

Why the Liberal Arts Still Matter

Never has a broad liberal education been more necessary than it is today, and never have colleges and universities done such a poor job of delivering it. Radical measures are needed.

BY MICHAEL LIND

EVERYONE IS IN FAVOR OF LIBERAL EDUCATION. Praise of its benefits is found in countless university commencement addresses and reports by commissions on higher education. But it seems that nobody can agree on what liberal education is.

For some, liberal education means a general education, as opposed to specialized training for a particular career. For others, it refers to a subject matter—"the humanities" or "the liberal arts." Still others think of liberal education in terms of "the classics" or "the great books."

All of these conceptions of liberal education are right—but each is only partly right. The tradition of liberal education in Europe and the Americas is a synthesis of several elements. Three of these have already been mentioned: nonspecialized general education; an emphasis on a particular set of scholarly disciplines, the humanities; and acquaintance with a canon of classics. The traditional Western synthesis included two other important elements: training in rhetoric and logic, and the study of the languages in which the classics and commentary on them were written (Greek and Latin,

and, in the case of Scripture, Hebrew as well).

What brought all of these different elements together in the liberal education model was their purpose: training citizens for public life, whether as rulers or voters. Liberal education is, first and foremost, training for citizenship. The idea of a liberal education as a "gentleman's education" reflects the fact that, until recent generations, citizenship was restricted in practice if not law to a rich minority of the population in republics and constitutional monarchies. In a democratic republic with universal suffrage, the ideal—difficult as it may be to realize—is a liberal education for all citizens.

Liberal education, in different versions, formed the basis of Western higher education from the Renaissance recovery of Greco-Roman culture to the late 19th century. In the last century, however, liberal education as the basis for higher education in the United States and other nations has been almost completely demolished by opposing forces, the most important of which is utilitarianism, with its demand that universities be centers of practical professional training. So completely has the tradition been defeated that most of the defenders of liberal education do not fully understand what they are defending.

The first thing that must be said about liberal education is that the word "liberal" is misleading. In this con-

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Allegory of the Liberal Arts (1475–95), by Biagio di Antonio

text, “liberal” has nothing to do with political liberalism, or “liberation of the mind” (a false etymology that is sometimes given by people who should know better).

“Liberal arts” is a translation of the Latin term *artes liberales*. *Artes* means crafts or skills, and *liberales* comes from *liber*, or free man, an individual who is both politically free, as a citizen with rights, and economically independent, as a member of a wealthy leisure class. In other words, “liberal arts” originally meant something like “skills of the citizen elite” or “skills of the ruling class.” Cicero contrasted the *artes quae libero sunt dignae* (arts worthy of a free man) with the *artes serviles*, the servile arts or lower-class trades. As the Renaissance humanist Pier Paolo Vergerio wrote in “The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth” (1402–03), “We will call those studies liberal, then, which are worthy of a free man.”

Once “liberal arts” is understood in its original sense as “elite skills,” then the usefulness of elements of a traditional liberal arts education for a ruling elite becomes apparent:

Classical languages. In the last 200 years, as the study of Greek and Latin declined, its proponents often argued that learning these two languages was valuable in itself, or that it provided “mental discipline.” But such far-fetched arguments were unnecessary for nearly two millennia. In their day, the relatively unsophisticated Romans needed to read and understand Greek in order to read most of what was worth reading on subjects from philosophy, medicine, and military tactics to astronomy and agriculture. Greek was also the lingua franca of the eastern Mediterranean, shared by the Romans with their subjects. Subsequent generations of Europeans and Americans learned Latin and, sometimes, Greek for equally practical reasons.

Rhetoric and logic. The members of the ruling class—whether they were citizens in democratic Athens or republican Rome, or courtiers in a monarchy—were expected to debate issues of public policy. The Greeks and Romans naturally emphasized rhetoric and logic. Rhetoric helped you persuade the voters or the king, while logic permitted you to rip your opponent’s arguments to shreds.

Beginning with Plato, philosophers and theologians often railed against rhetoric as the seductive

art of prettifying falsehood. In modern, democratic societies, rhetoric is often equated with bombast—“mere rhetoric.” But the great theorists of rhetoric, from the Athenian Isocrates to the Romans Cicero and Quintilian, insisted that their ideal was the moral and patriotic citizen, and manuals of rhetoric subordinated flowery language to clarity of thought.

