

Literacy and Civic Life: “What kind of liberal arts education will promote the type of literacies – scientific, civic, multicultural, historical and more – that are needed in Wisconsin and the nation in the future?”

11.15.05

Thank you, Jim, for inviting me to be a part of this panel and for forcing me to ponder what I believe we will need to see in our future students of liberal arts education.

I see the important results of a liberal arts education in four areas:

- how to think deeply and critically,
- how to learn,
- exposure to a variety of experiences and possibilities,
- fostering civic engagement.

Let me start by telling you I began my post-secondary education at Ohio University with the dream of becoming a high school teacher. And, the world is probably a better place because I learned to think and was exposed to other possibilities. I’m certain those students were better served by another teacher who had that dream and a deeper passion for that role.

Allow me to touch on the four areas I mentioned: thinking, learning, exposure and becoming engaged citizens.

It teaches you how to think.

A liberal arts education should be an exercise program for the mind. It should stretch the brain to concentrate, to debate, and to understand concepts and relationships across broad areas of learning. The varied curriculum of a liberal arts education should give student brains a robust and thorough workout.

Wouldn't life be boring if the only physical exercise we knew was walking on a treadmill? And, wouldn't education be boring and ineffective if all we taught was algebra?

Students should learn through their studies and experiences how to think for themselves. They should develop the ability to form opinions, attitudes, values and beliefs. One of my responsibilities as publisher of a community newspaper is to foster democratic conversation – allow area residents to “talk” to one another on our pages and our websites.

Give me employees and readers who can think.

It teaches you how to learn.

My Mother gave me my basics in how to study. I still can't read a book without a pen or highlighter in my hand. Mom was right – and so were my college advisors: Study habits are important for more than a successful college career. What I didn't know until much later was that those study habits could help me analyze the performance of a group of four news and information operations that touch more than 150,000 Central Wisconsin residents weekly and learn how to change our business to meet customer needs.

If the UW system can teach students how to learn – really learn – you've reached a good goal that will serve those students well throughout their lives.

In our business world, our employees are required to learn every day. Reporters learn about new subjects for stories, advertising executives learn about new businesses, our leaders learn how to do business differently in our changing world.

As my friend, Jim, says, lifelong learning has become a cliché. That's too bad – because if we don't teach students how to learn throughout their lifetime, we fail.

It exposes you to a variety of experiences and possibilities.

I'll limit my comments to fostering the love of reading and the diverse richness of our world.

First, Reading: I grew up as a bookworm. I even read dictionaries and had a homonym collection (they don't call it that anymore). When I landed in college, my first few trips to the college bookstore put a damper on my love of reading. Ugh – it became a dread. But, an abnormal psychology class in my third semester re-opened that delight for me. My project for changing my behavior was to regain my daily reading habit. It worked. Since then, reading has opened the world to me.

A quick review of my reading stack at home this morning showed these materials:

- *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Asar Nafisi
- *First, Break all the Rules* by Buckingham and Coffman
- *Nieman Reports of Eroding Freedoms: Secrecy, Truth and Sources*
- *The Miracles of Mentoring* by Tomas Dortch Jr. (A gift from my Mom.)
- *The Powers that Be* by David Halberstam, a history of American journalism.
- *Lion Taming* by Steven Katz (A gift from my husband – not sure if that will be more useful at home or at work.)

- *Broken for You* by Stephanie Kallows (light reading for my next plane ride).
- *Action Cartooning* (so I'll be ready for my next Grandson visit).
- And, the current issues of *Ducks Unlimited*, *Oprah* and *Editor & Publisher* magazines.

I love to read and I encourage our employees to read. If the UW system can foster a love of reading through a liberal arts education, you will have given businesses good employees with at least one very strong attribute.

Now, Diversity: I grew up in Southern Ohio in the 60s and 70s, attending the same school for all 12 years of elementary and high school. Most of us were middle income and children of blue collar workers. A pretty homogenous group and much like Wisconsin in those times.

College widened my horizons – courses in world history, current affairs, literature and arts took me around the world to events, locations and stories that widened my view of our world.

A Liberal arts education should open students' eyes and lives to a world of possibilities and differences.

Exposure to new experiences and people with different opinions and encounters will offer employers and communities more well-rounded individuals who understand the complexities of life and can accept differences in their world.

If the UW system can foster a curiosity to seek those differences and understand them, you will have improved understanding and teamwork within businesses and throughout our communities.

Last,

It fosters engagement in civic responsibility.

A liberal arts education can help students understand the importance of current events and the effects on their world and their neighborhood. These experiences exist inside and outside the classroom. They can include classes on current events but also include involvement in activities like the student newspaper and political debates. I encourage the UW to continue to offer a wide array of these classes and experiences.

Recent studies cited by Kids Voting USA show that the earlier children are exposed to voting and government processes, the more engaged citizens they become later in life. A liberal arts education can foster those future engaged citizens and our future voters with courses in government and history and by offering campus events and organizations that open their minds to their role in our democratic society.

Many liberal arts colleges require community service and involvement for graduation. I'm not sure that's a bad thing. Even better is to foster the students' passion to become involved by showing them the possibilities through the results of their involvement.

Here is my wish list for the UW system:

Deliver students and graduates who

- can think deeply and critically;
- know how to learn – for the rest of their lives;
- Love to read;
- Seek to celebrate and understand the diverse richness of our world;
- And, are engaged citizens.

Thank-you.

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