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Why Liberal Arts Education is Still Relevant and Valuable

*Intended Audience: I think a suitable audience to read this piece would be any administrative officials within any system of education. I would hope that my arguments may be able to sway the naysayers of humanities education into recognizing the many benefits that can come from this type of learning. I think that the need for more humanities-type education extends to secondary education as well as higher education, and I would intend for any people involved in either to hear my arguments. I think these arguments would be relevant in any conference or forum regarding the priorities of education on any level.*

I. Introduction: What is Liberal Arts Education and Why Pursue It?

Albert Einstein once wrote, “It is not so very important for a person to learn facts. For that he does not really need a college. He can learn them from books. 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” (Frank 185). It is no secret that liberal arts education has become increasingly criticized over the past decades due to the rising call for more practical education methods. Many people today would argue that humanities education is becoming more and more irrelevant due to the growing demands of a global economy and technologically advancing society. I would posit the exact opposite; I believe that the expansion in these areas is why we need the humanities more than ever before. With the advent of social networking and other forms of internet media, it is a legitimate fear that we are becoming increasingly out of touch with our own humanity. “Karl Marx suggested that, in the capitalist age, we began to treat one another as commodities…we now treat one another as packets of information” (Denby). Although recent advancements in technology and science have had numerous benefits, it is important that we balance these developments with a keen respect to our own capacity for human empathy and compassion. The human tendency to want to simplify ideas, which is in part enabled by internet media and social networks, can be detrimental to our ability to reason in a complex and thorough manner; subjects in the humanities challenge students to consider several facets of an issue before coming to a conclusion about it. This is the reason why humanities education is still so vital: in a time where so many of us are tempted to choose the most obvious solution to a problem, humanities education dares and requires its students to think critically before choosing a mode of action.

This type of education, which fosters way more than the mere absorption of facts, has the ability to train students in a fashion that reaches far beyond the realms of practicality. The truth and real beauty of liberal arts education is in fact its lack of practicality:

Arguments aimed at proving the practicality of liberal learning are doomed from the outset…knowledge by definition can be correctly called liberal only to the extent that it cannot be shown to have direct practical uses…liberal knowledge really is, by definition, less directly and demonstrably useful than other knowledge. (Graber 4)

Although what is stated above may sound counterintuitive to what I am trying to argue, it is in fact one of most important reasons as to why a liberal arts education is valuable. One should pursue a liberal arts education, not because what is directly learnt is applicable, but because the cognitive skills indirectly fostered through it are beneficial in innumerable ways. In this essay, I will argue in favor of humanities education on three grounds: that a liberal arts education is marketable for job-seekers; that liberal arts majors are taught to think in ways that other more specialized majors are not; and that the liberal arts are still useful despite their apparent impracticality. Liberal arts is one of the oldest and most classic forms of education. The value of the humanities is inherent in their collective title—they express what it means to be a human being, gifted with the ability to logically reason and carefully weigh options, ideas, and emotions. It is necessary that humanities education continue to be emphasized and expanded in all levels of education because of its inherent relation to our daily personal and professional challenges.

II. How Is a Liberal Arts Degree Marketable to Employers?

Although a liberal arts degree’s uses are not always obvious, the possibilities are endless. The same cannot be said for those students who graduate with a specialized degree, who are more or less delegated to a single type of job for the majority of their lives:

While it is true that some degree of specialization facilitates immediate employment gratification, in the long run specialization can be very hazardous. Specialists are the most inflexible commodity on the market; their livelihood is almost solely dependent upon the status of the economy. During times of rapid technological advancement their training becomes increasingly obsolete. (*Liberal Arts: Education and Employability* 9)

Although pursuing a specialization in college can be useful and practical in the short-term, there is no guarantee that one’s specialization of choice will always be valued. “It may be worse to have the *wrong* career focus in college than having *no* career focus—because skills for one career often can't be used elsewhere” (Capelli). Furthermore, just because a field of study is currently in high demand does not mean it will remain so forever. “Because cultural change is constantly rendering some useful knowledge (apparently) useless, even useful knowledge is what we might call, ironically enough, ‘potentially useless knowledge’” (Graber 46). The broadness and explorative nature of a liberal arts education gives students a wider range of skills that can be used in several job settings, rather than a single work environment; although the skills of a liberal arts major may be less practical in the sense that they cannot be used for a singular purpose, they are valuable because they teach skills such as critical thinking, creative problem solving, ethical decision-making, and evaluative understanding which are all universally applicable (Sigurdson).

