A Bright Future: Liberal Arts for the 21st Century

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While many argue that the liberal arts curriculum has outlived its use, this paper argues that a liberal arts curriculum is the most appropriate method of teaching and learning in the 21st century. Higher education institutions (HEIs) should concentrate curriculum around liberal arts tenets of problem solving, innovation, and collaboration to meet the needs of the present knowledge economy. This argument is supported through analyses of higher education history, the motivation behind liberal arts curricula, and the needs of contemporary society. Additionally, the organizational structure of HEIs is not built to keep pace with today’s changing technologies; instead, HEIs can better offer a liberal arts curriculum than alternatives focused on ever-changing job training. Finally, the paper presents educational theories that explore the connection between a liberal arts curriculum and a student’s cognitive development. These theories examine how context-based creative problem solving improves a person’s ability to translate learned skills between contexts.

Keywords: liberal arts, curriculum, educational theory

Higher Education in Review

To best serve a generation of students that are highly career focused, higher education professionals must do what is counter-intuitive—focus less on job training in undergraduate curricula. The pedagogy of the liberal arts, and not the practical arts, gives students the skills necessary to be successful in 21st Century. The liberal arts tenets of concentration on learning how to learn, problem solving, innovation and collaboration—defended by the work of both Benjamin Bloom and John Dewey—are more valuable to a student graduating into a professional landscape that is constantly changing and creating new positions, which is impossible for higher education institutions to address directly. Rather than trying to keep pace with technological advances and go against the slow organizational change built into the higher education system, a liberal arts curriculum provides the best answer for how to prepare students for an unknown world where any number of practical skills may be necessary.

Brint, Riddle, Turk-Blcakci, & Levy (2005) argue that college curricula can be divided in the broadest of terms between two camps: liberal arts and practical, or vocational, arts. The liberal arts concentrates on lifelong learning, critical analysis, and humanistic goals of civility and citizenship, while the practical arts focuses on developing a competent, proficient workforce of professionals in various disciplines (Brint, Riddle, Turk-Blcakci, & Levy, 2005). The authors continue explaining that the division of liberal and practical arts curricula has proliferated since the establishing of the Morrill Act in 1862 (Geiger, 1998), when the practical arts curriculum model was strongly established at land grant universities.

More than 100 years ago, in 1915, the Association for American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) was founded upon concerns of sustaining liberal arts education. As land grant universities found enrollment success and professional training schools (i.e. medical, law, teacher schools) proliferated at the same time (Geiger, 2015), liberal arts supporters grew concerned the curricular approach would fade as a vestige of American education, just as the trivium and quadrivium had (Pratt, 1998; Shukhoshvili, 2016). The AAC&U was predicated on the idea that vocationally oriented public schools would overwhelm the future of higher education curricula and that the instruction of the character and citizenship of students would be left unfulfilled (Fong, 2004). These concerns have persisted through the 20th and into the 21st century. Today, the value and role of liberal arts curriculum is questioned as the world moves toward a more innovation-dependent knowledge economy in the 21st Century (Duderstadt, 1997). We are left with the same historical inquiries about the efficacy of liberal arts, questioning the value of an education that does not explicitly prepare students for a post-college profession.

This paper will explore the value of liberal arts curriculum in today’s culture and economy by proposing that a strong connection exists between the goals of today’s career-oriented students and the foundational mission of liberal...
arts education. The liberal arts concentration on critically reflective experience and higher order thinking, if thoughtfully conditioned for the 21st Century, are the most effective ways forward for institutions of higher education in addressing the needs of today’s society. Institutional inertia, a historical review of liberal arts curriculum, and education theories from Bloom (1956) and Dewey (1938) provide a foundation in understanding the value of liberal arts curriculum for the 21st Century.

The Needs of Contemporary Society

Before addressing the efficacy of liberal arts directly, it is important to establish what culture and society needs from higher education in order to determine the value of liberal arts curriculum. A common narrative of today’s students states they want a college education that will prepare them for jobs. In UCLA’S annual national survey of incoming freshmen, which bears out the important shift: in 1971, 37% responded it was very important to be “very well-off financially,” while 73% said the same about “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” In 2009, the values were nearly reversed (Zernike, 2010). Careerism has become the majority way of thinking, leading to a decline in liberal thinking approaches to learning—‘the learning for learning’s sake’ ideals.

