

The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs



Lives of Consequence,
Inquiry, and Accomplishment

Richard A. Detweiler

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For Carol,
My partner in life,
In a life well lived, and
In a life of learning

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Preface

In my judgment, one of the most vexing issues facing higher education in the United States today is the role of the liberal arts. It is blamed by some for making college expensive, impractical, and worthless, but by others, it is credited with making our society innovative, creative, and civically involved. As a long-ago college-bound student, I inadvertently chose to attend a liberal arts college—inadvertently because I decided I wanted to attend a smaller college without understanding that I was, at the same time, choosing an education of liberal arts character—and I had no idea what that meant. But of course, at that time, there was little controversy about what should be studied in college; everyone at almost every college and university in the United States, regardless of major, was expected to take courses in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences because breadth of study (which is inherent to the liberal arts approach) was standard everywhere, as it had been for centuries on this continent.

But for many reasons—economic, political, social, and religious—for the past several decades, many long-standing assumptions about American higher education have been challenged. Two of the issues that have dominated discussion have been the cost and the value

of a college degree (and with those, the associated issue of who has access to higher education). The cost (or more accurately, the price that colleges charge as their tuition) has risen inexorably, driven by a number of factors, including decreases in government support (especially the shift from federal grants to students to attend college to student loans, as well as decreases in state aid), the expenses of high-tech equipment (especially in the science and technology areas), improved compensation for faculty and staff, dramatically increased financial aid funded by the institutions themselves, and the increase in amenities that are now expected (such as fancy facilities ranging from classrooms to gyms). As the price inexorably increased, attention began to focus on the question of value: is a college education worth the money?

Colleges and universities ultimately responded to this question by arguing that college graduates earn more, so obviously higher education is a good investment. And research supported this assertion not only in the case of salary, but also in work advancement and health, among other benefits. By embracing graduates' employment upon graduation as proof that their price was worth it, and with this simple-to-measure outcome, colleges inadvertently helped unleash a change in view about the nature and purpose of higher education. With jobs and income as the rationale for going to college, what should students study? "Practical and useful and resulting in a good-paying job at graduation" became the new watchwords for students, parents, regulators, and legislators.

Whereas higher education had long been viewed as a mechanism for social mobility, this fresh emphasis on economic value to the person made a college degree a private good (e.g., like buying a car, it benefits the individual) rather than a public good (e.g., necessary for a successful democracy, as had been the primary assertion). From this shift in perspective, it was a short step to lots of new issues, including questions as to whether governments should really be funding a private good, ever-higher expectations about what

colleges must offer if they are going to attract students to enroll, and who was being excluded from access to this life benefit. Like other aspects of consumer behavior, college became increasingly competitive for both the prospective students (who often feel they need to get admitted to the most prestigious college possible when quality educations are available at hundreds of institutions) and the colleges (needing to attract students in a competitive environment through scholarships, services, and wonderful campus amenities).

That brings me back to the first sentence of this preface: in my judgment, one of the most vexing issues now facing higher education in the United States is the role of the liberal arts.

Two simple questions indicate why this issue is vexing. First, should all college students be required to take courses in history and philosophy as well as more obviously practical courses that are directly related to a good job? Second, do graduates who have studied in a liberal arts context live a more successful or better life? The first question assumes that study in the tradition of the liberal arts is defined by the courses that one takes. But it turns out, as you will learn from this book, not only is there is no agreed-upon definition or description of the liberal arts, but importantly, the research findings make it clear there is much more to a liberal arts education than merely the courses that one takes. The second question assumes that we know which life outcomes are most important or valuable—is it personal success, or making contributions to society, or being fulfilled, or something else? Again, as you will find in this book, while there are countless books, articles, and speeches on this subject, there is no agreement on what life outcomes actually matter most.

In developing the work reported in this book, my goal was to take a fresh look at higher education in general, and liberal arts education in particular. Rather than adopting a particular theoretical or philosophical position, or simply accepting the assertions of some of the many impressive thinkers who have written on this subject, I endeavored to objectively catalog both the practices of liberal arts

education over the centuries and the goals that institutions have identified for their graduates' life outcomes. Then it was a simple process (well, actually, it was quite challenging and complicated) to see whether, based on the actual experiences of college graduates, there is any relationship between particular aspects of liberal arts study and specific life outcomes.

As you will learn, I concluded that liberal arts study always involves serving a common purpose (of value to both society and the individual) and involves not only the content of study (the courses taken), but also the context of study (the nature of the educational environment). And the desired outcomes include those of individual value (success and fulfillment), societal value (leadership and altruism), and intellectual value (continuing study and cultural involvement). Importantly, there are some aspects of the content and context of the liberal arts that are related to some of the life outcomes, and other aspects that are related to other life outcomes. So the results reported in this book can be useful to many people: students, as they choose the type of college to attend based on their own life goals; institutions, as they allocate resources for particular outcomes; regulators, as they decide how to hold colleges accountable; and others.

This endeavor was, not surprisingly, not a solo journey. In partial acknowledgment, I must start with the leadership of many liberal arts-based institutions outside the United States which, by showing me their different approaches to the liberal arts, stimulated me to ask new questions about the essence of this educational approach. Next, my abiding gratitude goes to presidents associated with the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA), who encouraged me to invest time and attention to this issue: Brian Casey, Grant Cornwell, David Dawson, Sean Decatur, Mauri Ditzler, Gregory Hess, Rock Jones, John Knapp, James Mullen, Georgia Nugent, Adam Weinberg, and Eileen Wilson-Oyalaran. The following members of the GLCA staff were supportive in countless ways: Derek Vaughan, Gregory Wegner, Simon Gray, Colleen Monahan Smith, Charla White, and Maryann

Hafner. And then, without the generous financial support of the Teagle Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the GLCA, the research reported here could not have been undertaken in the first place.

