

# Keeping the Liberal in Liberal Arts Education

by Susan Nagelsen

Serving on committees is, of course, one of the duties expected of a tenured professor. For me, one of these assignments entailed an examination of the core curriculum for undergraduates at my small, liberal arts college in New Hampshire, part of the periodic review process. The committee members agreed to label the result the “Liberal Arts Core Curriculum,” or LCC, for short. No one thought either the name or the acronym would be offensive, but they did not anticipate the degree to which the political polarization of the country has infused the same antipathy into higher education.

A faculty member in the political science department subsequently objected, not to the curriculum’s designation but to the acronym that omitted the word “Arts.” According to his reasoning, LCC signified a political agenda, deriving from a bias toward a leftist philosophy, thereby failing in the institution’s goal of educating—not indoctrinating—undergraduates. The lacuna, so the argument went, concomitantly labeled more conservative students as somehow being beyond the pale and incapable of redemption in a classroom that focused exclusively on the opposite end of the political spectrum.

The episode prompted me to wonder, again, how the word “liberal” has become a pejorative in our political and educational lexicon. I am, sadly, accus-

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tomed to dealing with such matters, and these interactions always take me back to Cardinal Henry Newman's thoughtful exposition on the idea of higher education.

#### FROM ANCIENT GREECE TO CARDINAL NEWMAN: THE MEANING OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Newman stressed the importance of "enlarg[ing] the range of studies" available to students, because although "they cannot pursue every subject which is open to them, they will be the gainers by living among those and under those who

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represent the whole circle.” In the process, students learn mutual respect in what Newman called “a pure and clear atmosphere of thought.” That is, the student is immersed in an intellectual tradition that “is independent of particular teachers.”<sup>1</sup> I would add independent of political ideology as well.

Institutions of higher learning are, therefore, charged with creating an atmosphere in which the student “apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little.” And, most important, Newman reminds us that the nature of this education is purposely called “liberal,” and produces “[a] habit of mind ... formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.”<sup>2</sup>

Etymologically speaking, Newman is on point; “liberal,” of course, derives from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free,” and describes a mind unencumbered by either prejudice or indoctrination. Extending the discussion, we could then ask what specific courses would produce the liberal mind to which Newman alludes? Liberal arts, of course, a brief history of which is relevant to contemporary issues.

In ancient Greece, the term pertained to an education that enabled a Greek citizen to participate in the business of the *polis*. To guarantee effective participation in civic life, formal study had as its primary goal the production of an educated, virtuous citizen. To that end, the focus was on grammar, logic, and rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Today, by comparison, one often hears complaints about students' difficulties in all three fields and the relatively shallow learning and profound ignorance displayed by American citizens in general. Studies show, for example, that only 79 percent are aware that the Earth orbits the Sun, and barely 76 percent know that this country achieved its independence from England.<sup>4</sup> Existing in such an epistemological desert would have disqualified similarly limited Athenians from adding a well-informed voice to civic discussion.

Moving into the Middle Ages, the liberal arts were expanded. The three original subjects from antiquity were christened the Trivium, and four more subjects (the Quadrivium) were subsequently added: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.<sup>5</sup> As humanity's knowledge base expanded, more subjects found their way into the curriculum until a contemporary description of liberal arts includes all subjects not pertaining to professional, vocational, or technical curricula.<sup>6</sup> And therein lies the rub.

The exclusion of these pursuits, that is, any educational system that does not base its core curriculum on, and have as its primary goal, making money appears to

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be the major point of contention with some faculty and many students in today's colleges and universities. This sort of identity politics, as Alan Ryan points out, “degenerates into a grinding exercise in denying an advantage to the other side, no matter what the long-term damage to yourself might be.”<sup>7</sup> So intense is the disagreement between the two factions, that the adjective “liberal” has become, at least in some circles, synonymous with anti-capitalism, anti-business, and therefore anti-American.

The growing emphasis on financial success as the singular goal of higher education, exemplified by the rise in for-profit colleges run on business models, as well as business-friendly “competency-based” institutions, has created a disturbing pattern. Many institutions of higher learning now sacrifice qualified administrators who do not demonstrate sufficient prowess or innovation when it comes to increasing the university's bottom line. The University of Virginia recently dismissed its president because board members did not think she was sufficiently attentive to the university's financial position.<sup>8</sup> Responding to Virginia's action, an assistant professor at the university observed, “Universities are not corporations. Universities are nonprofit, public entities that have missions of teaching, research, and public service. Those are not the same mission as a corporation.”<sup>9</sup> In a similar move, Purdue University installed a new president, a former governor with no academic experience, who is, however, adept at raising money and reducing spending for education.<sup>10</sup>

