

# A Liberal Education Is Not a Luxury \*

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## POINT OF VIEW

A couple of years ago, in one of the "idea of the university" seminars that I regularly direct for professional staff members, I spoke with a recruiter from the admissions office who enthusiastically agreed with everything I had to say about the aims and practices of liberal education but who reported that she hardly mentioned the nature of liberal education in her standard pitch to prospective students and their parents. When I asked why not, she hemmed and hawed and then blurted out: "If we had the luxury of really explaining liberal education to prospective students the way you are explaining it to us, we'd do it" but we just don't have that luxury. What our students want to hear about is not liberal education, but jobs!

As we sat there a moment, silently, the line that Emperor Joseph II repeats in the movie *Amadeus* kept running through my head: "Well, there it is." So helping students get jobs is a necessity, but helping them get a liberal education is a luxury? If that is the case, I thought, then there's not much difference between liberal education and sports teams, exercise centers, campus movies, and ice cream in the cafeteria, is there? Are we willing to live with this trivialization of higher education?

Those of us who spend our careers putting our hearts and souls into liberal education sometimes fail to realize that the most potent threat to the mission we love comes not from outside enemies but from the proponents of liberal education themselves. At universities that focus on the bottom line — and what university these days does not? — supporters of liberal education have been on the defensive for so long, they no longer know how to fight prevailing trends. They don't challenge the current orthodoxy that the modern university must go along to get along, espe-

cially in relation to marketplace practices and values. Their friends' support is only lukewarm, sometimes no more than lip service, and would vanish if liberal education became powerful enough to threaten others' resources.

The liberal-education rhetoric that developed in the last century is subtly and quietly accommodationist. Often, in fact, it is a rhetoric of silence. It implicitly concedes the strongest ground in any discussion of educational aims to faculty members from professional and pre-professional programs, who love to insist that students' progress should be measured exclusively by grades and skills, and who seem to believe that making lots of money is an imperative somehow woven into the fabric of the universe itself. Such people almost always talk in narrow, instrumental terms about what a student is to do, rather than talk in broad terms about who that student is to be.

The proper response is to point out that students' overriding concern with post-graduation employment is simply misguided. The real danger is not that students will miss out on a job, but that they will miss out on an education. In 35 years of teaching, I have never seen a student who really wanted a job fail to get one after graduation, regardless of his or her major. (The best predictor of students' future incomes is not their college major; it is their parents' incomes.) But I have seen many students fail to get an education because they were fixated on the fiction that one particular major or another held the magical key to financial success for the rest of their lives.

Students' overriding concern should be how to develop as fully as possible their basic human birthright: their powers of imagination, aesthetic responsiveness, introspection, language, rationality, moral and ethical reasoning, physical capacities, and so on. Those are the powers that students must cultivate if they wish to strive for excellence. Moreover, those are the

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powers that higher education is especially suited to help students hone.

But while many faculty members talk twaddle about accommodating liberal and vocational education — by which they mean to “accommodate” liberal education all the way outside the city limits where it won’t bother anyone — we liberal educators too often make no response or, worse, make small, meek noises that suggest we will be content with any moldy corner in the university as long as we can, please heaven, just have that corner. I cannot remember the last time I heard any liberal educator bluntly and emphatically challenge the presumptions behind the pre-professional rhetoric of narrow utilitarianism, which always paints itself as simply being realistic (a rhetorical strategy that condescendingly marks liberal educators as people with no proper grasp of reality).

Accommodationist rhetoric began as a coping mechanism to allow liberal education to coexist with burgeoning professional and pre-professional programs. However, coping mechanisms that stay around too long run the risk of becoming dysfunctional. Liberal educators have tried immensely hard to avoid giving offense to the futurists and instrumentalists who increasingly control university programs today. And we have succeeded. **We are nothing if not inoffensive.** However, our rhetoric of accommodation also makes us seem irrelevant and hopelessly old-fashioned, like the crocheted doilies that my grandmothers placed on every armchair in their homes.

Liberal education should not be about going along to get along. It’s not about a genteel frosting of humane learning — like knowing that Bizet, despite composing *Carmen*, was French, not Spanish. It’s not merely about being well rounded, whatever that cliché means, nor is it about being able to discuss a variety of entertaining topics at cocktail parties. Con men can be well rounded, and fools can be entertaining.

Liberal education is the pursuit of human excellence, not the pursuit of excellent salaries and excellent forms of polish and sophistication. Liberal education is not even about excellent intellectual achievements. Its goal is more ethical than intellectual: It focuses on the development of individuals as moral agents, and it teaches students how to reflect both analytically and evaluatively on the fact that the choices we make turn us into the persons we become.

If the enterprise I have just described is a luxury, then I cannot begin to define a necessity. What could be more necessary for any human being than learning how to claim, develop, enjoy, and put to public use the distinctive advantages of our nature — to be able,

first, to choose the kind of person that we turn out to be and, second, to influence the kinds of persons that others turn out to be? If liberal education is a luxury, then so is truth in a courtroom, love in marriage, or kindness in response to suffering.

I regret that I must contradict the young recruiter in my staff seminar. She was, after all, only reflecting accurately and conscientiously the views and pressures that she receives from her usual audience of prospective students and their parents. But challenging those views, no matter who expresses them, is crucial for liberal educators. No matter what career we choose, the single job that every human being has to work at is the job of deciding what kind of person he or she will become. That is a requirement grounded in the existential conditions of human life. What are discretionary are goals that have little to do with the pursuit of human excellence. And when those discretionary pursuits begin to define all of education, as they threaten to do in academe today, then true education becomes trivialized. Most of the professional and technical training that people need for their jobs actually takes place on the job, and valuing that training above education comes perilously close to making colleges and universities minor-league farm clubs for the world’s corporations and bureaucracies.

Liberal education represents the last and best — but least understood and least appreciated — mechanism for achieving the fullest development of human potential. Today’s universities too often pander to, rather than challenge, students’ educational utilitarianism. But who is better equipped to help cure that problem than liberal educators? Surely we can make a strong case for liberal education instead of using accommodationist rhetoric that gives the store away before students have a chance to see what’s on the shelves. Without our assistance, students may never understand that they get the profits from buying the wares of liberal education, and that those wares appreciate in value as students use them in a lifetime pursuit of human excellence.

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