

In Defense of the Liberal Arts

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This is the season when we pack up our college students and send them off to new environments and desperately hope they find their niche.

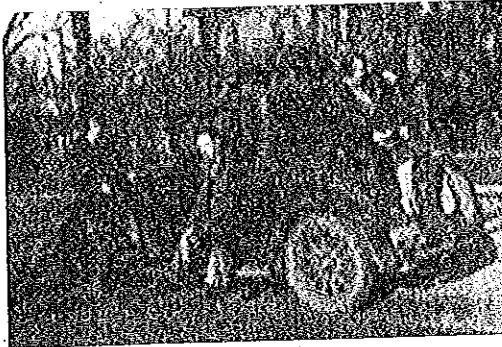
There are a wide variety of educational options, all of them preferable to the alternative—ignorance. However, in recent years there has been a distinct prejudice against studying the liberal arts in favor of the misnamed “practical fields.” All areas of learning are important, but as someone who has taught in the liberal arts for 25 years, I would like to defend them on educational, social, and environmental grounds.

Contrary to popular belief, the purpose of education is not to get a job, but to be educated. This seems an obvious logical proposition (the study of logic being one of the traditional liberal arts) that is all too often ignored. If education were only a means to employment, we would teach kindergarteners to run cash registers and drive trucks.

The idea that free citizens need a broad education goes back to the Ancient World. The term liberal arts derives from the Latin word for free, *liber*, the same origin point for liberty—no coincidence there. Ancient Greeks and Romans wanted their citizens to actively participate in civic life, so they promoted this broad area of learning to make their elites better-educated citizens. In the Middle Ages the university was born as an institution designed to actively promulgate the liberal arts—described in that era as seven fields: music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

In the Renaissance, modern languages, ethics, and history were added to the curriculum, allowing me to earn a living as an itinerant historian. Today the liberal arts degree can include any of the humanities, social sciences, and many sciences. As such a broad category, it is perhaps most easily defined by what it is not: specifically it is not a professional, technical, or vocational education.

So what do the liberal arts teach versus a more clearly defined program leading to a certification or profession? When taught properly by the best educators, a liberal arts undergraduate degree should teach students both oral and written communication, critical thinking skills, and the tools and perspectives in a wide array of disciplines ranging from art history to zoology. The idea being that the motivated student will emerge with a broad toolkit for human life, including both quantifiable skills in, say, math or sciences, and a sense of their history, ethical guidelines, and a lifelong curiosity about other cultures and fields. This educational goal was recognized as valuable for two centuries in American higher education, and the preponderance of small liberal arts campuses speaks to its persistent legacy.



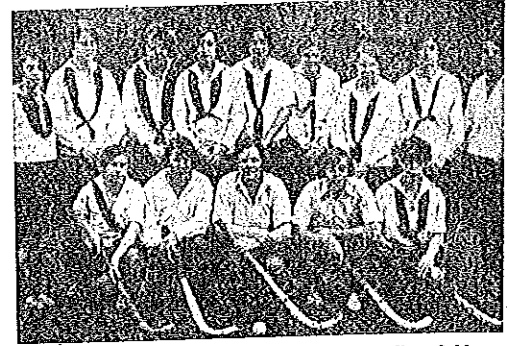
Beloit College students on Model T Ford (circa 1920)

Educationally, it is hard to argue against a curriculum that expands a student's intellectual horizons to the broadest degree possible while, hopefully, giving them the tools to succeed professionally.

Socially, the value of liberal arts has been recognized for 2,500 years. The ancient Greeks and Romans wanted citizens who could engage productively in social life; the Medievals sought to preserve learning for future generations; the Renaissance scholars wanted to rediscover the best learning of the past and expand it with current new discoveries; and eventually American universities sought to create an educated citizenry capable of helping their nation progress and grow. The liberal arts have always claimed that in a democracy, improving the intellect, tolerance, and critical skills of the citizens improves the society as a whole over time. If we lived in a society where dictators or computers made all our decisions for us, perhaps we could risk a less critically attuned public. But considering we all live with the consequences of our decisions, a sane and ethical citizen of a democracy would always prefer the best-educated decisions be made on a wide variety of topics, rather than on ignorance or prejudice. A properly educated, well-rounded graduate would at a minimum know: the Civil War was about slavery; evolution is the foundation for the biological sciences; and other cultures have their own unique perspectives and aspirations.

Criticism of the liberal arts is most often voiced in the platitudinous question, “What are you going to do with a degree in [fill in the blank]?” Although seemingly a fair question, it is actually the wrong question to be asking. The correct question is, “How do we prepare our youths for a world in which 30 percent of the jobs that they will be working in do not yet exist and where only 27 percent of college graduates have a job closely related to their major?”

If we honestly admit we cannot predict the future nor do we want to limit it, then perhaps the best bet is a



Rachel Carson (top row, second from right) on college field hockey team in 1928

well-rounded education that can provide the fundamental skills to learn new jobs and master an evolving world place. The growing emphasis on narrow specialization and career training in the world of higher education may provide some type of placebo effect for students and bankrupt parents, but it does little to enrich our youths or our economy.

Finally, broad-based grounding in the liberal arts may secure the future of the environment. Our environmental crises are changing from decade to decade. When Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962, she never imagined climate change, global invasive species epidemics, or an increasingly urbanized, technological oriented youth disconnected from nature.

As our environmental problems change, we need creative and critical problem solvers to address them. These future environmentalists will need to discover new solutions to new problems, compromise without surrendering, and behave in a manner that is ethical both to the human and nonhuman species directly impacted. These skills are not easily broken down in one discipline or technical skill. But they may be some of the skills that future Rachel Carsons will develop with a broad-based education in the liberal arts. In fact, Rachel Carson graduated from a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, where she studied both English and biology, synthesizing these skills in a book that changed our world!

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