As this project developed, many people and organizations contributed substantially to shaping it: Julie Kidd, president of the Endeavor Foundation, who relentlessly supports education in the tradition of the liberal arts; the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through their long support of education at liberal arts institutions; the presidents, deans, and faculty of colleges and universities in the United States and abroad through their involvement in workshops and discussions; numerous higher education thinkers and leaders who patiently spent time responding to my questions about the nature of higher education; and David Strauss and Shanaysha Sauls of the Art & Science Group, who thoughtfully and skillfully turned messy concepts into useful interview questions. I am also indebted to the 1,000 graduates of decades past who invested substantial time in being interviewed and reflecting on the nature of their higher education experience, and the additional 85 graduates who contributed lengthy narratives about their college experiences; without them, there would have been no research findings to report. Finally, my exploration of Islam and its role in the history and development of the liberal arts through the Islamic Golden Age was greatly advanced by the wisdom shared by Dr. Haifa Reda Jamal Al-Lail, president of Effat University; and Dr. Driss Ouaouicha, then the president of Al Akhawayn University and now the minister delegate to Morocco's Minister of National Education.

As the preliminary results became public, I am particularly grateful to Scott Jascik for his interest in reporting on the results, and to Elizabeth Branch Dyson, who encouraged me to write a book on this work. At that point, Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, and the enthusiastic comments of Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education were fortifying as I slogged through the detailed analyses. In addition, I wish to

acknowledge the superb final manuscript editing by Susan McClung. And very importantly, I express my deep appreciation to Susan Buckley, my editor at MIT Press, whose strong interest and continuing support have brought this work to you as the book you now hold.

Finally, there were the numerous people who provided reviews and suggestions for improving the work, ranging from professional colleagues and anonymous readers to members of my academically involved family, who shared expertise on the educational concepts (Jerusha Detweiler-Bedell), analytic strategy (Brian Detweiler-Bedell), publication process (Courtney Hillebrecht and Carrick Detweiler), social justice (Natasha Detweiler-Daby), and the public case (Doug Detweiler). Through all of this, my wife, Carol—my partner in higher education as well as in life—not only unceasingly gave me the time for this work, but also kept pressing me onward both through encouragement and candid critiques of countless drafts; without her, this book would not exist.

1

Our Puzzle

Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!

—Alice, in Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

America's higher education system is considered by many to be the best in the world. Nearly 1 million international students come to the US for college or university studies every year¹—twice the number as any other country, and in many cases, they need to pay for an education that would have been very inexpensive or free at home. At the same time, numerous educational leaders in other countries assert that their higher education systems should be improved by adopting essential aspects of the American approach. Many of us in the US scratch our heads at this acclaim, which is in stark contrast to critics who persistently lament what they describe as our broken and ineffective colleges.

So, what about the American approach has made people in other countries believe it to be exceptional and impactful in ways not typically reported elsewhere? It is probably not the football teams, though they are distinctively American. It is probably not the disproportionate number of Nobel Prize winners that have come from

US universities because, while this is an impressive accomplishment, Nobel laureates rarely teach classes or spend much time with undergraduate students. It also doesn't seem likely that it is how hard students must work to gain admission—some US colleges accept almost everyone who applies. Indeed, in many other countries, more extreme demands are placed on students to qualify for university admissions than in the US.

The fact is that what has made undergraduate education in the US unique, and makes it the darling of the world, is that it is based on the liberal arts. And while US colleges are currently feeling intense pressure to eliminate this approach, and students are being encouraged to focus exclusively on mastering immediately practical, job-specific information, this is a grave error, as the research reported in this volume demonstrates. *Higher education based on six essential aspects of education in the tradition of the liberal arts is an educational ecology that has a uniquely powerful and positive impact on the life and achievements of college graduates and the society in which they live.* This impact is not simply the result of the subjects studied (its content); much more important, it is the result of the use of a deliberately crafted educational environment (its context). In this era of educational reform, the challenge facing higher education today should not be to eliminate liberal arts in favor of the wrongly perceived value of an exclusive focus on specialized education, but rather to strengthen those liberal arts practices that have been demonstrated to increase the lifelong value of the education provided.

* * *

From its early days, American-style higher education was intentionally designed to be different from the higher education being offered in other countries. Two centuries ago, when European universities were considered the best in the world, a decision by the faculty of Yale University led to the US taking a different path to higher education. This was an approach that American educators of that time

believed would not only better serve the needs of the individuals being educated, but also more constructively shape the development of the nation. So, instead of trying to copy the European approach, which focused on the development of job-oriented, specialized, and professional training, educators in the US concluded that it was more important to equip American youth with the broader talents and values they would need to thrive in, and contribute to, individual and societal progress during a time of challenge and change. Their belief was that the payoff from this approach would be far greater in the longer term than the shorter-term benefits that come from a narrow focus on specialized higher education.

Choosing not to follow the world's educational leaders of the time, but instead to take a distinctive path, was a courageous experiment—seeing whether higher education designed to prepare people for a lifetime of contributions and achievement, not just for a particular job, would be successful at projecting a nation and its people forward. And successful it has been, as judged by the attainments of graduates, its contribution to the progress of society, and its well-deserved global reputation for impact and effectiveness.*

This distinctive American approach to higher education carries the label “liberal arts”—which, unlike what many believe, does not merely describe the types of courses students take, but rather the totality of an educational approach, both inside and outside the classroom. In recent years, interest in this liberal arts approach

*While the focus of this book is on undergraduate degree education rather than technical or trade programs, the same argument can be made for those in noncollegiate educational programs, which prepare so many of our society's essential workers. As described in chapter 11, in this time of constant change, people will hold ten to fifteen different jobs over their careers. The analysis by the World Economic Forum reported in that chapter also indicates that liberal arts skills—leadership, communication effectiveness, problem-solving ability, a collaborative mindset, and so on—are equally important for those without a traditional college degree, in order to prepare them to successfully navigate the constantly changing and evolving world of work.

