields as music in a science lesson or physical education in a math lesson. This knowledge both makes me more marketable and will continue to enhance my teaching abilities.

My broad academic background also gives me the ability to see things from different points of view and understand individual differences. These goals are achieved through the third curriculum objective, environment objective two, and the first relationship objective in the student handbook; "C3-teaches content from multiple view points, E2-plans learning opportunities that respond to individual differences, R1-collaborates with students, colleagues, parents, and community agencies with a sensitivity for cultural norms" Through class work and personal connections I have been able understand that other view points can be just as valid, logical, or better developed than my own. I have observed continuously that everyone learns in a different way. This fact is in accordance with Gardner's multiple intelligences. Some people work better with numbers, through music, or with experiments. My studies in Spanish have already provided some knowledge of different cultures, and they continue to give me the ability to speak with future students or parents whose first language could be Spanish. The variety of classes and projects required in a liberal arts education provide practice in working with colleges and professors that will be essential in the work field.

The purpose of a college education is to prepare students for work in their chosen field of study and life in general after college. This goal can not be effectively be attained through knowledge on one subject or through one perspective or method of thinking. Students need to be flexible and adapt to any situation presented to them in the journey through life. A liberal arts education provides students with the ability to problem solve, use global perspectives, and acquire a well-rounded education to be successful in life as teachers and learners. On the structure of life Newman stated that, "Life itself is not divided into majors" (qtd. in Harris). Thus students should not solely be

instructed in the knowledge pertaining to a single field of study, more importantly students ought to understand the multiple subjects and pieces of knowledge that make up life.

Work Cited

Harris, Robert. "On the Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education." Virtual Salt. 17 Feb. 2006

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Manchester College Teacher Education Program. Student Handbook. Manchester College, 2003.