



Written by on April 6, 2010

The Value of Liberal Arts Education

“The Death of Liberal Arts” lamented a headline in an April 5 Newsweek.com article that carried the subhead: “How the recession and unemployment are making schools and students rethink the value of an education in the humanities.”

The trend, notes *Newsweek*, was as rapid as the onset of the current recession. Case in point was Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana, which *Newsweek* had labelled in 2007 as the “hottest liberal-arts school you never heard of.”

But the recession has taken its toll. As *Newsweek* reporter Nancy Cook observed: “After the endowment of Centenary College ... fell by 20 percent from 2007 to 2009, the private school decided to eliminate half of its 44 majors. Over the next three to four years, classic humanities specialities like Latin, German studies, and performing arts will be phased out.”



In response to changing economic conditions, Centenary’s administrators are considering the addition of several new graduate programs to increase their students’ career prospects, such as master’s degrees in teaching and international business.

The college’s president explained that the school was trying offer a compromise between providing “a grounding in the arts and sciences, but they also probably need some training in a specific area.”

As another college official quoted in the article, Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, noted: “Students want something they can sell.”

The report provided statistics to prove that this was no small concern, citing a [recent study](#) by the Pew Research Center that just 41 percent of people ages 18 to 29 are working full-time compared with 50 percent in 2006.

The ancient principle that “man must eat before man can philosophize” may certainly apply to our current situation, as students opt for majors that will provide them with income over those that might feed the mind at the expense of the body. However, students and academicians alike may have overlooked a liberal arts education’s value in the world of commerce as well as in the arts. As Cook writes:

Among liberal-arts proponents, the concern is that students who specialize in specific careers will lack critical thinking skills and the ability to write, analyze, and synthesize information. While business education tends to prepare students to work well in teams or give presentations, it often falls short in teaching students to do in-depth research or to write critically outside of the



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traditional business communiqués of memos or PowerPoints. “I think you need to have both liberal-arts and pre-professional classes at the four-year level,” says José Luis Santos, assistant professor in the Higher Education and Organizational Change division at UCLA. “People need to graduate with critical thinking skills because most workplaces retrain individuals for the needs of the industry.”

To put it simply: Most employers would prefer to train an applicant who has already learned to think and analyze problems the specific technical skills pertinent to an industry than to teach a new employee who has technical skills — and nothing more — how to *think*.

In the April 5 edition of *The Maine Campus*, the University of Maine student newspaper, French language professor Yann Dupuy wrote an op-ed piece entitled [“In defense of the liberal arts and languages at UMaine.”](#)

Professor Dupuy cited a statement made in response to proposed budget cut by Raymond Pelletier, the chairperson of the university’s Modern Languages and Classics Department, who was quoted in the campus newspaper as saying, “We need to go at it philosophically, not by the numbers.”

“He is perfectly right,” observed Dupuy. “It is a matter of philosophy, and APPWG’s [the Academic Program Prioritization Working Group] report shows the philosophy of university pretty clearly: They lean toward education over instruction.” He continues:

Instruction means giving the bare minimum of knowledge a student needs to be competent at his future job.

Education is this as well, but it also includes giving students the tools they need to later be an independent, free-thinking and morally sound citizen. Education is aimed to make one grow as a human being, while preparing for your future career as well. *Education makes citizens; instruction makes good servants.* (Emphasis added.)

Dupuy lamented a recent e-mail communication from the university’s dean of students, Robert Dana, in which the dean wrote: “Our primary focus remains on providing the best possible experience for our students.”

Dupuy noted: “Tellingly, in this long e-mail, the word ‘instruction’ is used once, while the word ‘education’ is nowhere to be found.”

With a sense of ironic wit, Dupuy concludes: “People go to Disneyland for a good experience, but students pay tuition for an education.”

Yet another commentary on the decline of liberal arts education, “A look at teaching ills of top-tier colleges,” a book review written by Cornell University professor Glenn C. Altschuler, appeared in the *Boston Globe* for April 6. Altschuler reviewed *The Marketplace of Ideas* by Louis Menand, an English professor at Harvard and staff writer at the *New Yorker*. Altschuler writes:

Liberal education, Menand reminds us, is in danger of being marginalized by the proliferation of alternatives. Twenty-two percent of bachelor’s degrees are conferred in business. Twice as many sheepskins are awarded in social work each year as in all foreign languages and literatures combined. Four percent of undergraduates major in English; two percent in history.

Over the past 30 years, the revolution in humanities disciplines has spawned a crisis of legitimacy. An emphasis on context, contingency, and interpretations rather than facts, Menand indicates, led to an abandonment of “Great Books,” “Western Civ,” a core curriculum, and, often, prerequisites for courses



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in the major. Professors of women's studies, cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies, and postcolonial studies took the theoretical position that disciplinary boundaries are arbitrary and limiting.

If there is any surprise to be found in these critical analyses, it is that they originate from sources generally deemed to fall on the *modernist* "liberal" side of the philosophical spectrum, and not on the *classically* liberal side from which "liberal arts" takes its name.

Whatever the sources, and whichever labels are attached to these sources, they present a concurrence with the message delivered by the late University of Chicago professor Allan David Bloom (1930-1992) who championed the idea of "Great Books" education. Bloom became famous for his criticism of modern American higher education, and is best remembered for having expressed his views in his bestselling 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*.

That these concerns about the decline in American education are being voiced in circles traditionally thought of as being *receptive* to modern "liberal" philosophy is encouraging. Perhaps the ever-more apparent impending political totalitarianism and collectivism enveloping our nation is making the need for an intelligent, informed, and *thinking* electorate apparent to our nation's most intelligent and honest observers, by whatever philosophical label was previously applied to them.

More and more academicians apparently are realizing, as Professor Dupuy said: "Education makes citizens; instruction makes good servants."



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