

The Liberal Arts: Preserving Humanity  
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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, society is preoccupied by advancing technology and the accumulation of material wealth. Perhaps this is why the liberal arts have been given a negative reputation. In a culture propelled by the promise of material possessions we generally have little care about preserving an intangible humanity. As a culture we have become like slaves to the temporary gratification brought by objects. The liberal arts, the *artes liberales*, literally translate to mean “arts of freedom”. The liberal arts are the conscience of civilization, weighing the heavy ecological, psychological and moral burden of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s technological materialism against the values of human expression and individual growth in both personal studies and work.

Today people seem to be obsessed with plasma TVs, I-pods, and cell phones featuring bells, whistles and pictures. Our society is completely consumed by material things, which either become obsolete within a few months or eventually lose their thrill. The liberal arts student, however, will recognize these things for what they are. They already know that these “toys” are momentary, and that freedom of human expression outside the limits of technology is necessary for the evolution of humanity at large. However, in a society comprised of consumers and instant gratification, the door on the liberal arts seems to be closing. It is no longer practical to attend college without a future career planned, senseless to major in an area that is abstract. “It is quite common to hear parents, even faculty members, say students should get [liberal arts] courses ‘out of the way’ so they can prepare for more important things, a major that prepares one for a career, a job, a profession” (Weeks 23). In fact, I personally had to passionately convince my parents to allow me to major in art. With the terrible stereotype of “the starving artist” in their minds, I couldn’t really blame them. Now I am pressured into the most

“marketable” of art-related jobs. Do I want to be a graphic designer or an art teacher? To conciliate my parents I added an additional major in sociology, another passion of mine. Yet, by double-majoring in two liberal arts I am still taking an intentional risk with my future, with no solid cushioning career to fall back on. Still no matter what happens, I can say that I planned my college experience according to my own interests. I took the risk, but others may no longer bother with the study of art, music, humanities, philosophy and dance. Should we not consider these ideas valid to our sense of growth, integrity or honor unless they provide a paycheck?

Hip-hop artist Aesop Rock speaks about what the average American citizen trades for a paycheck when he professes, “We the American working population hate the fact that eight hours a day is wasted on chasing the dreams of someone who isn’t us. And we may not hate our jobs, but we hate jobs in general that don’t have to with fighting our own causes. We the American working population hate the nine to five day in day out while we’d rather be supporting ourselves by being paid to perfect the pastimes we have harbored based solely on the fact that it makes us smile.” Imagine a world where we got paid for our interests, not stigmatized for studying whatever our passion may be. Imagine a world which we lived primarily for our minds and spirits and not just merely for the security of material wealth. In an economy dominated by the greater good of the employer instead of the individual, preserving the liberal arts is that much more vital.

Fortunately, some in the business world view the liberal arts as important in developing individuals. In a paper subtitled “The Most Practical and Professional Education for the Twenty-First Century,” author Richard Hersh states that CEOs and human resource managers are looking for three things: intellectual flexibility, skills in

self expression, and a universal understanding of diversity. A degree in liberal arts would certainly guarantee the above qualities. Success in the world is more than an understanding of how “things” work; it is an understanding of how people work. Gadgets and whistles will change, but the ability to understand and connect with people will not. In fact Philip Lewis and Rosemary Liegler claim that liberal arts “reflect the breadth of human culture,” which is considered “the foundation of the American democracy” (47). With the very basis of our government in the hands of the liberal arts, society ought to be praising the liberal arts instead of eliminating them. However, this is sadly not the case.

Apparently, our current education system feels that if the budget needs to be cut, liberal arts are the first areas to be neglected. Schools all over the country have been “trimming” their music classes, art classes, and even the gym classes where dance is taught. Ms. April Swick, principal of Clement Avenue Elementary School in the Milwaukee Public School District states that the full time staff of art, gym, music, and library has been decreasing steadily over the past ten years. As a result of the budget she explains, “We can’t cut regular classes, so we had to cut everything else... our librarian left, and we have not been able to replace her.” It is now the teacher’s responsibility to integrate the humanities into their curricula. However, teachers are preoccupied by teaching mandatory “subject matter” that will no doubt be measured by standardized testing allowing little extra attention to be spent focusing on the liberal arts. At the elementary schooling age a child’s unique creative genius should be celebrated and cultivated, not repressed. A child’s ingenuity is precious and should not have to pay the cost of school budgeting.

As we know, once the core of a system is eradicated the entire structure is bound to collapse. If, instead of being taught global responsibility, social awareness, and self-development we are taught materialism, careerism, and to value objects more than people we will lose the very essence of our humanity.

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