to education in other countries has been encouraged by newspaper articles emphasizing the need for the development of creativity, adaptability, insight, and personal responsibility, outcomes that international observers believe are among the hallmarks of a liberal arts education. The handful of American-style colleges founded in other countries at a time of American idealism more than a century ago have earned new attention and respect; new liberal arts colleges have been created and are now operating within traditional European universities,* and Africa, Asia, and the Middle East are the homes of a growing number of liberal arts colleges.† In Asia, there are serious efforts to replace narrow specialization, career focus, and rote memorization with education in the tradition of the liberal arts: “It’s past time for colleges to introduce a broader range of subjects, to promote greater intellectual curiosity, and to foster creative thinking. And they’re convinced that these changes will, in turn, build a workforce of rigorous, creative thinkers—just what they think is needed to meet the fast-changing needs of a transforming global economy.”²

In India, well known for its engineering and technology universities, there is a growing realization that longer-term success comes from rejecting the narrow specialization of these institutions and developing “in students a spirit of inquiry, critical thinking and analysis as well as verbal and written communication skills” through “a broad-ranging education aimed at holistic development.”³ A major new initiative of the Indian government is to require liberal arts

* See the work of the European Consortium of Liberal Arts Colleges at www.ecolas.eu/eng/.

† A few examples of these institutions are Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco; Ashesi University in Berekuso, Ghana; Bratislava International School of the Liberal Arts in Slovakia; Effat University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; FLAME University in Pune, India; the International University of Grand-Bassam in Côte d’Ivoire, the American University in Cairo; American College of Greece in Athens; the American University of Nigeria in Yola; the American University of Paris; Lingnan University in Hong Kong; Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador; and Yale-NUS College in Singapore.

study for all college students not only by creating many new public liberal arts institutions, but also by overhauling the university curriculum, including at its well-known technological institutes.⁴ One need only read the books *American Universities Abroad*⁵ or *Doing Liberal Arts Education—Global Case Studies*,⁶ or consider the work of organizations such as the Global Liberal Arts Alliance,⁷ which links thirty institutions internationally, in order to be convinced of the importance of this growing international liberal arts wave.

I first became aware of the significance of this difference in 1993, not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall and in the early days of the reunification of West and East Germany. As president of an American liberal arts college, I committed to supporting interested German students from the East's best high-tech university to come to my college for a year of study—the kind of opportunity that did not exist when they were under communist rule. Our interest was in helping to bridge the East/West divide through a linkage between Hartwick College and Mittweida University, which indeed happened.* But it turned out that I was in store for an important learning experience myself. These students regularly came to talk with me about the profound impact of taking courses in literature and philosophy and psychology and history and more; taking a range of courses unrelated to their area of specialization was not allowed at their German university. They found that by studying a broader span of knowledge and developing some understanding of how areas of knowledge interrelate, their ways of thinking about their future life and profession (many in engineering) fundamentally changed.

And they also spoke enthusiastically about their professors at this American college—how they invested time and effort getting to know each student and were committed to helping them succeed.

*I express my gratitude to Hartwick College faculty members John Clemens, Tom Sears, Steve Kolenda, and Doug Mayer for recommending, developing, and implementing this project.

The professors spent out-of-class time with students exploring both academic and nonacademic issues; rather than giving passive lectures, they used teaching methods that involved the students. At their eastern German university, a prime example of the traditional European university, the focus was on the development of specialized knowledge within an area of study in preparation for a specific vocation; memorization was essential and there were no opportunities for broader study. There, my students said that the professors focused on the degree to which students could accurately regurgitate facts they were given, and professors did not express much interest in the intellectual or personal development of individual students.

The time that professors at my college spent with students outside of class and the range of courses that students took, as well as their active involvement with students of different values and life experiences, generated fresh insights, broader interests, heightened creativity, a desire for continued opportunities to learn, and a new awareness of and commitment to ways they could contribute to the development of their nation in the future. In short, they found the experience to be one that they believed would help them be more successful over the longer term, for both themselves and their society. Their enthusiasm about their learning experience upon returning home resulted in the chancellor of their university coming to my college to learn about this very different liberal arts approach to higher education.

This label, “liberal arts,” is frequently used pejoratively in the US. In part, this is because it is often interpreted as political, although its actual meaning comes from the Latin word “liberalis,” which means “free”—an education for a free person. In addition, some people believe that it describes a type of college study that is impractical, useless, designed for those lost souls who don’t know what to do with their lives; it is an education that leads directly to unemployment, with the horrifying outcome of graduates having to move back home with their parents. There is an often-told joke about liberal arts education:

How can you tell the difference between graduates with different college degrees?

The graduate with a science degree asks, “Why does it work?”

The graduate with an engineering degree asks, “How does it work?”

The graduate with an accounting degree asks, “How much will it cost?”

The graduate with a liberal arts degree asks, “Do you want fries with that?”

As a result, many parents encourage their children to specialize and take courses that prepare them for their first job. Governors and legislators have taken actions to ban liberal arts majors or eliminate humanities subjects at state colleges. Some opinion writers ridicule this approach to education. As described in the *New York Times*, students attending a liberal arts college, or perhaps even worse, majoring in a humanities subject, can face astonishment bordering on ridicule, or at the very least, can expect this uncomfortable conversation:⁸

Parent: What’s your major?

Student: History and the classics.

Parent: What are you going to do with that?

This negative assessment of education in the tradition of the liberal arts is not shared by knowledgeable people who appreciate and respect the demonstrated success of graduates of American-style, liberal arts–based colleges. Indeed, there are significant voices in the US who advocate for education in the liberal arts tradition: 80% of US employers believe that, regardless of major, every college student should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences, and 93% agree that “a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.”⁹ According to a recent study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the top ten attributes of job candidates sought by employers are communication skills (82%), problem-solving skills (81%), ability to work on a team (79%), initiative (74%), analytical/quantitative

skills (72%), strong work ethic (71%), communication skills (67%), leadership (67%), detail-oriented (60%), and technical skills (60%). It is noteworthy that seven of the top ten are associated with liberal arts education, and that specialization, while still included, is at the bottom of this list. Technology entrepreneur Mark Cuban states that the longer-term value of nontechnical expertise is clear: “Creativity, collaboration, communication skills. Those things are super important and are going to be the difference between make or break . . . In an [artificial intelligence] world, you have to be knowledgeable about something, right?”¹⁰