General education. On hearing his son Alexander play the flute, King Philip of Macedon is reported to have asked, “My son, have you not learned to play the flute too well?” A governing elite, whether in a republic, a monarchy, or a dictatorship, must know a lot about many subjects but not too much about any particular subject. An aristocrat or general should show some accomplishment in arts such as poetry, scholarship, music, and sports, but only as an amateur, not a professional. Even in modern democracies, the same logic applies. U.S. senators and presidents must know enough to be well informed about many subjects, from global warming to military strategy to Federal Reserve policy. But a senator or president who neglected other issues while devoting too much time to studying one favorite subject would be guilty of dereliction of duty.

A focus on the humanities. While the liberally educated elite could master the basics of any subject, subjects in the the humanities or liberal arts were of particular importance in the education of rulers, in republics and autocracies alike. Studies in these areas, according to Romans such as Cicero and Seneca, helped an individual cultivate *humanitas*, by which is meant not humanitarianism (although education might promote understanding of others), but rather the higher, uniquely “human” faculties of the mind and character, as opposed to the lower faculties needed by peasants and craftsmen, those human beasts of burden (once again, the class bias of the liberal arts tradition is evident).

In the Middle Ages, the “seven liberal arts” came to be thought of as the trivium (grammar, dialectic or logic, and rhetoric) and quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy)—in essence, literacy and numeracy. Renaissance humanists, rebelling against the logic chopping they associated with medieval Christian Scholasticism, downgraded the mathematical subjects in favor of their own list of the

“humanities,” including grammar, rhetoric, politics, history, and ethics. Mathematics, however, survived as part of the liberal arts curriculum in the West until the 19th century.

The classics. Like most premodern societies, the premodern West viewed the past as the source of wisdom and virtue, not as an outmoded former stage in a history of never-ending progress. Whatever their other studies, elite Greeks were expected to be familiar with Homer and other ancient poets, who were viewed as sources of knowledge, not just aesthetic pleasure. The Romans, and later, the Europeans and Americans, added Virgil, Horace, and other Latin authors to the canon.

Some Christians in the later Roman Empire and the post-Roman West viewed the pagan classics with suspicion. But in Catholic and Protestant countries alike, a version of the Greco-Roman gentleman’s education, supplemented with liberal doses of Christian ethics and theology, provided the basis of higher education from the Renaissance until the 19th century.

I’ve said nothing so far about philosophy, for good reason. The founding fathers of liberal education are the Roman statesman and thinker Cicero and the unjustly neglected Athenian orator Isocrates, a contemporary of Plato and Aristotle. Isocrates ridiculed the Socratic philosophers for wasting their time on metaphysical puzzles instead of educating virtuous statesmen and citizens. This skepticism toward metaphysical philosophy and theology was shared by the great figures of the Western humanist tradition, from Cicero and Seneca to Petrarch, Erasmus, Montaigne, and Hume. It was only in the 20th century that Americans, influenced by 19th-century German thought, began to treat Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, rather than orators such as Isocrates and Cicero and poets such as Homer and Virgil, as the founding fathers of Western civilization. The assertion, frequently encountered today, that the tradition

of liberal education is based on the Socratic method is completely incorrect.

The premodern Western liberal arts curriculum served a variety of governing classes quite well for two millennia. In colonial America and the early United States, most colleges were Protestant denominational institutions whose curricula would have been familiar to Romans and Renaissance Italians alike. For example, in the 1750s Harvard required every applicant to be able “extempore to read, construe, and parse Tully [Cicero], Virgil, or such like common classical authors, and to write Latin in prose,

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and to be skilled in making Latin verse, or at least in the rules of the Prosodia, and to read, construe, and parse ordinary Greek, as in the New Testament, Isocrates, or such like, and decline the paradigms of Greek nouns and verbs.” Thomas Jefferson thought that before being admitted to college, students should learn “Greek, Latin, geography, and the higher branches of numerical arithmetic.”