With career success as a primary goal for a majority of students, one might expect that higher education should provide explicit training and education in various vocations. This would, logic might suggest, give students what they want and also contribute to the national economy—giving reason to believe that higher education is a public good. But, job training in the 21st Century, especially for jobs that require an advanced degree, is not so clear-cut. In 2015 President Obama, in his State of the Union Address, stated “there are also millions of Americans who work in jobs that didn’t even exist 10 or 20 years ago” (par. 40). In an age of such speed in technological advances, the entire professional world struggles to keep pace. Clearly, some jobs in technology fields have yet to be created. But, even more traditional jobs must account for these advances (that are occurring or have not yet occurred), which directly impact the skills and knowledge of a professional. Consider the job of an engineer who must learn a new material’s, or the economist who must adopt new algorithms that account for technological influences in national and global economies. As new jobs are created, and current jobs transform to stay relevant, a vocational skills-based education quickly becomes out of date.

Instead, liberal arts curriculum is based in critical analysis and creative thinking processes. The curriculum concentrates on processes of learning, rather than a comprehensive instruction of content (Pratt, 1998). This shift toward process instead of content allows liberal arts curriculum to remain useful for graduates of all professions—even for those jobs that have not yet been created.
Organizational Theory and Higher Education Institutions

When considering a rapidly changing career landscape and economy, it is also important to note the nature of higher education institutions, and their inability to keep pace and teach such ever-changing vocational skills. The concept *institutional inertia* proposes that colleges and universities are bound by internal and external constraints, such as investments, legitimacy, or their very own histories (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). These constraints make institutions slow in change, but formidable in their ability to last through centuries. Consider that of the 66 oldest institutions in Western civilization, 62 of them are universities and colleges (Pondy, 1992). According to institutional inertia principles, the makeup of higher education institutions is not built for rapidly changing environments. This does not suggest that colleges and universities tend toward irrelevance with the rapid pace of our contemporary world, only that these institutions cannot attempt to mirror the structure of changing technologies and vocations in their education. Instead, they must rely on the strengths of translatable skills attributable beyond any current (and quickly becoming out-of-date) state of our societal or economic needs (Harkavy, 2006).

Universities and colleges cannot pedagogically keep pace with technology and the landscape of 21st Century knowledge economy; thus, the solely practical approach to education cannot succeed. Instead, the liberal arts are better suited for educating in innovation and complex problem-solving. With a grounding in critical thinking, problem solving, and creative application, the liberal arts and its tenets are well-suited for today’s students and their aspirations for successful careers. Maintaining a curriculum founded upon these skills allows colleges and universities to work with their organizational structures instead of against. The stability that higher education institutions have established reaffirms the power and influence of liberal arts curriculum. Shifting to a more practical curriculum does not align with the structure of these institutions, which are not built for curricula that need changes quickly and often.

The Liberal Arts Curriculum: Purpose and Instruction

Horowitz (2005) argues that the *Yale Report of 1828* stands as a summation of the initial foundations of liberal arts education. The report argues for a full college course meant to be the foundation, but not full, education of a student (Geiger, 2015). The report itself states that the goal was to educate “men of superior education, of large and liberal views” (p. 27) by teaching students “how to learn” (p. 14) rather than what to learn. The means of education was through “the discipline and the furniture of the mind” (p. 7), in which the process (discipline) and product (furniture) of knowledge was part of the liberal
education. It is worth noting, the report indicates the former is the more important, so that students may know how to apply their knowledge to any given situation.

From these beginnings, the liberal arts mission grew to also address directly the building of civic and social leaders. New pedagogies formed to incorporate student discussions and original writings. Student engagement with academic material and faculty became a cornerstone of the curriculum. And from this, there was a heightened importance of teaching students how to formulate arguments and beliefs based on complex analysis and synthesis of ideas found in various disciplines (Horowitz, 2005). This ushered in a major tenet of liberal arts curriculum, and an ever-increasingly valuable one, that of interdisciplinary studies (Newell & Klein, 1996). In this curricular practice, students of liberal arts found themselves drawing connections not only within disciplines, but between them. Today, liberal arts experiences reach beyond the curricular, where colleges and universities open opportunities of further academic exploration and synthesis in research, study abroad experiences, and community engagement practices. (Núñez, 2013).

