

Liberal Arts in the 21st Century:
Promoting a Free Society

by

Dawn M. Freese
Psychology and English Education Major
University of Wisconsin – Platteville

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Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, roughly six multimedia conglomerates control the media, and therefore control content. As of February 2005, AOL/Time Warner, Viacom, Disney, News Corp, Sony, and NBC Universal owned nearly every major news outlet, publishing firm and entertainment provider in the country. Each of these conglomerate corporations owns several film and television production companies; television network and broadcast companies; distribution and exhibition businesses; internet and new media outlets; radio stations and recording studios; book and magazine publishers; and sports teams, as well as other entertainment franchises. Assuming that perhaps as few as 20 people head each of these conglomerates, it could be argued that roughly 120 people control the information and content that is consumed by almost every individual in this country.

At a time when nearly every citizen of our nation is inundated with an explosion of information from 24 hour news outlets and the internet, it is frightening to consider who may be controlling the content of what we consume and what kind of effect their control may have on public opinion, consumer trends and political discourse. As a result, if we wish to maintain a free society, it is more important than ever for citizens to be independent, critical and creative thinkers. A Liberal Arts education is a strong antidote to the intellectual lethargy and poor decision making that is often the result of the consumption of too much vetted and controlled information. The following paragraphs will detail the many ways that the Liberal Arts can promote an independent and free citizenry

through teaching us how to think, how to learn and how to see things comprehensively.

Teaching Us How to Think

The Liberal Arts teach us how to think as opposed to what to think. Using good judgment to think independently in the face of pressures, distortions or overemphasized truths requires a familiarity with many areas of knowledge. The diversity of subjects studied to acquire a Liberal Arts education is essential to making the world understandable and allowing us to be well informed participants in our government and communities.

It could be said that thinking has its own grammar. Grammar, as well as math, geometry, foreign languages, history and philosophy, has an orderly structure or set of rules for usage. Their study requires us to order our thoughts, examine and analyze, compare and contrast, create rational sequences of thought, organize hierarchies, and bring evidence and argument to create organized solutions. These studies promote an ordered intellect and strong mind by requiring habits of attention, concentration and ability to follow arguments to logical conclusions. Over time, students of the Liberal Arts learn to distinguish between the important and the trivial to grasp larger concepts and make rational analysis.

Thinking independently requires an active engagement with knowledge. A diverse body of knowledge combined with tools of examination and analysis

allows us to base our opinions on sound information and ideas. These skills are essential in an information saturated society and they cannot be attained by studying one specific set of skills to earn a technical or vocational degree.

Teaching Us How to Learn

While it is true that no four year college program can teach us everything we need to know to be effective professionals, citizens and human beings, a Liberal Arts education can teach us how to learn for a lifetime. Once we gain an active engagement with knowledge, we can learn anything we need to know at any time we need to know it.

Fortunately, old knowledge clarifies new knowledge. A diversified foundation of old knowledge offers a rich source for analogy that allows us to put new knowledge in its proper perspective. This makes all knowledge more relevant and useful. Good learning habits and strategies allow knowledge to build upon knowledge. The more we learn, the greater our capacity for learning in the future. A free society is dependent on an informed citizenry who are great lifetime learners.

Teaching Us to See Issues Comprehensively

Seeing issues comprehensively is a great benefit of Liberal Arts study. Studying diverse subjects allows us to develop an intellectual panorama. Imagine all knowledge as a map of the universe. A study of the whole range of knowledge

gives us a systematic view of that universe. It allows us to understand relationships, interdependencies, associations, causes and correlations. It gives us a powerful context for all knowledge. Each specific field of study is simply one small part of the universal view.

For those who suffer from an education that overemphasizes one field of study at the expense of comprehensive and diverse studies, the universe of knowledge is small and limited. Their limited foundation of knowledge distorts their reality. Their internal intellectual system of checks and balances or an ability to see the bigger picture is compromised. As a result, the effectiveness of citizens and participants in the larger community is diminished.

The importance of Liberal Arts study in the 21st century is more evident than ever. One only needs to consider recent events to appreciate the importance of developing a citizenry of individuals who can think independently, critically and creatively. Our nation's current foreign policy in Iraq is a clear example of what can happen when media outlets and individual citizens do not ask enough hard questions about government policy. It is fair to wonder how differently things might have turned out if individual citizens, government leaders and news media outlets had asked more tough questions of the Bush administration before we launched a military invasion of the sovereign nation of Iraq. If more of our citizens were able to think critically, place information in its proper context, consider the larger picture and seek more knowledge of the

issues, the dissenting voices may have been heard. Thousands of lives and billions of dollars may have been saved. Our nation's credibility on the international stage may not have been further tarnished.

As consumers of the news, we rely on networks and news outlets to provide comprehensive and accurate coverage of the issues. We often fail to consider that these news outlets are businesses, generating capital for their stock holders. Reporters who used to report news independently from the battle field are now embedded with military units. Twenty-four hour cable news networks fill their time slots with editorial talk shows hosted by political operatives and talking heads. Even major newspapers and news magazines like *The New York Post*, *The Weekly Standard* and *Time Magazine* are owned by the same conglomerates that produce those 24 hour cable news programs. While reporters have a responsibility to dig for the truth, so do consumers of the news. Individuals have a responsibility to be informed and elect government officials who represent their values and protect their interests.

An enlightened public makes for a healthy democracy. While a Liberal Arts education can give an individual an advantage in a competitive job market, the most important benefit it offers to individuals and society is a healthy and free nation. Citizens who know how to think, how to learn, and how to see issues comprehensively will demand and protect liberty.

Sources:

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