The crisis of liberal education began in the late 19th century and continued until the middle of the 20th. One by one, the traditional elements of a liberal arts education came under assault from reformers. Utilitarians argued for replacing the study of Greek and Latin with the study of modern languages. Rhetoric was disparaged, on the grounds that it was unscientific or undemocratic. General education was challenged by vocational training for jobs in the new industrial economy. The subject matter of the traditional humanities was carved up between the “social sciences,” including mathematical economics and political science, and the “arts” or “fine arts,” which romantics redefined as the realm of the nonrational and “creative.” Of the traditional humanities, only history and philosophy retained their premodern forms.



They may not get Plato, but they'll still get jobs.

The Anglo-American liberal arts college, founded in emulation of Renaissance Italian academies, was increasingly remodeled along the lines of the new German research university, whose main purpose was rigorous, original scholarship. Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876, was the first German-style research university in the United States. By World War I, most prestigious universities in the United States had rebuilt themselves along German lines. Increasingly, that Germanic degree, the Ph.D., became a requirement for college teaching. In German fashion, professors concentrated on research and writing for their specialist colleagues, rather than on undergraduate teaching. In the new research university, the original purpose of higher education—producing well-rounded, versatile civic leaders who shared a common cultural tradition—came to seem anachronistic.

The amazing thing is that liberal education survived at all. It was rescued thanks only to two measures initiated between the late 19th century and World

War II. First, a number of universities made an undergraduate liberal arts education a prerequisite for specialized professional training in law, medicine, and other fields. Second, the study of Latin and Greek was abandoned in favor of study of “the great books” in English translation.

The importance of the first reform was pointed out by the cultural critic Louis Menand in a 2004 lecture, “After the Liberal Arts.” In the early 1900s, Charles Eliot Norton, the president of Harvard, compelled the university’s professional schools to accept only applicants with undergraduate degrees. “Eliot’s reform, once it had been widely adopted, saved the liberal arts,” according to Menand, by making a generalist liberal arts undergraduate education the precondition for a specialized professional education.

The other reform that arguably rescued the liberal arts from extinction was the replacement of study of the classical languages with study of the classics in translation. This reform is associated with President Charles Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago, who introduced the “Great Books” program in the 1930s. Columbia University adopted a similar approach at the same time. In addition, Columbia turned a propagandistic World War I course

instructing U.S. servicemen on Western civilization, whose preservation was the supposed goal of the war, into the first of many “Western Civ” core curriculum programs. Classics departments dwindled in resources and prestige as other disciplines assumed many of their functions.

As a result of these reforms, by the mid-20th century a new kind of undergraduate liberal arts education had taken shape in the United States, one that would have puzzled Thomas Jefferson and Cicero. Rhetoric had been downgraded to “composition,” also known derisively as “bonehead English,” and logic was encountered, if at all, in math classes. The chief emphasis was no longer on rhetoric and logic, but on the study of classic and contemporary literature, in English translation rather than in the original languages. The humanities still included history and philosophy. But political science had torn away the study of politics, while political economy, now called economics, also claimed the status of a social science. This tilted the definition of the humanities away from the subjects of practical concern to statesmen and citizens and toward the fine or “creative” arts.

In the 1950s and '60s, this new kind of liberal arts education managed to hold the menace of vocationalism at bay for a while. In the booming post-World War II economy, liberal arts enrollment increased. But by the 1970s and '80s, a troubled economy and an uncertain job market pressured students to focus on career training. At the same time, increased competition for admission to selective professional schools inspired a growing number of undergraduates to follow “pre-professional” tracks.

In recent decades, debates over humanities curriculums and Western Civ courses among multiculturalists, postmodernists, and traditionalists have attracted considerable public attention. But the rival sides are fighting for a few planks from a ship that has already sunk. By the beginning of the 21st century, only three percent of American undergraduates were choosing a liberal arts major. The most popular undergraduate majors in the United States were business (20 percent), education (eight percent), and health care (seven percent).

Today, as so often since the late 19th century, the chief danger to liberal education comes not from radical ideologies but from the utilitarian center, which views the university as the training ground for the U.S. work force. In its attempt to become the governing philosophy of the modern American university, utilitarianism has advanced in two great waves. The first began with the importation of the model of the German research university around 1900. The second, originating after World War II, started with the growth of government and corporate funding of university research, combined with the proliferation of professional schools.

