

The Perennial Value of a Liberal Arts Education

Various Perspectives and Insights

by Dr. Louis Shwartz

Honestly, why study the Liberal Arts? Doesn't trade school or a degree in Business and Technology make more sense, and more cents? Why not train to become a nurse or doctor and actually help people?

These legitimate questions deserve a careful response, especially considering today's emphasis on material prosperity and physical comfort. After all, the pursuit of wealth and health, provided these are ordered to a fitting purpose, is good ... but it is not best, not even on the natural level. Higher, by far, than external goods and bodily soundness is intellectual strength. What man, in his right mind, would trade his existence for that of a noble lion feasting in his prime? Indeed, man's right mind sets him far above the mightiest beast and likens him to the angels and even to God. Ultimately, study of the Liberal Arts facilitates the liberation of an earth-bound mind as it strives to recognize its Creator and take on a fitting role in creation according to its talents.

Truth incarnate proclaims, "the truth shall set you free – *veritas liberabit vos*," and the *Liberal Arts* seek to *liberate* fallen man from ignorance, pettiness, and provincialism by putting him broadly and profoundly in contact with truth. The liberal arts are not narrow, not confined, not specialized, but reach out and study many aspects of our complex reality in conjunction. Only a strong mind is capable of such sustained and strenuous study; thus any authentic liberal arts curriculum stresses the formation of intellectual virtue, habits of upright thought. Apart from encouraging accurate study of any particular subject or topic, such training permits man to see his entire life and all its activities in context. It provides a solid intellectual foundation that supports balance and harmony between work and play, strain and sleep, family and friends, feast and fast, conversation and contemplation. Aided by God's grace, the well educated man becomes master of his entire life.

But don't just take my word for it! Recent studies by leading academics develop similar claims, and before dismissing the Liberal Arts as inefficient or obsolete, consider these thought-provoking insights. Below follow short excerpts from Mark William Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 198 pages, and Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education* (Norton: New York, 2015) 204 pages. We then conclude with a list of "Great Questions" studied at our own Saint Mary's College, the premier institution offering an integral, fully Catholic four-year-program in the Liberal Arts.

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In a contemporary liberal arts education, in contrast to the specialized orientation of professional or technical curricula, students receive a general education that is a broad grounding in diverse disciplines. Through a wide distribution of courses, often with a core curriculum, liberal arts students take classes in chemistry, history, and philosophy. But beyond this curricular orientation and its high academic expectations, the liberal arts ideal entails the goal of educating the whole person, which presupposes a meaningful community of learning and a rich residential life experience. Its success demands intensive intellectual dialogue among students and between students and faculty across the diverse spheres of human inquiry and concerning the highest of human values.

(Roche, pp. 5-6)

The liberal arts build on one of the oldest ideals of learning, which Socrates put into practice in ancient Greece. For Socrates it was clear that we learn more effectively when we pursue questions ourselves and seek the answers ourselves, when we embody what educators call “active learning.” The student is actively engaged in the learning process, asking questions, being asked questions, pursuing often elusive answers in dialogue with others. Knowledge cannot simply be poured, like water, from one larger container into an emptier one. It requires the lighting of a fire, the sparking of curiosity.

Socrates also made it clear that learning is most important and most successful when students are engaged in meaningful discussions, asking questions that will determine who they are and what they think about life’s most significant issues. For example, what is human excellence? What is friendship, or love? How do we learn? What constitutes the just state? What is piety?

A third pedagogical principle for Socrates, beyond active learning and meaningful inquiry, is that the Socratic method of engaging great issues through a question-and-answer format prepares the inquirer for further learning. To know something fully is not simply to mimic the truth but to be able to give reasons and arguments for that truth; this level of reflection ensures that the student will be able to defend a view against the argument of future opponents instead of simply succumbing to their persuasive rhetoric. Well-formed students will be ready to apply knowledge in changing circumstances and will be equipped to build on existing knowledge and extend it into new areas.

(Roche, pp. 6-7)

A liberal arts education is most pronounced, and most prominently realized, at small residential liberal arts colleges. Such colleges offer a broad general curriculum in the arts and sciences. They offer extensive extracurricular activities in an intimate and nurturing environment.

The campuses are often idyllic, classes tend to be small, and faculty devote themselves entirely to undergraduates.

(Roche, p. 9)

A liberal arts education can be defended first and foremost as an end in itself; that is, it is of value for its own sake independently of preparing students for eventual employment. As an end in itself, a liberal arts education contrasts strongly with the increasingly common notion, informed by the credentialism and achievement ethos of our era, of education as primarily a means to an end. ...