Further, the noted journalist Fareed Zakaria writes eloquently about the power of a liberal arts education: “A liberal education gives us a greater capacity to be good workers. But it will also give us the capacity to be good partners, friends, parents, and citizens.”¹¹ The conservative social and political commentator David Brooks describes the importance of studying the humanities in developing people with a strong “inner character”¹² and of cultivating an inner life.¹³ And for many years, Apple cofounder Steve Jobs spoke of the centrality of the liberal arts to innovation. While he never graduated, he took many college courses in the humanities, which he later reported shaped his approach not only to life, but to his groundbreaking work humanizing computers. One of these courses was calligraphy, about which he stated, “It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can’t capture, and I found it fascinating. None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But 10 years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac.”¹⁴

And more recently, Microsoft president Brad Smith and artificial intelligence (AI) vice president Harry Shum, in a book about the future distributed at Davos, said that their most important conclusion may relate to the value of the liberal arts: “One of us grew up learning computer science and the other started in the liberal arts. Having worked together for many years at Microsoft, it’s clear to

both of us that it will be even more important to connect these fields in the future.”¹⁵

There is an irony here: in the US today, there are substantial public and governmental pressures to change higher education to be more as it is in most other countries—a vocational, specialized, professional education—and our colleges are complying. Yet these changes threaten the very features that have made the American approach to higher learning different and powerful. Those advocates of changing higher education so that it is specialized and prepares a graduate to perform a specific job do not realize that they are emulating an approach first championed in nineteenth-century Prussia and subsequently adopted throughout Europe and their colonial world. Their calls to action are the result of a fundamental misunderstanding (and rejection) of education based on liberal arts principles.

What you will learn in this book is that the liberal arts approach to higher education has developed, evolved, and improved over a period of 3,500 years in ways designed to maximize learning impact and positive life outcomes—in the past through trial and error, and today through the insights provided by rigorous research. It is important to note that while the most complete education in the liberal arts tradition is usually found at smaller liberal arts colleges, virtually every American college and university, regardless of major, involves at least some liberal arts requirements or experiences. The analyses reported in this book demonstrate that people who live more consequential, wise, and accomplished lives have experienced most of the six essential aspects of liberal arts education.

Education in the tradition of the liberal arts, as I develop it in this book and use it in the research to be reported, includes both the content of study and the educational context within which learning occurs—the whole educational ecology. As with any ecological analysis, these attributes are interlinked; we must consider them together to fully understand the liberal arts educational experience. This increased understanding creates opportunities to enhance the impact of this

American approach to higher education; contrarily, a lack of understanding is now leading to changes that diminish its impact and erode its value. The purpose of this book is to bring the liberal arts back to the center of higher education, based both on a newly clear understanding of its purpose and methods and on evidence about its long-term impact on the lives of individuals and the societies in which they live.

* * *

I have now used the term “liberal arts” many times in this chapter. While I have worked in and taught at liberal arts colleges for many decades, I began to develop fundamentally new insights into the meaning of the liberal arts when I became involved in partnerships with more than a dozen colleges and universities in other countries. These institutions had adapted the liberal arts to fit their own national, cultural, and educational needs. Just like Alexis de Tocqueville, writing from the perspective of an outsider to the US 150 years ago, my experience as an outsider looking at liberal arts education abroad stimulated fresh insights about a subject that I previously thought I knew very well.

In my discussions with liberal arts educators in other countries, I learned they believed that American undergraduate education—and they used the terms “American-style” and “liberal arts” interchangeably—is distinctly different from higher education in their own countries. They said it is unusually valuable for a number of reasons, including:¹⁶

- It prepares people to be successful over their lifetimes by educating them to lead their societies forward, not just to become prepared for a specific job upon graduation.
- It respects and values students, and student learning is the first priority.
- It places faculty themselves as participants in the learning process, while also being engaged with developments in their own areas of expertise.

Previously, like most liberal arts advocates in the US, I had focused primarily on the content of a liberal arts education—the courses required. In contrast, a majority of the ideas expressed by these non-US liberal arts educators focused instead on the nature of the educational experience and on the life outcomes expected.

This simple insight launched me on a renewed liberal arts journey that involves learning the answers to three questions:

- What is the impact of a liberal arts education?
- What are the implications of an education in the tradition of the liberal arts, and what is the value of it?

The answers to these questions are overwhelmingly positive and surprisingly conclusive. For those of you looking for “ammunition for the liberal arts,” as I once heard a college president put it, look no further.

The First Question: What Is Education in the Liberal Arts Tradition?

The next several chapters of this volume explore the nature and development of liberal arts education. This is not a philosophical analysis (Kimball’s *Orators and Philosophers* nicely fulfills this purpose¹⁷), but rather an examination of the practice of the liberal arts. These chapters begin by noting that the liberal arts is described in many ways: some say that it is the study of humanities subjects (such as philosophy and history); some say that it involves the study of a broad range of subjects, as well as one subject in depth; some say that it includes the sciences, as well as the social sciences and humanities; some say that it involves the development of citizenship or responsibility; some say that it occurs at residential liberal arts colleges; and so on. Indeed, a systematic review of descriptions of liberal arts education yields hundreds of words and terms used by various writers, educators, and colleges. While these descriptions

often include inspiring rhetoric, the lack of consistency among them is striking.

With such a variety of contemporary descriptions, it is little wonder that people have different ideas about the nature and value of liberal arts education. To unscramble this jumble of ideas, I concluded that it would be enlightening to take a fresh look at the character of education in the tradition of the liberal arts as it has developed over its many years of existence. Have there been consistent ideas about what is involved in the liberal arts that are (or should be) considered today as essential aspects of this educational approach?

Indeed, the most important insight that I developed as a result of my investigations of liberal arts education over the past 3,500 years, and as practiced today, is that three aspects of this educational approach must be considered: the outcomes intended for the education (its *purpose*), what is studied (its *content*), and the educational environment (its *context*).

