

The Global Citizen: Finding Practicality In A Liberal Arts Education

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What can you do with a degree in classics? How are you going to get a job with that degree? Many people still fail to understand what a liberal arts education is and how it translates into success in the job market. This attitude raises a fundamental question about undergraduate education in the 21st century: Are we preparing students for careers, or educating them for a lifetime of learning? A better question is: why do people continue to believe these are two separate things?

Liberal Arts and the Critical Mind

The historic aim of a liberal education is to prepare citizens who will lead and serve in society. Liberal arts colleges and universities offer students the opportunity to apply large-scale ideas to societal challenges. Graduates think critically and act wisely in professional situations because their coursework encouraged self-reflection and global analysis. The important challenges of contemporary life are not confined to academic disciplines. They are global issues. When students are only trained to focus on a very specific skill set, they miss the larger picture and their evaluative skills suffer as a result.

While some critics still focus on specialization as the key to professional success, it's important to realize that a practical liberal education includes breadth and depth. Breadth is presented in an intentionally organized general education program that allows students to examine the world from multiple perspectives. Depth comes from a student's major field of study. Students acquire greater knowledge of that specific interest and learn its methods of inquiry, as well as the limits of its current knowledge. This focus on breadth and depth nurtures the mind to question what it encounters and seek solutions. This single skill provides a foundation for success and fulfillment in life.

Liberal Arts and the Business World

Reports published in the past four years by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) document the expectations today's business leaders hold college graduates to. The key abilities listed were critical thinking, effective communication, cooperation, integration of knowledge across disciplines and contexts, and trustworthiness. These qualities are the hallmarks of a liberal education. The most recent edition of Peer Review (Spring 2012) notes that educators from a variety of professions recognize that technical knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient alone, for truly effective practice.

The liberal arts graduate possesses the professional and life skills necessary for adapting to new environments and forming team solutions through analysis and reflection. Knowledge and technology continually expand at a rapid rate and change our professional world. In fact, the jobs that will be in high demand 20 years from now might not even exist yet. As a result, employers want a workforce that is able to learn and grow accordingly; transferable skills are increasingly vital in today's marketplace. Companies can provide the necessary training for specific jobs, but it is the responsibility of our higher learning institutions to empower students with lifelong learning habits.

Liberal Arts and the World Community

We live in a global community and compete in a global economy. Students benefit greatly from global education programs in preparing for their future careers. Study abroad, cultural immersion, and service programs offer meaningful encounters of substantial duration to broaden students' perspectives and nurture an understanding of their own culture and its place in the international community. A wide variety of programs at the university level encourage students to seize and explore this opportunity.

Diversity on campus also opens students' eyes to new perspectives and cultural experiences on a daily basis. A true liberal arts experience is formed by the university's ability to bring all of these unique international and multicultural opportunities to its students. The global conversation begins with these experiences. The transition into international business and communication at the professional level becomes less intimidating with these formative experiences at the college level. The idea of college is to broaden students' horizons, rather than immerse them further in their comfort zones, and global education achieves this spectacularly.

Our continually changing world needs great thinkers and communicators who have the ability to reflect, analyze, and create effective solutions. A liberal arts education builds these qualities with a foundation of critical thinking and global awareness. Students gain success skills that transcend disciplines. The lifelong learner has the ability to flourish in any given environment and continues to regularly seek new challenges and methods. So, when the question "What is a liberal arts education?" arises, the answer is simple: It is the path to a lifetime of genuine success and fulfillment.

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