Not only does it help us discover intrinsic goods, it is itself an intrinsic good. Liberal arts students gain insights into what has supernatural and supertemporal value. While they certainly explore the challenges specific to our age, they also learn to express wonder and awe at the transcendent and eternal. A classic and compelling defense of this ideal of learning for its own sake was given by Cardinal Newman, who argues that “there is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does.” Newman further states that “there is a knowledge which is desirable, though nothing come of it, as being of itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labor.”

(Roche, pp. 15-16)

The college or university citizen is invested in the search not only for specialized knowledge but also for the relation of the diverse parts of knowledge to one another. To be liberally educated involves knowing the relative position of the little that one knows within the whole of knowledge. Thus a goal of every serious university is to explore the unity of knowledge across disciplines. Wisdom is the ability to understand and interpret individual phenomena from the perspective of the whole. An institution or program of higher education that does not include diverse disciplines or a theory of learning that brackets overarching or ultimate questions is not well suited for the cultivation of wisdom, which is no less necessary to address the challenges of our age than are particular technical skills.

(Roche, pp. 21-22)

In modernity leisure seems to disappear. Technical inventions and eventually social techniques increase the pace of life. With technology the world moves more quickly. Contemporary society thus has little patience for the apparent idleness of learning for its own sake. Yet happiness is not something that can be bought or purchased; it comes to one replete with

meaningful values and virtues as a gift. Moreover, when reflection on how to reach certain ends becomes supreme, it easily overshadows the question: which ends should I seek to achieve?

(Roche, p. 25)

Rightly understood, a liberal arts education is more than a means to an end; it is a dose of *otium* (leisure) in a world driven by speed and utility. To devote one's time to exploring the great questions is not to negotiate the automatic rungs of the ladder of success, but to step out, pause, and deliberate. The origin of the word "school" or Latin "schola" derives from the Greek term for leisure (*scholē*). This is not leisure in the sense that most Americans think of leisure. It represents the values of rest and focus in advance of, as a respite from, and as a reward for, daily work, and it is analogous to repose and silence as presuppositions for meaningful communication with God.

When we are gripped by substantive works and great questions, we may be so immersed in them that we forget the external world. We lose ourselves in what we are reading and thinking. Through the leisure of contemplation we abandon the contingent and engage the eternal. Such joy does not, and need not, serve a purpose beyond itself. If we believe Aristotle, we do not rest primarily in order to work more effectively; on the contrary, the business of work serves the external purpose of giving us the conditions for leisure and repose, on which the joy of contemplation, our highest end, depends.

(Roche, pp. 25-26)

In our age, consumerism and pleonasty, the bondage of worldly things, tend to distract us from the heights of contemplation. One of the dominant goals of modernity has been to increase living standards and consumption; both of these factors have contributed to the definition of social success in materialistic terms. But what is distinctive about human beings is thought, love of wisdom, and love of one another in the contemplation of the highest values, including goodness. An engagement with great questions and a love of thought allow all external trappings to recede in importance.

Indeed, the college experience is for most people a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to engage great works, ask deep questions, foster one's identity, develop relations with peers, and pursue overarching principles for the most part unhampered by the distractions of material needs and practical applications. Anthony Kronman notes that "college is a time to explore the meaning of life with an openness that becomes harder to preserve the further one enters into the responsibilities of adulthood, with their many entanglements." Colleges seek not simply to please but primarily to educate, fostering an ethos that privileges the life of the mind over that of the body, encouraging students to develop an identity by focusing on what is most essential.

(Roche, pp. 27-28)

The goal of seeking knowledge for its own sake also serves the purpose of helping students see the world differently from those immersed in the categories of the age; it helps students see the world as it might and should be. The counter-cultural nature of a college education, its cultivation of knowledge and meaning for its own sake, is not a weakness but the very strength of a college, for it offers students a vision of life that is contrary to the dominant values of the secular world which surrounds them.

For Americans, this draw towards the tangible, practical, and economic aspects of life is nothing new. Writing in the nineteenth century, the French observer of American society Alexis de Tocqueville noted poignantly that Americans are ambitious, but in small and petty ways, seeking “property, reputation, and power,” while lacking “lofty ambition.” Tocqueville continues, “For the most part life is spent in eagerly coveting small prizes within reach.” Some pursue nothing but “vulgar pleasures and paltry desires,” while we should instead cultivate a higher idea of ourselves and of humanity.

(Roche, pp. 31-32)

The liberal arts experience of the intrinsic value of knowledge allows us to be comfortable in our own company, in our own thoughts, which is a precondition of character and depth. College can give its graduates sources of inner fortitude, self-knowledge, and personal renewal. As the German writer Jean Paul suggests, “A learned person is never bored.”

(Roche, p. 41)

What transcends the liberal arts years are not only the intellectual interests that are formed but also the friendships. Over time these become among our longest-lasting friendships. Aristotle famously said that the highest friendships are based not on mere pleasure or mutual utility but on shared values and an intrinsic appreciation of one another. In the highest forms of friendship, we cultivate in one another what is the highest potential of humanity and the highest activity of the soul, goodness and intelligence.