The earliest roots of liberal arts in ancient Greece stemmed from the purpose of training warriors for compulsory military service—an urgent societal need at that time. This seems like an odd beginning for what many today see as a wishy-washy approach to education. Over the next 1,000 years, studies involving the intellect—arts, music, and philosophy—were added and gymnastics and athletic competitions were substituted for military training. An understanding of this broader range of subjects was seen as necessary in order for leading citizens to contribute effectively to the progress of society through informed civil discourse and decision-making. In this earliest era of the liberal arts, the way that education occurred—the educational context—remained constant: it involved a close relationship among students and teachers learning together. The purpose evolved, although it was always based on fulfilling the highest needs of both society and the individual: it consistently served the

“common good.”* However, the content of the study changed substantially over time in ways that served the societal and individual outcomes described in its purpose.

This approach to higher learning was transplanted from Greece to ancient Rome and, indicative of continuing changes in the content of study, was ultimately described as involving music, logic, rhetoric, grammar, geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy. This content was believed to be important for educating individuals who could best contribute to the “common good”—at that time, an education for a free person to be an effective and successful contributor to society. Throughout the Greek and Roman millennia, the educational context continued to involve teachers and students learning together in a very personal way: tutors worked with individuals or small groups, and intellectual interaction among all of them was central to teaching and learning.

When Europe entered the early medieval period (sometimes referred to as the “Dark Ages”), most of the writings from the Greek and Roman periods were deliberately destroyed because they were thought to be pagan. Scholars who knew about them were driven from Europe to the largely Muslim Near East. This resulted, as it turns out, in a critical phase in the development of a liberal arts approach to higher education. It was described as the Islamic Golden Age, an era when the nonsectarian and open pursuit of knowledge and understanding was a sacred calling for Muslims. Major efforts were undertaken to collect the knowledge of the known world; all sources were pursued, including (but not limited to) ancient Greek and Roman writings. The “House of Wisdom” (located in what is

*Philosophers, economists, political scientists, and social activists have developed many definitions and interpretations of this term. It is also important in Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, Hindu, and Islamic thinking and teaching. My use of the term is similar to current common usage and is largely consistent with Aristotle’s conception that it involves benefits shared by individuals and society more broadly.

now Iraq) was founded, and scholarly collectors ventured through South Asia and went as far as China to bring together many of humanity's contributions to knowledge.

Documents were translated into Arabic by interdisciplinary teams of scholars, thereby preserving them for the future. Over several centuries, not only was knowledge gathered, but major new advances were made in mathematics, sciences, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and other subjects. Schools, universities, and libraries were pervasive from Spain through North Africa and the Middle East. In this era, the content of study changed dramatically as areas of knowledge expanded exponentially. But the higher purpose remained constant—the common good—and the educational approach (its context) continued to emphasize effective teaching and learning through close relationships among teachers and students with numerous circle schools (where students would literally gather around a scholar), as well as residential centers of learning.

Much later, as Europe moved from the early medieval period, followed several hundred years during which the much deeper and broader human knowledge that had been developed and accumulated during the Islamic Golden Age was translated from Arabic into European languages. To prepare those who would be ecclesiastical and secular leaders, European universities were founded and grew. The course of study began with a narrow definition of the content of the liberal arts, but as stimulated by the new translations from Arabic, as well as significant new European contributions, a vastly expanded range of knowledge became a part of liberal arts education. Like their Islamic-world forebears, the educational context involved bringing students and teachers into residential communities, with them living and learning together. And the higher, common good purpose of this education remained a constant—both the individual and society benefited. Ultimately, English graduates of Oxford and Cambridge brought education in the liberal arts tradition to colonial America and founded institutions such as Harvard and Yale.

Then, in the early 1800s, a different approach to higher education was established; an approach that rejected liberal arts education. The king of Prussia, Frederick William III, concluded that education at all levels must serve a different purpose. Rather than serving the common good, its purpose was to strengthen the kingdom and protect the monarchy through the creation of bureaucrats to run the growing number of state agencies and researchers who would contribute to the economic success of the state. Ideas of breadth of education were replaced by early specializations in primary and secondary school because students needed to begin their higher education with their choice of profession already made. This Prussian approach was adopted by monarchies throughout Europe as they also wanted to strengthen their rule. And because this was the age of European colonial empires, the monarchy-serving Prussian approach spread throughout the world. With this change in the purpose and content of study, the educational context also changed, focusing on the mastery of specialized information rather than fostering a learning environment that engaged students in broader intellectual and societal learning.

In response to this development, the faculty of Yale paused in 1828 to ask whether they should copy the Prussian specialization model. After careful consideration, they rejected that approach and reaffirmed a liberal arts–based education. This conclusion was based on a number of insights about what they believed should be the character of a truly valuable higher education. First, its *purpose* needed to be for the common good: to educate people who could effectively contribute to the development of a growing democratic society in a time of change—a benefit not only to the individual, but also to the progress of society. Second, to accomplish this purpose, the *content* of a higher education needed to include fluency in the full span of human knowledge. Third, the educational *context* should involve learning in a residential educational community in which faculty and students lived and learned together; this was seen as necessary not only because the population was relatively

dispersed, but also because this familial approach was the best way to educate the whole person in ways that served the common good.

To these three aspects of the liberal arts approach—its purpose, content, and context—was added a uniquely American contribution: this education was to be available to *all* people. Whereas a higher education had formerly been offered only to the elite, they believed that it was a necessary education for all people because everyone in American society was expected to have the knowledge and ability to be contributing and responsible citizens.*

And from the East Coast of the US, this renewed liberal arts approach to higher education spread voraciously west across the rapidly growing nation through the creation of hundreds of residential liberal arts colleges. Ultimately, virtually all American colleges and universities, even those that developed noteworthy specialized programs and research universities, took a liberal arts approach to undergraduate education.

