

Get a Liberal Arts Degree

A liberal arts education is relevant in the 21st century for numerous important reasons, one of which is a skilled workforce.

Fortune 500 companies want students who can communicate in writing and in speech, solve problems, think creatively and work in a diverse environment. They want liberal arts majors. But do all liberal arts majors want to work for Fortune 500 companies?

When you ask English, sociology, anthropology or history majors about their career goals, they often say they don't want to work for "the man." They say money is less important to them than making a difference in the world. And thank goodness for that.

Certainly one's upbringing has something to do with this admirable quality to think beyond one's self interest, but people who teach in the liberal arts can take some credit for it, too. Alexander Pope said it well nearly 300 years ago in his Moral Essays: "'Tis education forms the common mind, just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined." A life worth living is not just about acquiring money. Rather, it is one in which you make a positive difference through action.

A liberal arts education is not a body of facts but is one that promotes inquisitiveness, lifelong learning and an idealistic notion that one can make a difference. One reason why Forbes magazine's list of "worst" majors — which includes many liberal arts majors — is so inaccurate is that it is based on the premise that annual salary equals happiness and fulfillment. Five years after graduation someone might be working for Amnesty International or Earthwatch with a low salary and be quite happy, but apparently that's a failure according to Forbes.

Not only does a liberal arts education provide students with the skills to be successful in business careers, it opens up new areas that focus on social justice, environmental protection and other worthy causes. In fact, according to the Center for Civil Society Studies at Johns Hopkins University, in 2010 about 10.7 million people were employed in nonprofits, making it the third largest workforce behind retail trade and manufacturing.

One of the challenges today of teaching a liberal arts curriculum is that we live in a world of 140-character messages, sound bites and instant gratification. People speed past one another focused on an ever-narrowing world view. It is common to see on campus friends sitting together with each person staring at their phones, ignoring the friends beside them. A liberal arts education teaches us to

look away from the screen, engage the world around us and expand the depth and breadth of our attention.

Our world, past and present, is not something that can be understood quickly, and answers to today's problems are never black and white. James Freedman in his insightful book, "Liberal Education and the Public Interest," reminds us that a liberal arts education gives us a perspective characterized by "humility of thought and a hospitality to other points of view," while sound bites and screaming pundits produce intolerance and rigidity. Our world's problems will never be solved with such inward and polarized thinking.

As summer turns to fall on our Midwestern campus and students file into their classrooms, we feel great hope. Here they will learn about the rich depth of our history, the fragility of our planet, the vastness of our cosmos and the complexities of our brains. They will learn how to construct arguments, build consensus and work toward solutions. Some will go on to make their fortunes while others will dedicate themselves to service and improving other people's lives.

Regardless of their path, the keystone to their success will be their liberal arts education.

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