College friendships arise out of a context of identity formation in connection with a sharing of discussion and thought, an engagement with the great questions, whose primary purpose is not utility but meaning. This vertical elevation to the transcendent has the effect of strengthening horizontal bonds. One of the marks of a liberal education is that it enables lasting friendships to form over ideas. When graduates visit with college friends, they share thoughts about what they are reading and what they think about recent world events. They ask about each other’s vocation and professional puzzles. The liberal arts offer a vocabulary that sustains a language of deep friendship.

The best liberal arts courses foster friendships. They encourage students to contribute in class, to offer their own perspectives and experiences, to comment on each other's work. The challenge, which can be met partly by the mediating role of caring faculty members, is to help students see a connection between their learning and their friendships, so that friendships are not purely social, something alongside schoolwork, but interwoven with learning and ideas. What students in their inner core desire are trusted friends with whom they can speak about issues that matter.

(Roche, pp. 46-48)

Students who enjoy a liberal education develop critical thinking skills. They learn to unearth and question their own assumptions as well as those of others. The common practices of one's own culture are subjected to a higher measure, namely reason. Well-formed students thus see through quick-and-easy answers, and they understand the consequences of a theory, position, or argument. They learn to recognize whether a reason is compelling or flawed. A liberal arts education thus encourages students to challenge ideas that may be widely shared but lack merit; in this sense, it shields them against error.

(Roche, pp. 64-65)

The value of understanding issues across a range of disciplines has only increased in importance, as advancements in knowledge mean that more and more issues are turned over to specialists and experts who may understand a piece of a puzzle but not its interconnection and integration with other seemingly unrelated issues. In the world of work, as managers gain higher levels of authority, their responsibilities broaden, such that they must develop knowledge of new fields, learn how to acquire diverse kinds of information, and synthesize ideas and materials from areas with which they may have previously been unfamiliar. The liberal arts student knows how to connect disciplines and to ask penetrating questions across the range of human experience, and is thus well-prepared to fill leadership roles.

(Roche, p. 70)

The student who experiences the intrinsic value of education develops autonomy, whereas the student whose education serves only an external purpose – a remunerative position or external accolades – lacks that privileged element of freedom. Such a person becomes dependent on that purpose; value comes not from the internal delight of exploring the life of the mind and engaging meaningful questions but from external approbation and success in the world. The student, in

contrast, who loves truth is not finished with knowledge when it has served its external purpose, but instead takes joy in continual discovery. On the other hand, the student who explores learning only for its immediate application has no capacity to draw on the principles that alone make possible its appropriate use.

(Roche, pp. 78-79)

A love of learning that fosters the capacity to continue to learn is the greatest hallmark of a liberal arts education. Liberal arts students understand how to adapt to a rapidly changing world, which gives them confidence as they tackle projects in new areas. True education, as opposed to mere training, includes the ability to respond to new situations and challenges.

This capacity for adaptation and innovation is especially important in a work environment that requires dramatic shifts in employer and employee tasks and projects as technology, cultural contexts, and market forces change. A young American today with at least two years of college can expect to change jobs at least eleven times before retirement. Not surprisingly, in a national survey, CEOs made clear that they value the long-term outcomes of a college education, those that prepare one not only for a first job but for a long and variable career. These CEOs insist that a college education produce people of strong character with generalized intellectual and social skills and a capacity for life-long learning.

(Roche, p. 80)

The idea that the highest end of a liberal arts education is learning for its own sake does not mean that this is the best strategy to defend the value of the liberal arts. On the contrary, in an age that is increasingly focused on competitiveness, credentialism, and getting ahead in the work-a-day world, the most effective defense of a liberal arts education surely emphasizes its practical value. Fortunately, the record is clear. In pursuing the liberal arts, students develop capacities that allow them to excel in any endeavor. The best firms know of these capacities and value them, especially among those employees whom they hope to see ascend into higher levels of management. To develop advanced skills in reading, writing, and speaking; to be able to think critically and solve problems; to have experienced a range of disciplines and spheres of knowledge; to become comfortable with difference, ambiguity, and complexity; and to desire to continue to learn – all of these qualities prepare liberal arts graduates for the positions and challenges that are available to them as they graduate, and for those that have yet to be invented or discovered.

(Roche, pp. 98-99)

Loving to learn is a greater challenge today than it used to be. I've watched my children grow up surrounded by an amazing cornucopia of entertainment available instantly on their computers, tablets, and phones. Perhaps soon these pleasures will be hardwired into their brains. The richness, variety, and allure of today's games, television shows, and videos are dazzling. Many are amazingly creative, and some are intellectually challenging – there are smart video games out there. But all are designed to get children enraptured and, eventually, addicted. The all-consuming power of modern entertainment can turn something that demands active and sustained engagement, like reading and writing, into a chore.