Although this summary description of the development and evolution of the liberal arts is very brief—I present more information in the next three chapters of this book—it points to the following six attributes of education in the tradition of the liberal arts:

- Regarding the *content* of study:
 - a. It is nonvocational (not designed for a specific job or profession),
 - b. involves the full span of knowledge (studying broadly while understanding ways in which areas of knowledge are interrelated), and
 - c. develops intellectual skills (analytic and reasoning ability, creativity)

*Of course, in the early 1800s, the phrase “all people” included only white males. Most Blacks were enslaved through 1868 and did not have the right to vote before 1870, and women did not have the right to vote until 1920. With the exception of a few liberal arts colleges, higher education for women and for nonwhites was rarely available before the 1860s. The lasting impact of this inequity persists today, and as discussed in chapter 11, higher education can be a tool to support equity, inclusion, and social justice efforts.

- Regarding the educational *context* of the education:
 - a. It uses engaging pedagogy (methods of teaching that actively involves students),
 - b. it develops larger perspectives (broadens understanding and challenges narrow thinking), and
 - c. occurs in an authentic learning community (students, faculty, and staff interact with each other in meaningful ways, both formally and informally outside of class time).

And what is the purpose of a liberal arts education—the desired common good? Identifying common good outcomes that are relevant today involved analyzing the mission statements of 241 undergraduate liberal arts colleges.* Consistent with the historical types of higher good outcomes, today’s mission statements indicate that liberal arts graduates could exhibit some or all of these socially and/or personally valued behaviors:

- Living lives of consequence:
 - a. as leaders in communities, organizations, and with others;
 - b. as altruists (civically involved and contributing to society).
- Living lives of inquiry:
 - a. be continuing learners (being involved in learning activities throughout life);
 - b. be culturally involved (with arts, museums, music, and other artistic pursuits).
- Living lives of accomplishment:
 - a. attain a fulfilling life (satisfaction with life and career, reflective on the meaning of life);
 - b. be personally successful (through professional contributions and success).

*I express my gratitude to Colleen Smith of the Great Lakes Colleges Association for her help on this analysis.

Of course, colleges vary in which of these six outcomes they seek to create or focus on, but the overwhelming majority of colleges state that their mission purpose is to fulfill one or more of them.

The answer to the first question, then, is clearly defined. A liberal arts education involves *fulfilling a common good purpose by creating an educational ecology involving both the content of study and the educational context.*

The Second Question: What Is the Impact of a Liberal Arts Education?

In the words of the noted entrepreneur John Doerr, who provides counsel on organizational impact to philanthropists and companies alike, every effective organization must keep their focus on what matters most: being clear about their mission and purpose and then identifying and assessing a limited number of truly key outcomes.¹⁸ In the case of liberal arts education, the “what” is the content of study and the educational context, and the key outcome is the common good purpose of preparing people to be effective in their adult lives. Or, to state it more specifically, *the key question is whether there is a relationship between any of the six aspects of a liberal arts education (its content and context) and any of the six longer-term life outcomes.*

The answer to this question is presented in the middle four chapters of this book. First, we developed a series of interview questions related to each of the *content attributes* (e.g., amount of humanities study, kinds of course assignments, major), the *context attributes* (e.g., out-of-class interaction with faculty and other students, campus involvement, teaching methods experienced), and each of the *purpose attributes* described as adult life outcomes (e.g., leadership, altruism, continued learning, cultural involvement, fulfillment, and success). Using these questions, we then interviewed 1,000 graduates of a wide range of types of colleges and universities across the US:

small and large, private and public, teaching-focused and research-focused. Some of these graduates had experienced many of the aspects of a liberal arts education, whereas others received a college education involving few of these aspects. These differences made it possible to draw comparisons between people who had experienced each of the liberal arts attributes with those who did not—for example, those with vocational majors compared to those with non-vocational majors, those who experienced teaching that is highly involving of students compared to those who experienced less personalized education, or those who spent time with faculty outside of class compared to those who did not. And because the goal was to understand the impact over one's lifespan—not merely new college graduates—the interviews involved people who ranged in age from twenty-five to sixty-five.

Participants were not asked their opinions about the relationship between their college experiences and later life activities; rather, the interview questions asked them to describe various aspects of their college experiences and their adult lives. Statistical analyses were then used to assess whether there was any relationship between each of the six aspects of a liberal arts college education and each of the six adult outcomes.

What did we learn from this research? Based on statistical analyses of the interview responses, we can objectively document significant and substantial relationships between many aspects of a liberal arts educational experience and various life outcomes. *Overall, while both the content of study and the educational context are associated with significant life outcomes, the content of study (i.e., subjects studied) has less relationship to positive adult life outcomes than the educational context (i.e., frequently talking with faculty outside of class about both nonacademic and academic matters, professors knowing students' first names, being mentored, frequent out-of-class discussions with other students of their different values and life experiences, and campus involvement).*

Among many other statistically significant specific findings, college graduates who, in their adult life, are:

- *Leaders of organizations*—more likely to report having developed larger perspectives that broaden understanding and challenge narrow thinking and to have been more involved with faculty and other students outside of class
- *Altruistic*—more likely to have been more involved with faculty and other students in their college community
- *Continuing learners*—more likely to have studied a broader range of subjects, have a nonvocational major, develop larger perspectives and intellectual skills, and engage with their college community
- *Culturally involved*—more likely to have had a nonvocational major, study a broad span of knowledge, have closer out-of-class relations with faculty and with students of different backgrounds, develop intellectual skills, and experience engaging pedagogy
- *Fulfilled*—more likely to have taken more courses in the humanities, to have taken many courses where humanities issues were considered, have had a nonvocational major, have experienced engaging pedagogy, and have had their professors challenge their thinking and writing
- *Successful* (in more senior positions and with higher income) over the long term (as their lives and careers mature)—more likely to have taken more than half their courses outside their major, to have had greater involvement in the college educational community, and to have discussed issues of significance to humanity with other students outside of class more frequently

Study in the tradition of the liberal arts indeed has a great impact.* But it is important to point out that through this research, we have

*The question of causation is addressed in chapter 10 and in appendix 1. In brief, the strongest case for demonstrating long-term causation requires making experimental changes in educational practices and then waiting twenty-five or fifty years

also learned that liberal arts education is not a singular concept. Rather, “liberal arts study” is an educational ecology involving a number of educational approaches (the attributes of a liberal arts education as described earlier); each bears a distinct and often different relationship to adult life. For example, the “development of intellectual skills” educational experience is related to three life outcomes: continued learning, cultural involvement, and fulfillment. In contrast, a higher degree of involvement in an “authentic educational community” (interaction with faculty outside of class, out-of-class serious discussions with other students, and so on) is related to all six adult life outcomes. Therefore, it begins to be possible for a college, a student, or a policymaker to think about the life outcomes desired and to design an education tailored to that purpose.