Many would-be liberal arts majors are averted from pursuing the humanities because they are under the impression that they will not find a job after college or that they will earn much less money. However, there is data that is contrary to that belief:

There’s pretty good evidence even people with liberal arts degrees have pretty much the same chance as other majors to end up making good money…they bring a *slightly* greater risk of unemployment *immediately after graduation…*there’s good evidence that liberal arts majors tend to earn *higher* salaries by midcareer. For example, a 2008 report from payscale.com shows that people with Philosophy degrees earn about $81,000 per year mid career, compared with $77,000 for Accounting degrees, $67,000 for Nursing degrees, and $65,000 for Biology degrees. (Jones 5-6)

If ensuring a good salary is a primary concern of those who wish to study liberal arts, they should be assured that they have decent chances of doing so in comparison to many other majors. Furthermore, they have the added benefit of being marketable in many different areas due to their broader skill sets. The main reason many people fear pursuing a liberal arts degree is because the type of future it sets a graduate up for is not always concretely stated. “It requires some *creativity* and *unguided exploration* after you get it in order for you to *figure out* what you want *to do* with it. And it requires these things because you can’t read the name of a job off of a liberal arts degree” (Jones 7). It is understandable why many people fear to pursue the humanities; it does not offer one a sense of immediate security. However, with an open mind and some creativity, a liberal arts degree can be extremely marketable to employers and lead to success.

III. How Do Liberal Arts Majors Think Differently?

If a liberal arts major is not equipped with a specialization, he or she must benefit instead from an augmented ability to think and problem-solve in a broader sense. College students who major in the humanities are challenged to think in ways that other students are not:

The real social function of the humanistic intellectuals is to instill doubts in the students about the students’ own self-images, and about the society to which they belong. These people are the teachers who help insure that the moral consciousness of each new generation is slightly different from that of the previous generation. (Conn 9)

Liberal arts majors are not just required to learn material from a textbook; they are required to research information, synthesize ideas about it, and come to a conclusion that is both original and reasonable based what they have collected. This is why people who study liberal arts are often the forerunners of new cultural ideas and fresh ways of thinking. Unlike non-humanities majors, who are mostly required to absorb information and regurgitate it in the same exact form, liberal arts majors have to handle problems that don’t always have a definite answer:

If school studies are assessed on their replicative and applicative uses a decade or so after end-of-course examinations were passed, one finds most of what was studied as general education is either forgotten or not applied…on these criteria the humanistic studies are bound to fail…the humanities function instead through their associative and interpretive uses. We think *of them explicitly* while studying them in school, but in life we think and feel and act *with* them—tacitly, without being able to recall many of the details. The results of humanistic studies are largely context-building resources (logical, linguistic, and imagic) for association and interpretation. (Finn, Ravitch, Fancher 18)

Education in the humanities is more centered around teaching students how to think deeply and instinctively. Although liberal arts majors will find that most of the information they learned in school is not always guaranteed to be directly applicable to their work, their education in the humanities will cultivate them to react logically and think critically in several different contexts, whether those contexts be professional or personal. Thus, humanities majors are further benefited by their degree because it reaches beyond the realm of the professional world; many liberal arts majors will benefit indirectly from the “context-building resources” in other areas of their lives as well, such as in familial and personal relationships.

The ways in which liberal arts education stimulates this type of mind-growth once again coincides with the contrasting ideas of useful and useless knowledge:

Useful knowledge has value apart from its (possibly transitory) usefulness…*all* knowledge has value that transcends utility, and therefore is not to be judged on that basis alone…the useless knowledge absorbed in a liberal education becomes useful…only insofar as it is forgotten…This rather comprehensive forgetting leaves behind a residue…endowing one with wisdom. (Graber 46-47)

This is why liberal arts education teaches its students to make insights that other modes of education cannot teach; it grants students a kind of astuteness and intelligence that can only be obtained through careful reflection rather than through the repetitive memorization of facts and sequences. Humanities majors discover how to function ethically, responsibly, professionally, and personally in a modern society; their ability to think beyond surfaces can give them an upper-hand in many different types of situations.