And yet reading – especially, I would argue, reading books – remains one of the most important paths to real knowledge. There are few substitutes to understanding an issue in depth than reading a good book about it. This has been true for centuries, and it has not changed. And kids need to enjoy reading – not just see it as the thing their parents make them do before they can play video games or watch a television show.

(Zakaria, pp. 61-62)

When you hear someone extol the benefits of a liberal education, you will probably hear him say that “it teaches you to think.” I'm sure that's true. But for me, the central virtue of a liberal education is that it teaches you how to write, and writing makes you think. Whatever you do in life, the ability to write clearly, cleanly, and reasonably quickly will prove to be an invaluable skill.

If you think this has no earthly use, ask Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon. Bezos insists that his senior executives write memos, often as long as six printed pages, and begins senior-management meetings with a period of quiet time, sometimes as long as thirty minutes, while everyone reads the “narratives” to themselves and makes notes on them. If proposing a new product or strategy, the memo must take the form of a press release, using simple, jargon-free language so that a layperson could understand it. In an interview with *Fortune's* Adam Lashinsky, Bezos said, “Full sentences are harder to write. They have verbs. The paragraphs have topic sentences. There is no way to write a six-page, narratively structured memo and not have clear thinking.”

(Zakaria, pp. 72-74)

Norman Augustine, reflecting on his years as the CEO of Lockheed Martin, recalled that “the firm I led at the end of my formal business career employed some one hundred eighty thousand people, mostly college graduates, of whom over eighty thousand were engineers or scientists. I have concluded that one of the stronger correlations with advancement through the management ranks was the ability of an individual to express clearly his thoughts in writing.”

(Zakaria, pp. 74-75)

Another great advantage of a liberal education is that it teaches you how to speak. ... At the deepest level, articulate communication helps you to speak your mind. This doesn't mean spouting anything and everything you're thinking at any given moment. It means learning to understand your own mind, to filter out under-developed ideas, and then to express to the outside world your thoughts, arranged in some logical order. Whether for public or private communication, the ability to articulate your thoughts clearly will prove a tremendous strength. No matter how strong our idea, you have to be able to convince others to get behind it.

(Zakaria, pp. 75-77)

To obtain a position, to have enough money to satisfy basic needs for food and shelter, for health and safety, and for opportunities for one's children, is important, but to focus on getting a high-paying job over developing a life vision is to cut short one of the few opportunities that students have, beyond the home, to develop values and a worldview that will help them flourish as persons. Psychological research has shown that people who are more materialistic, prioritizing the accumulation of wealth over social or spiritual values, are less happy. The focus on the spiral of ever more success, replete with praise, rewards, status, and continuing comparison with others, actually increases one's sense of insecurity. On the other hand, a life focused on virtue – developing one's capacities, engaging meaningful challenges, exploring ideas, deepening friendships, fostering community – tends to increase one's sense of contentment and purpose. Empirical research suggests that the “greatest happiness comes from absorbing yourself in some goal outside yourself.” A liberal arts education encourages and prepares students to strive for precisely such goals.

(Roche, pp. 151-152)

The liberal arts give students many of the human qualities sought by businesses, but even more importantly, they develop in students the capacity to ask questions about what is important in the world, who they are, and what they wish to do with their lives. To cultivate a sense of character, of purpose, of vocation, by reflecting on the world as it is and as it should be, is to unleash a passion and devotion that, much like other liberal arts capacities, will not only help students succeed in the world of work but also guide them in terms of values and life decisions.

(Roche, p. 145)

Great Questions explored at St. Mary's College

- Can we prove that God exists, and that Jesus Christ is God?
- How do we learn, and what is tradition?
- How do we distinguish between truth and error, what are the limits of our knowledge, and how are the various fields of learning related?
- What is love? How is it manifested?
- What makes something beautiful?
- What is the relation between human reason and divine revelation, and why do Christians study the pagan classics?
- Can there be morality without belief in immortality?
- Why does God allow evil, and why do the innocent suffer? In what ways is suffering good?
- What is Christendom, how did it develop, how was it destroyed, and can it be restored?
- Why is warfare a focus of all human societies, and what makes war just?
- What are the relations among government, law, and man's natural rights? What role should the Church play in guiding temporal affairs?
- What does it mean to be human? How, then, should we live our lives?
- Do all men desire happiness? What will make them truly happy?
- What is freedom, and how have different ideas about freedom sparked dire conflict?

- Is it possible to find meaning in the waste land of the post-Christian, post-modern world? Is meaningful speech, thought, art, and even love still possible? Can we discern the action of grace among the ruins?
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To learn more, please contact and visit us at Saint Mary's College!

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