It is also noteworthy that whereas vocational or professional study does have value (e.g., the salary of a graduate’s first job), over the longer term, it was either unrelated or negatively related to positive life outcomes, including leadership, altruism, fulfillment, and personal success. Indeed, people who were more successful over the longer term took more than half their courses outside their major and were more engaged with faculty and other students. In contrast to specialization, the span of college study—an education beyond the major that includes the humanities, social sciences, and sciences—is frequently associated with many positive life outcomes

to assess the impact. The problem, of course, is that the delay would likely make any results valueless. Instead, the approach used here is to analyze the statistical relationship between reported college experiences and long-term life outcomes, and then to assess whether those relationships are consistent with experimental and nonexperimental research on short-term impact and are also supported by experimental findings in the fields of human learning and affective social neuroscience. The fact that the findings reported here align with research in these other fields increases confidence that the reported liberal arts effects are meaningful and consequential; that it is not merely the fact that, for example, people who report that at age eighteen they like to live in an environment with faculty were destined (by dint of their character or personality) to become leaders, altruists, and culturally involved.

over the longer term, including professional success, continued learning, cultural involvement, and personal fulfillment.

This research, then, objectively documents the relationship between specific aspects of the college educational environment and specific types of life outcomes. *So not only can we confidently describe the relationship between liberal arts education and positive adult life outcomes, but we can describe what specific types of liberal arts experiences are associated with those life outcomes.*

The Third Question: What Are the Implications of an Education in the Tradition of the Liberal Arts, and What Is the Value of It?

In the final four chapters of this book, I explore the implications of the research findings for higher education. Among the many specific implications discussed, several broad insights emerge. The first is the important positive impact of the educational context (e.g., personal involvement with faculty, mentoring, frequent out-of-class discussions with other students of different values and life experiences, campus involvement). This finding is no surprise to those who have followed Howard Gardner's extensive work on how college affects students: "the community surrounding a cognizing individual is critical,"¹⁹ a view that has guided his pioneering work on learning since that time.

Indeed, educational context has a more consistently positive, long-term relationship to life outcomes than does the content of study. How can this be? Contemporary research on human cognition—in the area of affective social neuroscience especially—provides strong evidence that the learning context is essential: educational impact occurs in the context of more socially and emotionally based approaches to learning. Human connection is essential. It isn't that content doesn't matter; after all, an educational experience by definition involves the

study of something. But because most discussions of what should happen in college focus strictly on the content of study, not on the significance of the educational context, the lesser impact of content is surprising. Indeed, the disproportionate focus on content that is typical of discussions of what college study should involve is a significant mistake if we wish to have a higher education with a life impact.

The second general insight relates to the content of college study. What becomes clear is that it is primarily the broadening aspects of the content of study that is more important than the specific courses taken (e.g., taking more than half of one's courses outside one's major, discussing issues of significance to humanity in most classes, and taking a nonvocational major).

The third is fresh insight into current conflicts about the purpose of a higher education: should college education be redesigned so that it focuses only on practical outcomes such as getting a particular job or maximizing income? Or should it fulfill a larger purpose, as our history of the liberal arts suggests? As Johann Neem insightfully describes a liberal arts education, "the goal is not just to give all people what they want (as utilitarianism would have it) or to accommodate every worldly need (as some pragmatists suggest) but instead to help students and professors orient their lives around new purpose."²⁰ While Neem believes that these goals indeed are not exclusive—that a liberal arts education can provide all these outcomes even though it is aimed at the last goal—the good news is that the research findings reported here objectively support this view. While different specific aspects of a liberal arts education have different kinds of relationship to life outcomes, the individual who experiences all aspects of the liberal arts is the person who as an adult is more likely to be a leader, an altruist, a continued learner, culturally involved, fulfilled, and successful.

Indeed, contemporary pressures from students, parents, legislators, and regulators to Prussianize our American education by emphasizing specialization and eliminating other aspects of learning are destroying

higher education's long-term, constructive impact on graduates' lives and society. Over the longer term, people who not only are more successful professionally, but are more fulfilled, are leaders, and become more involved in the advancement of our society are those who experience the full educational ecology of the liberal arts.

In the final chapters, I also explore many other implications of the research findings. Where can college educations with the most impact be found? How should a prospective college student decide what college to attend? How should faculty think about the higher education they provide and the desired priorities for their academic programs and professional lives? How do college and university policies support or interfere with creating an impactful educational experience? How should colleges think about marketing themselves in this liberal arts-skeptical era? What is the role of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in educational practice? What is the implication of technology for a liberal arts approach to education? What government policies encourage or discourage an education that has a positive impact on the progress of a region or a nation? Are there lessons to be learned regarding education in a pandemic and postpandemic era? Can liberal arts education contribute to the complex challenges facing our society regarding inequity? And what about the cost of college? Overall, the findings provide numerous insights into how both students and society benefit from an education in the tradition of the liberal arts, and how, by applying liberal arts educational principles, higher education can be made more impactful for all.

The Value of the Liberal Arts for Higher Education

Questions about the value of the liberal arts specifically, and higher education in general, typically include three issues: is the outcome useful; is the cost reasonable; and is it accessible to all who could benefit from it? For outcomes, as the research summarized thus far amply demonstrates, experiencing a liberal arts education is highly related to very positive life outcomes for both the individual and

society. While, as described in chapters 10 and 11, the impactful practices of the liberal arts are fully present in only some colleges and universities, they can be adopted more broadly and thereby enhance the outcome of higher education for all institutions.