IV. Why Are the Humanities Useful?

It is my firm belief that the humanities will always be relevant and crucial; they are engrained in what it means to be a free-thinking, compassionate, empathetic, and creative human beings. Although it is hard to designate any practical uses for the knowledge learned from a liberal arts education, this does not necessarily eliminate its value:

The humanities contribute to humankind’s ongoing “self-humanization,” vastly— but undemonstrably—enhancing our long-term prospects as a species. We must then value “useless knowledge” precisely because we cannot trust ourselves to know truly useless knowledge when we see it. Our vision is too limited, our judgments too archaically short-sighted, self-centered, and simpleminded…It is not our high technology in itself that increasingly imperils our planet and ourselves; it is the selfish, shortsighted ways in which we apply it. Indeed, entrusting an ever more advanced technology to our essentially primitive notion of practicality could produce that ultimate impracticality: human extinction. (Graber 49-50).

Although the idea that the vanishing of the liberal arts would bring about the extinction of humankind seems far-fetched, I think that Graber has pointed out something fundamental about the humanities; without them, the things that distinguish humans from every other living being on this planet would be diminished.

It should also be considered that the loss of humanities education would result in a weakening of art, design, and creativity. Although these things may seem to be no longer important in our technologically advanced age, it is in fact these very traits that have built some of the most influential companies in the world:

My research team at Duke and Harvard [surveyed](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1127248) 652 U.S.-born chief executive officers and heads of product engineering at 502 technology companies. We found that they tended to be highly educated: 92% held bachelor’s degrees, and 47% held higher degrees. But only 37% held degrees in engineering or computer technology, and just 2% held them in mathematics. The rest have degrees in fields as diverse as business, accounting, finance, health care, and arts and the humanities. (Wadhwa)

From this information we can see that success comes from a broad range of fields; what really leads one to success is not a practical education, but an education that teaches students to think beyond the textbook. The leaders of these companies did not find success by simply following the standard protocols of practicality; they dared to think outside of the realms of practicality and instead into the domains of possibilities.

V. Conclusion: Why the Liberal Arts are Still Relevant.

My hope is that all the evidence I have provided above about the humanities and liberal arts education may be able to convince the adversaries of humanities education of their crucial importance. In the past few decades, there has been a developing opposition to humanities education because it has been deemed impractical and irrelevant. However, based on the evidence I have found and shown here, I think that there is more than enough corroboration that shows that humanities education is neither irrelevant or impractical—at least not in the sense that the ability to reason and think critically are not impractical nor irrelevant.

For example, several employers not only appreciate, but even crave the types of skills that humanities majors are taught. Some of the most successful businesses in the world were only able to triumph because of the creative minds that humanities education fosters. Steve Jobs said in one of his more famous speeches, “It is in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough—it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing.” Thus, the humanities are still relevant in a professional and employable sense because they have been thought of as crucial to the expanding creativity and innovation in areas such as technology.

Furthermore, they are also still relevant because they are able to cultivate minds in a manner that no other type of education is capable of—the humanities forces students to think outside of simple question-and-answer problems. Rather than learning the protocols of problem-solving given to them by a textbook, subjects in the humanities more often than not require that students not only find the right answer, but also the *right question* to ask. Humanities education is about teaching students to synthesize their own mode of reasonable action based on the information they are expected to independently collect and analyze.

Finally, the usefulness of a liberal arts education is visible in our daily lives. They are essential to any person’s continuously growing ability to understand the world and its culture, evaluate challenges and surroundings, and to expressing one’s self effectively. The humanities are useful despite their impracticality because they encourage and enable their learners to think outside of the box. They teach and inspire students to approach problems by thinking about new solutions rather than simply relying on the most common one.

It is easy to criticize liberal arts education because its value is often hard to pinpoint or difficult to put into terms of practicality. Although the worth of the humanities are not always readily apparent, they are undoubtedly just as important to our lives. “The real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us” (Wallace). Whether or not one chooses to be a liberal arts major, the humanities will unquestionably have an effect on their lives. They surround everything we do—they define our past, our present, and most importantly our future.

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