

The Value of the Liberal Arts Education (Claude Clegg, Oct. 10, 2015)

by Claude Clegg

Public institutions such as ours with the liberal arts at their core have a great story to tell and much to be proud of. We have fine traditions of excellence and achievement in various fields, having groomed generations of doctors, lawyers, educators, businesspeople, artists, and many others. However, given contemporary debates about the value of higher education that sometimes tend to obscure these formidable educational legacies, the need to be both purposeful and strategic in illuminating the enduring value of a college education is perhaps greater than ever before. In particular, the push to demonstrate the vocational practicality of various fields and disciplines, along with their prospects for immediate financial gratification, deserves our attention and thoughtful response. While it is true that learning for its own sake is an essential tenet of the liberal arts education, this truism is not necessarily the best counter to skeptics who question this fundamental premise. Instead, the best defense of the liberal arts in this time of economic anxiety is to elucidate how the liberal arts education provides lasting intellectual and practical value. To put it another way, it is quite reasonable for a prospective student—or that student’s parent or any tax payer—to inquire into the viability of a liberal arts education, or the financial payoff of pursuing degrees or coursework in the humanities, the arts, or the social sciences. Consequently, it is incumbent upon those who cherish the great public universities to address such questions forthrightly, not dismissing them as answerable by self-evident truths that we need not take the time to utter.

There are a number of reasons that the rhetorical pendulum has swung away from the liberal arts as the most feasible path toward an expansive and rewarding educational experience. First, universities operate in a competitive marketplace for prospective students and can be

hypersensitive to the angst of 18 year olds (and their parents) as they seek the most bang for their tuition dollars. The resourcing of whole departments and even schools depend upon these marketplace anxieties, which sometimes compel universities to stress the popular curricular trends of the day. This tendency to offer what they believe students want to study--as opposed to what they need to know--unfortunately leads some universities to prepare students for the economy, society, and fads of the recent past, as opposed to the future.

Second, in the globalized educational culture and economic arena that American universities currently operate in, a good portion of what schools offer is tailored to an international audience. Strong demand for business, engineering, and science training on the part of students from developing countries that often do not have strong liberal arts institutions or traditions has in many instances pushed some U.S. institutions further down the road of “practical education,” at the expense of the more exploratory, multidisciplinary grooming that characterizes the liberal arts education. Finally, the escalating cost of higher education against the backdrop of arresting forms of income inequality have brought into sharp relief the question of the value of higher education, particularly when immediate employment prospects in some fields are not always apparent. These are the issues, the questions, before those of us who believe in the humanities and the arts, and the liberal arts education in general.

Fortunately for us, the liberal arts tradition is an easy one to defend as we proceed into the second decade of the twenty-first century. To be sure, the debate is not a new one; the nature and composition of the ideal educational regimen has been argued since ancient times. However, just as each generation writes its own history, each must also determine how its progeny will be shaped and prepared for the challenges of tomorrow.

The liberal arts education both encourages the development of the life of the mind and skills-based qualities. It teaches students advanced methods of reading, writing, and speaking; it nurtures habits of critical thinking, evidence-grounded argumentation, and collaborative problem solving. By introducing students to a rich palette of disciplines and fields of inquiry, the liberal arts education pushes the individual to appreciate difference, ambiguity, and complexity. The ultimate purpose is to educate the whole human being, whether through the cultivation of a sense of artistic beauty, an understanding of historical processes, a sensitivity to principles of ethics, or a wholesome wonderment about the great literary works of another age or the timely grand questions of the human condition (Where do we come from? What is love? What is piety? What is a just society? How do we bring it into being?)

The liberal arts, and in particular the humanities, do much of the labor of teaching writing and communication skills on university campuses, regardless of a student's major or curricular trajectory. These skills are transferable across disciplines and professions, and employers appreciate them as such. I would assume that there has never been a business or company that has ever complained about employees who have taken intensive-writing courses in history or English while in college. The same can be said about the kinds of interpersonal skills that a liberal arts education imparts, whether derived from courses on gender, race, class, world cultures, or foreign languages, or similar curricula that equips students with the cultural fluency to relate to diverse peoples and traditions. These are critical skills for most any endeavor, whether the marketing department of a major corporation, a law firm engaged in international transactions, a pharmaceutical company with foreign distribution networks, or a computer games developer seeking to attract a wider demographic of players.