Since the foundational Yale Report of 1828, liberal arts curricula have been designed to teach students how to learn. This fundamental principle—how to learn, rather than what to learn—makes liberal arts curriculum still vital for today’s students. In addition, it is important to consider that today’s workforce is transitioning between jobs at a more frequent rate (Savickas et al., 2009), needing to also learn new skills for these moves. The trend of multiple jobs over one’s life reiterates the need for the capability to ‘learn how to learn,’ since graduates are likely to need to learn a new job many times over their careers. The tenets of liberal arts curriculum, developed over nearly two centuries, form methods for instructing students on how to think critically and develop creative connections between disciplines and various experiences—skills required for success in today’s knowledge economy.

**Educational Theory and Liberal Arts Curriculum**

The pedagogical practices that shape liberal arts education have formed over time, but not without influence from theorists who support liberal arts practices with explanations of student learning development. Both John Dewey and Benjamin Bloom present perspectives on learning that inform and explain the usefulness of liberal arts.

Benjamin Bloom is best known for his oft-cited taxonomy (1956), in which he offers ‘levels’ of active knowledge that students employ in their learning. These levels are: knowledge (remembering), comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This taxonomy has been used often over the decades since its development, and it still stands as a common
expression of pedagogical practices. Using the taxonomy as a lens to view liberal arts, Huber, Hutchings, Gale, Miller, and Breen (2007) note that synthesis rests upon many other levels, near the top. They remark that synthesis is of a higher-order learning, and one in which students begin to form complex methods of problem solving and context-based learning, such as that of a profession, post-BA. The interdisciplinary nature of the liberal arts is built on the very same concept of synthesis, in which students strive to draw connections between disparate fields of study for a common purpose. In addition to synthesis, the other higher order skills—evaluation and analysis—are core principles of the liberal arts education. Built into liberal arts’ foundational tenets, as enumerated in the Yale Report of 1928, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis are the actionable skills of learning how to learn.

Further, John Dewey discusses knowledge as contextual and action-based, in addition to education as a humanistic endeavor. Biesta and Burbules (2003) point out, “Dewey believed [in...] the inseparability of knowledge and action, fact and value. [...] This is a quest, in other words, for a new and different understanding of human rationality” (p. 22). This human rationality, in Dewey’s scheme, leads to his conception of an experiential education (1938). In this model, education is contextually bound, so that learning is in a constant state of problem solving, bound to the current moment in which the problem or question is found.

Elsewhere he argues for an education, as quoted in Stallman (2003), that “should not be so practical [but instead should] tend to improve the mind and lead the ones enjoying it to altruistic effort” (p. 18). Evident in this passage, the characteristics of liberal arts mission and pedagogy align nearly perfectly with the philosopher and leader of progressive education. Dewey addresses, also, the concern of skills and training for students to be successful, and the role schools should take in that training. Though with his lens of experiential, context-bound learning, much school-based instruction on skills and training grows stale. He notes,

As formal teaching and training grow in extent, there is the danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school. This danger was never greater than at the present time, on account of the rapid growth in the last few centuries of knowledge and technical modes of skill. (Dewey, 2004, p. 10)

In this quote, he summarizes the liberal arts mission through the warning of its opposite. What he offers as the wise alternative is to educate students with a mind that can adjust to fit what the contemporary context demands. In other words, Dewey argues for an education that allows students to enter into a career, perhaps without the requisite skills, but an abundance of analytical, problem-
solving skills so that they may build skills that fit perfectly their position—even (and perhaps especially) as it changes over time.

**Conclusion**

The liberal arts curriculum, because of its mission, has a firm place in the 21st Century. Some higher education professionals translate liberal arts ideals, masking them as innovations in pedagogy. Claims of a new concentration on experiential education (DiConti, 2004) or a reinvention of collaborative learning (Tapscott & Williams, 2010), take traditional liberal arts characteristics—a concentration on student action and citizenship in learning, or centering pedagogy on the student over the instructor—and reform them for the 21st Century. These practices do not limit liberal arts, but expand the reach of the mission.

For liberal arts curricula, there is hope in these movements. Schools offering liberal arts curriculum have an institutional history and firm commitment to a pedagogy that is vital to today’s students. As expressed earlier, the speed of innovation only quickens, and the knowledge economy of today’s market requires the higher order thinking that the liberal arts fosters. Where practical and vocational curricula offer direct career skills and instruction, the liberal arts offer learning more far-reaching. The liberal arts curriculum’s commitment to learning translatable skills of problem solving, critical analysis, and creativity directly address the needs of students in today’s society and job market.
References


