

Liberal Education and the Idea of the University

Arguments and Reflections on
Theory and Practice

Edited by

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Series in Education



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Cover image: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. According to UNESCO, the University of al-Qaraouvine in Fes, Morocco, is the oldest existing and consistently operational degree granting institution in the world. It was founded in 859 CE by Fatima al-Fihri. She founded one of the world's oldest libraries, also at the university. Photographer and owner of the photo: Anderson Sandy.

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Dedicated to Rev. Dr. George Kirby, Mount Royal College's first President, 1910-1941, and Dr. David Docherty, Mount Royal University's President, 2010-2019

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Foreword

by David J DiMattio

In light of an ever-changing landscape in 21st century learning, educators desire to share best practices with their peers and even if they come from a wide spectrum of higher education institutions, the support of general and liberal studies bind them. This manuscript, *Liberal Education and the Idea of the University: Arguments and Reflections on Theory and Practice*, takes on the continuing debate around the “place” for liberal education.

Part I: Liberal Education: Values and Ideals address the “Why Liberal Education is needed?” Part II: Liberal Education: Pedagogy and Practices addresses the “How Liberal Education can be incorporated?” Each chapter also offers insight toward “Who can benefit from Liberal Education?” and “Where can Liberal Education be found?”

Who can benefit? A “bricks and mortar” identity no longer influence educational institutions, rather a globalized society provides guidance and that requires a home for liberal education as well. Faculty need to find real purpose in liberal education courses, as they are owners to an academic curriculum. Many students enter a program with a narrow view of the world and their place within it. Their concerns center typically upon a major, and often they view liberal arts and science courses as unnecessary. The goal should be to have them integrate their choice of major into the context of the liberally educated person: not to talk them out of their decision, but to help them understand and ground their choice in a broader, better informed intellectual context. (DiMattio, 2018)

Why is it necessary? Critics would suggest that in the 21st century, when education prepares students for career success and when it prepares them to be a member of community, it is valuable.

In 2008, 2013, and 2018, the Association of American College & Universities sponsored and initiated several surveys to measure employer expectations and perceptions of college graduates. *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success* (2013) indicated that employers endorse a blended model of liberal and applied learning. *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work* (2018) showed that employers “agree upon the value of college and

believe that it is both important and worth the investment of time and money.” (AAC&U)

Within academics, we help students to explore careers. Students should recognize critical thinking skills, collaboration and the ability to view the internal and external world. A student with critical thinking skills is able to evaluate positions. A student who is able to collaborate can accept a shared environment and expertise.

The ideals identified in Part 1 of this manuscript add to these values. Philosophy applies logic and reason. Civics education teaches students they can influence government. Exposure to social problems allows students visibility to the current world, and its problems.

How to use it? A liberal arts education introduces and exposes students to the humanities and the fine arts, the natural and social sciences, uniquely allowing a methodology, and a vehicle for discovery. It provides breadth and depth of understanding of one’s own culture while establishing a worldview. (Westlund et al., 2018)

A perceived threat within higher education involves the struggle between a liberal arts identity and the training desires from the local, regional and national levels. Institutions begin toward a job-focused education yet this should not be at the cost of a liberal arts mission. All disciplines including professional education should connect liberal education in an interdisciplinary manner. (Himmelberg, 2018)

Launched in 2005, Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) was a national public advocacy and campus action initiative supported by the Association of American Colleges & Universities. Part 2 of this manuscript demonstrates a synthesis across general and specialized studies as found in LEAP’s “Principles of Excellence” as well as “High Impact Educational Practices.” (AAC&U, Leap) Community service, integrative learning, teaching the art of inquiry and innovation can build bridges between liberal education and Business, STEM, Health Sciences and other professional programs.

However, as educators continue to redevelop their pedagogies, they should incorporate some nontraditional practices. Utilize technology to reinvent liberal education with new resources.

Where is it? Liberal Education is foundational within Higher Education. As demonstrated in this manuscript, a collection of international institutions came together to share insights, best practices and ideals on why, how and where they have been successful. Examples span from the traditional formats to reinvented 21st century formats while embracing new (and sometimes not so new) practices. These efforts will offer

innovation to any reader while providing evidence to the importance of collaboration.

Please learn from, experience, and appreciate *Liberal Education and the Idea of the University: Arguments and Reflections on Theory and Practice*.

David J DiMattio, PhD

President, Association for General Liberal Studies (2016-2018)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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Many champions of liberal education defend against the reduction of education to purely instrumental purposes. An undergraduate education, they argue, is an incubator for a democratic ethos and it can, at its best, encourage a critical understanding of one's own beliefs, while taking seriously beliefs that shape the lives of others. In this way, the spine of liberal education is hortatory: a call to action that seeks to preserve what is best and to critically reflect and alter those features of our collective inheritance that fall short of our ideals. Thinking beyond one's self-interest, being an engaged citizen, and cultivating the capacities to integrate and appreciably assess data seem hallmarks of the liberally educated person. In recent years some apologists have come from business and STEM subjects, touting the aggregate benefits to their particular sectors from the hiring of the liberally educated student. In light of the many significant challenges we currently face and will no doubt have to imminently confront, the defense of the liberally educated, engaged global citizen seem obviously true and right-minded.

