

Liberal Education & Obligations as an Educated Citizen

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The sun beat down on us as we hiked through the hills of Guatemala to a small village outside of Comalapa. Led by Peace Corps volunteers, our group of students set out to assist members of the village in building a well to provide water for the community. We quickly got to work piecing together the well by bending pipes over an open fire, chopping at cinder blocks, and forming plugs to pull water through the pipes. Despite having no experience building wells, the group was quickly forced to adapt and learn multiple new skills while working together to create something functional for the village. Communication was not only important between members of the group, but between the group and the people of the village as well. Teamwork was necessary in completing the job and problem solving was key to building a well with limited supplies and few resources. While in Guatemala, our group was also asked to visit classrooms to give presentations and paint a world map on a school for education. Together we gave a presentation to a large grade school about topics such as American culture, polluted water sources, and hygiene. We quickly overcame the challenges of the language barrier and brought together our skills and ideas to communicate very important issues to the children while engaging them in the presentation.

In Guatemala we were presented with many interesting challenges. To overcome these obstacles, I referred back to classes that I have taken such as physics, Spanish, math, and architecture and applied my knowledge to each new challenge in order to develop the best solutions. This vast knowledge from my liberal education gave me, as well as others, the ability to adapt to different situations and problems quickly while working as a team. The Peace Corps volunteers demonstrated the importance of having a liberal education through their work in Guatemala and serve as prime examples of what

well-educated students can and should do with their education. Each of the volunteers utilized their knowledge in multiple areas to adapt to jobs such as working at the town hall, teaching children in the schools, or assisting small villages with common problems.

Across the country and around the world it is clear there are people in need just like those in Guatemala. In addition to working in Guatemala, I've had the opportunities to visit multiple places in the U.S. to paint homes and assist families, visit at nursing homes, and rebuild homes after Hurricane Katrina, as well as volunteered more locally with various organizations. Groups of students from across the country came together to apply their knowledge and skills to help others in need in each case. Each situation presents its own challenges and it takes an enormous amount of communication and application to do something that is out of the ordinary and new. The volunteers and Peace Corps volunteers that I have had the chance to meet have inspired me to learn about many different areas through my education. I want to be able offer my knowledge and help people and places in need because it is our duty as citizens to do what we can in making the world a better place.

Reaching out to others requires the diverse knowledge and skills that a liberal education is able to provide. It was four years ago when I began at UW-Stevens Point studying interior architecture and Spanish. Thrilled to learn that I was required to take a variety of classes outside of those programs, I quickly enrolled in sociology, psychology, philosophy, astronomy, and more. After transferring to Milwaukee I began studying advertising and journalism, as well as photography, and started dabbling in different areas of the media, science, math, and art with an incredible desire to learn. It is clear that a liberal education is the only choice for me and for so many others with the passion to

learn about the world around them. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), “Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest.” For example, I am focusing on photography, but see the value in learning the basics of drawing, art history, and other two and three-dimensional art forms before I can really apply myself to photography. I have taken classes in the book arts, web design, graphic design, music, and more, which give me a greater knowledge of the arts as a whole. Each of these classes and others expose me to different aspects of the world around me and push me to learn and take action in a variety of ways.

It has been through this liberal education that I have become compelled to continue to make a difference, knowing this is our duty as educated members of society. “A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility,” states the AAC&U, “as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.” Through volunteering experiences, it is clear that these skills shine in challenging, real world situations. In my advanced advertising class, as the art director I designed an annual report for Teen Approach, Inc. using both my skills in advertising and art to assist my group in creating the report for a nonprofit organization. The combination of teamwork, problem-solving, and wide range of knowledge made the project a success. As students receiving a liberal education, it is our duty as members of society to spread our knowledge and use it to our greatest ability whether it is through helping a nonprofit organization, volunteering in places of need, or

another form of service. We know what is going on in the world and have the power to reach out to others and use our abilities and resources to make a difference and really do something great.

I have a great respect for the volunteers and Peace Corps volunteers that I was privileged to work with over the years and am amazed at their ability to adapt and apply knowledge to overcome obstacles to do things that they had not done prior. These volunteers are prime examples of what students can do with their liberal education. As students, we are so fortunate to have the opportunity to receive such an education and should really push ourselves to make the most out of our experiences. Application of this education is important for graduates entering the workforce with the ability to do multiple jobs wells, but at the same time it is important to apply oneself outside of a daily job and reach out to those less fortunate, as well as do what we can for the world we live in. Once I graduate from college, I plan to find a job in which I can apply my knowledge to help others every day, dedicate more time to volunteering for organizations, and possibly join the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps. We are all in this together and should not sit back when each one of us has so much to offer. It is up to each person to reach outside of his or her comfort zone and take on the challenge of applying what has been learned to overcome obstacles and utilize the knowledge to its fullest potential.

Works Cited

Association of American Colleges and Universities.

<http://www.aacu.org/leap/What_is_Liberal_Education.cfm>.