At the root of the flexibility and suppleness of the liberal arts education is its breadth. Students are exposed to a wide swath of human knowledge and ways of knowing. History, philosophy, languages & literatures, sociology, political science, economics, art history, music, the natural sciences—engagement of the entire human mind. Various departments—whether African American Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, comparative literature, classics—are intersections for interdisciplinary inquiries into both general and particular issues and problems, bringing to bear integrated perspectives and methodologies from multiple disciplines. Students who aim to become courtroom attorneys, corporate managers, teachers, artists, or clergy benefit from the ability to bring a range of interdisciplinary knowledge and tools into their professions, affording them the intellectual bandwidth to ask more creative questions and to propose more dynamic and innovative solutions.

To be sure, the humanities and the arts must be able to interface productively with more technical disciplines and fields of study. Future jobs and professions, many of which do not even yet exist, will likely require a hybrid training that draws on various disciplines and skill sets. The many limitations of purely technical training are clear. Overly specific skill sets train people for the demands of static expectations, that is, for merely the task of the moment. Such training assumes that students are simply tool sets that can subsequently be sharpened to do one or two particular things well. Once those training goals are achieved in conformity with existing conditions, the individual simply stops learning and becomes a slave to routine. The liberal arts education, with its emphasis on broad multidisciplinary engagement, the development of critical and independent patterns of thought, sensitivity to context and consequences, and the premium placed on exploration and discovery, provide an always-needed counterweight to crude

reductionist and materialist thinking about how human ideals and endeavors produce value and meaning.

Thus, the question in many instances will not be whether employers are looking for liberal arts graduates or those with technical expertise. The answer will not be “either/or,” but “both.” The demand will be for employees with both broad, adaptable educational backgrounds and specific knowledge and skill sets. That is, the English lit major would do well to have some exposure to fields such as finance or the health sciences, and the business econ major will profit from the historical and contextual sense, personal ethics, and writing skills that the humanities offer. To put it more pointedly, when the needs of the job market change, the people with the narrowest training—especially those trained in a single technique or vocational skill set—will be the most susceptible to becoming passé or unemployable.

I am very partial to the American liberal arts tradition. I am a product of two of the great public universities of the nation (UNC-Chapel Hill and the University of Michigan), and my intellectual pedigree and professional life have been steeped in the humanities and social sciences (PhD in History, BA in political science and Afro-American Studies). As a university-affiliated historian, I have taught students who have gone on to become professors, doctors, lawyers, engineers, museum curators, grade-school teachers, managers of nonprofits, and a host of other professions. I have delighted in learning, usually well after graduation, how their training in the humanities—and in particular in my classes—made them more competitive in their chosen career fields. As a native North Carolinian, my own social consciousness as a citizen of the state and the nation was awoken in the classrooms of UNC-Chapel Hill in the 1980s, where I first encountered a few historians, an English professor, a couple of philosophers, and a handful of other professors who inspired me to think more deeply about the grand

questions of the age and other ages as well. It was, of course, the great universal issues (the existence and nature of God, the seemingly irresolvable dilemma of poverty in the world, the ethics of what should be, the ever-present possibility of species-ending thermonuclear war). But beyond these big questions, my liberal arts education at UNC also encouraged me to grapple with my own historical context and its particular implications for my evolving identity (such as what did it mean to be a person of color, a southerner, and an American on a campus in which the entire globe had come to study and to coexist). One could, in fact, have a global experience—inside and outside of class—and be engaged with a broad spectrum of the world’s peoples, cultures, languages, histories, and literatures without ever leaving Chapel Hill. In hindsight, those formative years as an undergraduate at UNC prepared me a life and experiences elsewhere.

A quarter of a century later, I have been fortunate enough to return to UNC as a faculty member. My appointment straddles two different departments (African American Studies and History) which I admire and care deeply about, and I am even more convinced now about the efficacy of the liberal arts education and the obligation of the state to facilitate a well-rounded and robust intellectual culture anchored in the humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences. Again, the skills imparted by a liberal arts education are of critical importance to all students, including evidence-based analysis, cogent expression of ideas in writing and other media, the rational synthesis of disparate data, and the development of both cultural literacy and interpersonal fluency. Further, I believe that we owe the benefits of our artistic and humanistic mission to our current students and generations to come. For in a 1000 years from now, no one will remember the date that the I-Phone 4, 5, or 15 came out, or the quarterly earnings of any given corporation. No one will care about our overpaid professional athletes, or our overvalued stock market, or our overheated political rhetoric. However, if history is any guide, future

generations will study and be inspired by our artistic legacy and high literature, as well as the ways in which our great research institutions studied and grappled with questions concerning the human condition, the health of our planet, and the meaning of our existence. These are the enduring issues that the liberal arts are best equipped to illuminate, and there is no greater calling of the public university than to lead the way in the discovery and application of such knowledge to all human affairs.