A third wave of utilitarianism may be on its way. The economic and technological progress of China and India already is prompting calls for more emphasis in

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American education on math, science, and technology, as in the post-Sputnik era of competition with the Soviet Union.

Another factor is demand by students and their parents. Most of the jobs being created in the United States are low-wage, low-prestige service-sector jobs—waiter, food preparer, retail worker, nursing aide—that do not require college degrees. In these circumstances, it is only to be expected that most students going to college will focus on the high-wage professions rather than the liberal arts, and that they will prefer specialized, pre-professional undergraduate courses of study that maximize their chances of admission to elite professional schools.

In an era when business elites and government officials are demanding more scientists and engineers to help the United States compete with Asia, while most students go to college in the hope of obtaining a well-paid job, any project to make the liberal arts the

basis of undergraduate education will almost certainly fail. Insisting on a broad curriculum by means of distribution requirements for all pre-professional students is probably the most that defenders of liberal education can do.

This raises the question: Why have liberal education in the modern world at all? The argument for liberal education, from Isocrates and Cicero onward, has been that the leaders of society, even if they practice one or another profession, need to be well-rounded, well-informed generalists if they are to make sound decisions in public and private life. Even in a society transformed by science and technology, the need for a liberally educated elite remains.

Defending liberal education against the excesses of professionalism in elite schools, then, is a priority. But even if that campaign succeeds, a second question will remain: In a democratic republic, isn't it necessary for all citizens to have at least the basics of a liberal education? Even if their participation in public life is limited to voting occasionally, citizens cannot adequately perform that minimal duty unless they have the training in reasoning, rhetoric, and fact that in aristocratic and patrician republics was needed only by the few.

Is the democratic dream of a gentleman's classical education for every citizen impossible? Not necessarily. The century-long takeover of the university campus by science, business, and the professions cannot be reversed. But the defenders of universal liberal education might consider retreating to the more defensible ground of secondary education.

As we have seen, the demands of liberal education and professional education were balanced for a few generations by universities that made an undergraduate degree a requirement for professional education. But this compromise was already breaking down by the late 20th century, as an increasing number of students who planned to go on to professional school chose specialized vocational or pre-professional bachelor's degrees.

The two-degree system can also be criticized for contributing to inequality in the United States. Whatever its legitimate purposes, the requirement of an expensive four-year undergraduate degree prior to three or more years of law school or medical school has had the effect

of driving up the fees of professionals by restricting the competition. And paying for every American to obtain at least two degrees and to enjoy seven or more years of higher education would be prohibitively expensive.

What if Charles Eliot Norton was right that liberal general education should precede specialized professional education—but wrong about the age range? When the modern research university and the modern professional schools were being introduced in the late 19th century, some American educators argued that the high school rather than the four-year liberal arts college should be the site of liberal education. Indeed, that was the course chosen by the nation that gave us the research university. While most German secondary students today receive an education that is tilted toward the vocational, the elite high school, or *gymnasium*, has long served as the equivalent of the American liberal arts college. College-level liberal arts education is also offered at the secondary level in many other European countries, and even in a handful of America's more rigorous high schools.

At a time when many universities are forced to provide remedial instruction to high school graduates, the idea of a quality basic liberal arts education in high school may seem utopian. But consider the social benefits. Because public high schools are free, every citizen could obtain the advantages of a basic liberal arts education, without the need for wealthy parents, student loans, or scholarships.

In the late 19th century, before Norton's reform, it was possible to go directly to professional schools from secondary schools. At many schools, for example, law degrees were undergraduate degrees. Suppose that this trend had continued. If it were possible to go directly from high school to law school or medical school, there would undoubtedly be more lawyers and doctors from working-class and middle-class backgrounds.

Making high school, rather than the four-year college, the basis of liberal arts education would mark a return to the older Western tradition, in which elite education ended and adult life began much earlier. And because high school attendance is compulsory and universal, the dream of the democratization of liberal education might be achieved, at least in a rudimentary form, in high school rather than in college.

Reforms like these can be debated. Of one thing we can be certain: Liberal education in some form will survive, as long as societies need not only leaders but also ordinary citizens who know how to read, write, and reason. ■