Still, there are critics and skeptics. Calls to increase STEM funding and other areas promising ready employment are a commonplace. Cuts to liberal education requirements and reports of the elimination of liberal and fine arts programs seem to threaten core assumptions about the idea of the university and the purpose of higher education. Critics argue that concerns about climate change, water and food security, disease prevention, technology and 'big-data', emerging economies, migration and urbanization, gender equity and access to education (among other things) require specialists—those trained to solve “real-world” problems with relevant “real-world” credentials. The critics' message is also hortatory: a call to create effective pathways from the university to the

workforce and from the workforce to full social contributor and engaged citizen. Are these two visions of education inherently at odds? What are some ways to rethink this tension and how might a liberal education aid in this process?

In April 2017 Mount Royal University and Medicine Hat College hosted their first international Liberal Education conference. Held in Calgary, the conference's theme, "The Idea of the University and the State of Liberal Education in the 21st Century," attracted attendance from Canada, the United States, Europe, and Asia. This collection is representative of the range of ideas and arguments explored by presenters.

In Part I, "Liberal Education: Values and Ideals", authors explore the nature of efficacy of a liberal education. The papers present arguments that demonstrate tensions in our outlooks and even in possible solutions to the crises identified.

In Part II, "Liberal Education: Practices and Pedagogy", authors explore teaching practices, epistemic assumptions about different methodologies and knowledge claims, and General Education programs.

Part I: Liberal Education: Values and Ideals

Ronald Glasberg introduces the volume in Part I. In Chapter 2, his timely paper, "Liberal Education and the Challenges of Our Time", attempts to address what Glasberg takes to be 'key challenges' faced by the liberal arts and sciences today. He identifies three: (1) the unconscious betrayal of cultural ideals we associate with our democratic values and how that betrayal evolves into a destructive projection of that betrayal onto some figure or group representing the 'traitor' or betrayer; (2) the development of a pseudo-reality or dream-like socio-cultural framework that functions in a manner that reinforces the aforementioned 'treachery trope'; and (3) the quality of 'addictiveness' or compulsive repetition of uncreative behaviours designed to maintain or reinforce the structures of the pseudo-reality. Glasberg's discussion seeks to demonstrate how a liberal education may be re-oriented to address the challenges outlined above, to help us overcome our pseudo-realities. In this regard, the primary thrust of a liberal education may be directed toward critically assessing and reformulating the underlying principles of our globalized world with a view to revealing unconscious forms of betrayal and possible ways of recommitting ourselves to our ideals.

In Chapter 3, "Why the World Needs More Philosophers: Liberal Education and Public Intellectuals", Kathryn Shailer suggests how we might reinvigorate the role of the university in society through the

education and cultivation of public intellectuals. She argues that the growing specialization of disciplines within universities has narrowed the role and credibility of 21st century academics who venture into the public realm and that a liberal education grounded in interdisciplinary philosophical training ought to be a foundation of all disciplinary and professional education. We need to consider, argues Shailer, how to reconstitute the spawning ground of the public intellectual: which means breaking down the silos of specialization. She argues for more vibrant philosophy programs that reconsolidate the disparate fields and perspectives now segregated into dozens of disciplines, and that look beyond narrow British and Continental European perspectives to embrace global, gender-specific, and Indigenous epistemologies. Shailer concludes by suggesting that we need our students to think of themselves as philosophers, *in the broadest interdisciplinary sense*, while acquiring a depth of knowledge that gives them substance.

In Chapter 4, “Liberal Education and Democracy: Challenging Neoliberal Conceptions of Pedagogy”, Navneet Kumar challenges the ‘wedded notion’ that market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, economic and even pedagogical decisions. He forcefully argues that neoliberalism has waged an assault on democracy, its public institutions, the welfare state, and the very idea of public good itself. He argues that a liberal education and its various forms in a classroom can be central to bringing the ethos of democracy back to the pedagogical sphere and as a consequence effectively enfranchise citizens in the public square.

In Chapter 5, “In Defence of a Utilitarian University Education”, Allison Dube interrogates an assumption familiar to those who defend the “intrinsic value” of a liberal education against “utilitarianism”. Dube thinks that some authors believe a utilitarian education to subvert the very ideals of liberal learning. Through the exploration of what Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill wrote on higher education, his paper marshals a defence of aspects of a utilitarian undergraduate education while challenging some of the assumptions made by those who speak colloquially of the need to move “beyond” it. Dube’s paper challenges readers to rethink their own ideas about utilitarianism and, indeed, of the ideals associated with the intrinsic value of liberal learning.

In Chapter 6, “A Conservative Defense of a Liberal Education”, James Cunningham defends what he identifies as Edmund Burke’s conservative view of education, describing the university as a virtuous intellectual community that is distinctively humane. Drawing on thinkers from a wide range, Northrup Frye, Alasdair MacIntyre and Theodore Adorno, Cunningham examines the place of social practice in realizing the virtuous

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A broad liberal education is a very good basis for learning to understand and value the perspectives of people whose racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds are very different from our own. Literature is one such tool. When students read and discuss a book like *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, they are quickly drawn into an understanding that the perspective of an African-American writer from the 1960s is profoundly different from their own. I know, the idea of how to educate and how it is done are two different things, but I tend to think the two are related. I'm definitely for general (solid) education in high school and specialization at the university (for fewer people than usually gets it in Europe, with very selective entry-tests). September 4, 2012 at 4:51 AM. Unknown said