This debate between a purely academic versus a profit-driven philosophy also threatens the boots on the ground, the faculty who are charged with educating the young men and women in their classrooms. More and more frequently, even at my liberal arts college, I encounter students who categorically deny any advantage of a liberal arts curriculum. These entrenched preconceptions, often inherited from

parents whose understandable objective is their child's financial independence, are extremely resistant to either modification or moderation. I continue to encounter students who openly denigrate any coursework that does not, in their view, contribute to an increase in income, confirming Tony Judt's observation: "[T]he thrall in which an ideology holds a people is best measured by their collective inability to imagine alternatives."<sup>11</sup>

Such a mercenary attitude promotes disinterested participation in the classroom of, say, a writing course, one that develops organizational and critical thinking skills and will clearly benefit anyone, regardless of major. This pervasive

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insistence on a business-oriented, vocational approach to higher education drives the current prejudice against anything that remotely detracts from that goal, often, as Judt said, to the point of emphasizing trivial disagreements and jeopardizing valuable programs.

This sneering condescension whenever a "liberal" curriculum is discussed, whether top-down or bottom-up, clearly creates a distraction from the goal of producing a well-informed citizen. I have never lost faith that a liberal education remains the most effective method for producing an intellect both broad and deep, which in turn will result in better educated citizens who at least have a sense of history and science to guide their professional and personal decisions. Peter Winch puts it this way: "[T]o study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own—not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own."<sup>12</sup>

#### RECLAIMING THE TRUE MEANING OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

How, then, can a "liberal core curriculum" be construed as either biased or politically insensitive? Only by insisting on a perversion of the term as understood through 2,500 years of tradition and application. A liberal education, free of the distortions advanced by reactionary politics, undertakes to produce a mind informed by "moderation and wisdom," a mind immune to the scandals and drama of 24-hour news cycles, a mind capable of identifying fact from fiction, truth from deception. The implications for a representative democracy are obvious and, contrary to popular myth, do not exclude the ability to earn a comfortable living.

Without such an education, the republic will be forced to contend with an electorate unfamiliar with substantive issues, voters who rely on personalities, half-truths, and innuendo, and succumb to a confirmation bias that treats views

congruent with theirs as revealed truth without examination or question, and dismisses out of hand anything that conflicts with those preconceptions. That is, Americans might be able to distinguish between macro- and microeconomics but will persist in picking their elected representatives in the same manner they choose their breakfast cereal and select school board members, university presidents, and faculty based on an ideological litmus test.

If the antidote to this gloomy state of affairs is a liberal education, then it beggars belief that any educated person would possibly object to the inferences attached to such a respected and august concept. A liberal mind, informed by a liberal education, is not the enemy of any specific political party, entity, or economic system. It is one that searches for the truth and tests the validity of any proposition. It encourages experimentation, introspection, and the thoughtful and respectful exchange of ideas.

A “Liberal Core Curriculum” therefore remains the proper vehicle for achieving higher education’s charge to make our young men and women better citizens. The misapprehension of the term by few should not relieve the academy of its obligation to keep alive a tradition that has flourished for over two millennia and brought human development to the pinnacle it now occupies. Jeff Lustig, in this journal, described the result if the liberal arts were supplanted with a more curriculum more limited in scope and philosophy: “The liberal arts could not be jettisoned from the university and its autonomy lost without changing what the institution fundamentally is.”<sup>13</sup> The risks are simply too great to allow Adam Smith’s invisible hand to be the exclusive determinant in educational choices.<sup>14</sup>

The NEA and all faculty must speak with one voice to preserve our educational heritage, manage our curricula, resist the pernicious influence of corporate largesse, and insist that higher education be entrusted to the men and women dedicated to an inclusive worldview that does not evaluate an individual’s merit based on a balance sheet or projected earnings. We must continue to encourage a mutual respect that can come, as James Axtell insists, “only when people learn to regard all other human beings, singly and in groups, as both *different from* and *equal to* themselves to understand them as much as possible in their *own* terms” (emphasis in original).<sup>15</sup> That is the ultimate purpose, and a heroic one, of a truly liberal education. 

## ENDNOTES

1. Newman, *The Idea of a University*
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Trivium Education*.
4. Crabtree, “New Poll Gauges Americans’ General Knowledge Level.”
5. *Ibid.*
6. The contemporary description of liberal arts includes history, moral philosophy or ethics, and the natural sciences.
7. Ryan, “Cosmopolitans,” p. 48.

8. Sampson, "College Boards Turn to Business-Style Approaches." Note: UVA's President Sullivan subsequently was rehired after faculty and student protest.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Judt, "Captive Minds," p. 10.
12. Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," p. 30.
13. Lustig, "The University Beseiged," *Thought & Action*.
14. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith elaborated his concept of the invisible hand of a free-market economy, reasoning that society would benefit most, including in unintended ways, by market forces unencumbered by government oversight or intervention. Applying that same rationale—which has proven to be fallacious—to higher education would eliminate any curricula that did not comport with an unrestrained pursuit of profit.
15. Axtell, *The Pleasures of Academe*, p. 70.

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