

Liberal Arts Essay  
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**Significant and Applicable Knowledge**  
Liberal Arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Last year at this time, I was wandering the streets of Japan. With my digital camera and a sense of adventure, I explored the shrines and temples, documenting what I experienced. I wanted to savor the moments so I could recall them vividly later on. Looking back at those pictures, I remember my first impression of Japan was a sense of the immense population that lives there. I recall the industrial city, the apartment buildings rising into the sky. Families stacked up in small units to create space for businesses and shopping districts. No room for the landscaped thoroughfares so common in the States. At first glance, I took in the sites, sounds and smells of a heavily populated community. As soon as I got settled, I walked along the small sidewalks throughout the city, taking in everything I could. Turning off one street, I followed a passage running beside a small river. Gradually, the landscape changed. Instead of garbage cans, tropical plants were lining the path I walked. The small river opened up to a lake, a beautiful pagoda stretched out onto the water. Swans gracefully paddled near the shore. Plum trees blossomed on the surrounding hillsides. A shrine for prayer and reflection blended in unassumingly among the natural setting. It seemed that I had just stumbled into a whole different dimension. I could still see the high rises in the distance making me aware that this haven was nestled safely among the city. The families in the nearby apartments, the workers in the offices and the diligent students could easily access the park when they needed to unwind or reflect. I realized that there was an equilibrium between the sacred shrines and the surrounding community. My understanding of the world and how it worked changed in that moment. I feel that the liberal arts is much like my neighborhood in Japan, a mixture of elements coming together to serve a purpose.

Liberal arts are our chance to explore new areas that we may have not had experience with before. Besides gaining knowledge to beat our opponents at Trivial Pursuit, we gain insight

on different aspects that affect our everyday lives. While being an expert in one area is a useful tool for some people, the liberal arts is a way for anyone who applies themselves to gain basic knowledge in subjects that might otherwise baffle them. When we apply these principles to daily life, we find that we are more equipped to handle problems and circumstances in the world we live. Someone who does not typically work with mathematical equations in their career can utilize this knowledge in other areas, such as their finances. A person who would normally shudder in front of an audience can learn techniques to better handle public speaking. A workaholic may find beauty outside the cubicle after developing a taste for the fine arts. Liberal arts are our way to interact with the world around us.

I feel that my learning experiences in a liberal arts college are opening areas of my mind that had grown stagnant. Being out of school for so long, I had forgotten a lot of basic knowledge that I hadn't utilized in awhile. College brings back these principles and expands on them. The part of my brain used for math coughed a dusty sigh and now grinds gears after years of calculator dependency. The simple rules of grammar once again dance in front of me. New knowledge presents itself by way of application performance classes. I can now make a camera out of a tin can and black paint. I feel like MacGuyver (sans the mullet) when I tell people of the things I am able to do. I am enjoying the wonderment and satisfaction that comes from learning something new.

"I don't like spinach," a friend says as we glance at our menus, deciding what to eat. "Have you tried spinach?" I ask. "No," comes the response, "but I don't think I'd like it." Many times we find ourselves fearing the unknown, afraid to try new things. When we know what it is that we enjoy, we cling to these things and develop ourselves around them. Believe me, I did not think I would enjoy a food that still had tentacles attached, but I found the

delicacies of Japan surprisingly savory. If we only accepted the things we enjoy, we would hinder our opportunities to grow and change. Naturally that does not mean we should all try hang gliding or cliff jumping, but with everything in life, there are hazards. Those with a background based in liberal arts may be better equipped to deal with the pitfalls, problems and changes that occur in a natural lifetime. By having a knowledge of many different facets of the world, we can make necessary adaptations when changes occur.

Looking back, I am grateful for the opportunities that I have been given. I feel that I have a broader sense of the world than just my immediate surroundings. I have taught English in Japan, volunteered my time in Utah as an Americorps worker, became a therapist for autistic children in Wisconsin, and had the opportunity to take on leadership positions at my college. Those are some of the more exciting achievements I've earned. At one point in time, I was making toilet seats in a factory. That time was just as valuable as any other in my life. I learned about discipline and hard work. I left the factory knowing I could achieve great things if I put forth the effort. There is a connection from where I started to where I am now, little bits of life experience strung together. Gaining knowledge in the liberal arts feels like a natural progression for me.

No matter where we are in the world, there are many different disciplines that affect our lives. Liberal arts expose us to new ideas, attitudes, and ways of understanding our surroundings. It is important to take into account how we relate to each other and our environment so that we can continue to progress and advance in a positive direction. The world is made a better place only by those willing to put forth the effort. By striving to better inform ourselves, we have already taken a step in the right direction.