Would adopting liberal arts practices increase the cost of higher education? As chapter 11 will also demonstrate, adopting or enhancing many liberal arts practices need not be expensive; it has to do with priorities and use of time, not with adding expensive personnel or programs. In fact, it may be less expensive: undergraduate-only institutions, which are more intensely student-focused, spend less per student on education and student support than do well-known research universities* whose focus is more on graduate and specialized programs.²¹

What about access to a college degree? There is no reason why a liberal arts-based education should not be accessible to all who seek an education that has the greatest impact on longer-term life outcomes. While the advertised tuition for attending the most famous liberal arts colleges is high, those schools represent a tiny proportion of undergraduate colleges in the US. Indeed, contrary to the perception that private, undergraduate-focused colleges are the bastion of the wealthy, the percentage of low-income students (as measured by Pell grants) is higher at these institutions than at other types of colleges, including at the typically well-known research universities.²² Private four-year colleges invariably offer substantial financial support to students with financial needs, and graduation rates are substantially higher²³ and default on debt lower.²⁴ So the issue of access to a liberal arts education well may be more limited by perception—lack of understanding of its value and affordability.

*The National Center for Education Statistics does not separate expenditures by degree program, so it is impossible to know how much of this very substantial difference can be accounted for by educational and student services for graduate students as opposed to undergraduate students.

Those who seek value—students, higher education institutions, policymakers, and funders—should start with the question of purpose. If one’s singular purpose is for a graduate to have a higher-paying job on the day of graduation, then specialization can be the answer and most of the liberal arts can be stripped away. If the purpose is longer-term success, however, then critical aspects of the liberal arts must be added to the college experience. If the educational goal is to maximize value by developing people who will contribute to the leadership and advancement of our society, will live fulfilled lives, and will be more personally successful over the longer term, then all aspects of the liberal arts educational ecology become important. By starting with this question of purpose and considering the findings of the research on educational content and context as reported in this book, both individuals and organizations can make more informed choices about the best way to enhance the value of a college degree.

In Closing

This chapter has provided a brief sketch of the story told in greater detail in the rest of this book. It describes essential ways in which this book is different from the myriad other books and articles on liberal arts and higher education. *Most fundamentally, it moves beyond broad assertions about the association between college and life or between the liberal arts and life after college; this work identifies which specific types of liberal arts experiences are directly associated with specific types of longer-term life outcomes.* Further, it does the following:

- Begins by identifying six key aspects of an education in the tradition of the liberal arts through a fresh historical assessment of the essence of this approach to higher learning
- Examines purposes of liberal arts education, identifying six categories of desired life outcome through an exhaustive analysis of college mission statements

- Involves an examination of longer-term, rather than short-term, impacts through interviews of 1,000 college graduates varying in age from twenty-five to sixty-five from a diverse array of institutions, ranging from small liberal arts colleges to large research universities
- Statistically analyzes the relationship between specific types of liberal arts experiences and specific adult behaviors that are indicative of the life outcomes of leadership, altruism, continued learning, cultural involvement, fulfillment, and personal success

As a result of this process, we can now answer the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: what in the world is liberal arts? The answer provided here is not only historically based, but also is empirically documented across a wide range of types of colleges and universities. The research findings impart the following lesson:

A bona fide liberal arts education is impactful—fulfilling the common good and serving the future of both the individual and society—by educating people for lives of consequence, inquiry, and accomplishment. This impact is brought about through a learning environment that is socially and affectively engaging and involves the study of the full span of human knowledge, intellectual challenge, and the exploration of different perspectives on issues of significance to humanity.

This statement is not just another nice, generalized description of liberal arts education; the specific findings supporting this statement as reported in this book are filled with significant insights regarding the choices that students, faculty, institutions, and policymakers should make if their goal is for higher education to have a real and lasting impact on the lives of college graduates and our society.

While I base the work in this book on a systematic investigation of the history of the liberal arts, and frequently refer to “education in the tradition of the liberal arts,” the research findings and their implications are not a call for higher education to resist change, nor to return to the practices of an idealized past. Quite the contrary, this presentation urges colleges and universities to shed many of today’s

engrained assumptions and practices and to focus on those liberal arts educational approaches that have demonstrable life impact. By doing so, we will be able to confidently attest to the value of the liberal arts—benefitting the individual and our society—and enhance our ability to provide an education of life impact.

* * *

In developing a fresh understanding of education in the tradition of the liberal arts, you may choose to read the rest of this book selectively. If you are interested in understanding what the term “liberal arts” means, read chapters 2, 3, and 4. What you will find there is not the usual philosophical exposition, nor a defense of particular beliefs about what must be studied in college. Rather, you will find a description of an approach to education comprising specific practices and goals that have been developed and perfected over millennia—an educational method consistent in its higher purpose, using methods designed to maximize its impact and with a curriculum embracing the span of knowledge and insight.

If you are most interested in the research findings regarding the lifetime impact of a college education and the specific educational experiences related to those outcomes, read chapters 5 through 8, as well as the appendices. There, you will find a description of how our research on college experience and life outcomes was carried out, and the essential findings regarding those aspects of higher education most related to long-term life outcomes: living lives of impact, inquiry, and accomplishment. Or, if you are interested in more information on the research and findings but wading through the details and graphs of those chapters is more than you wish to do, just read the first and last few pages of each of those research chapters, as they will give you both an introduction and a summary of the findings.

And if you are most interested in why and how the essential aspects of an education in the tradition of the liberal arts have impact, as well as the implications of this understanding for higher education, read

chapters 9 through 12. In these chapters, I explore the educational ecology comprising the liberal arts and the reasons for the powerful importance of learning in a deliberately constructed social environment, as well as the implications of our research insights for colleges, students, and policymakers.

And, of course, if your interest is in developing a full range of fresh insights into what it means to truly be higher educated—to best serve the future of the individual and the society in which we live—then each of the chapters will contribute to your understanding.

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