

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND “LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION”?

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The phrases “liberal education” and “liberal arts education” are both terms of art: neither refers to a natural kind. As such, they are used ambiguously in many discussions about policy and practice within higher education; sometimes they are mere slogans. I wouldn’t propose or try to impose one particular usage. The impulse behind this short essay was to help participants in the Mellon Research Forum’s discussions of liberal education and a liberal arts education to figure out whether they really were talking about the same thing, and, if not, to help them align their understandings for more productive dialogue.¹

Introduction

The phrase “Liberal Arts Education” requires interpretation. While used widely by educators and especially by higher education administrators, its meaning is not always clear. I do not propose to offer a single, precise definition here, but to tease out some of the important ways in which it can reasonably be used, in order to provide a conceptual map, and help fix which differences are merely semantic and which are substantive.

Section A

First some historical background. The “liberal arts” were originally those disciplines deemed by the Ancient Greeks to be essential preparation for effective participation in public life. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric were regarded as the core liberal arts, with arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy playing a secondary, if important, role. This model inspired the early European universities (though the grammar taught was Latin, not Greek) and by the end of the Renaissance other subjects had been added to this core – Greek grammar, history, moral philosophy and poetry. Even as specialization at the undergraduate level was embraced in some countries from the 19th century onwards, some vestige of a liberal arts idea persisted: well into the second half of the 20th century competence in Latin and Greek was an admissions requirements for matriculation of all students at some elite universities (e.g. Oxford and Cambridge).

Few colleges now require Greek or Latin even for *graduation*, let alone for matriculation. So what is a liberal arts education *now*?

It is worth distinguishing a *liberal arts education* from *education in a liberal arts discipline*. Most definitions of the liberal arts will include philosophy as a liberal arts discipline; but the intensive and exclusive study of philosophy offered at the bachelor’s level at some UK universities would not usually be considered a liberal arts education: the latter, usually, would require considerable study beyond a single discipline.

We have discerned (at least) three distinct ways of characterizing a liberal arts education:

1. Appeals to the kind of institution
2. Appeals to the design of the course of study
3. Appeals to the educational aims and objectives of the course of study

1. Appeals to the kind of institution

Two kinds of institutions in the US explicitly claim to provide a liberal arts education, and the simple, institutional understanding of a liberal arts education would take them at their word. The kinds of institutions are the Small Liberal Arts College (henceforth, SLAC) and the colleges within universities that call themselves College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, or College of Letters and Sciences, or College of the Liberal Arts, or something similar, and in which most of the majors associated with traditional, academic, non-pre-professional disciplines are housed (such colleges would usually include most of, for example, history, philosophy, mathematics, anthropology, French, and physics).

The SLAC is a distinct kind of institution in the United States. Students typically graduate with a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree (as opposed to Bachelor of Education, or Engineering, or Business...); the experience is typically (for most students) residential, and lasts four years, and a large proportion of the classes a student takes will have teacher to student ratios that allow for Socratic questioning and a seminar format (even if, in many cases, such pedagogy is not, actually, used). Such colleges self-identify as providing a liberal arts education to all students. Well known liberal arts colleges include Williams, Amherst, Carleton, Colby, Hamilton, and Grinnell. Comprehensive lists are available at Wikipedia, Carnegie, US News and World Report, etc. Most research and most four-year public universities also have Colleges of Letters and Science, or of Letters, Arts and Science, or of Liberal Arts, which claim to offer either a liberal, or a liberal arts, education. Again, the experience is normally residential and is designed to last four to five years. Upper-level classes oriented to majors in the liberal arts subjects are often taught with student-to-teacher ratios that approximate those in the SLACs, at least in social sciences and humanities disciplines, whereas most classes oriented to non-majors and designed to fulfill breadth requirements are typically taught in a large lecture format that does not easily allow for Socratic questioning or seminar-style interactions.

2. Appeals to the design of the course of study

What do the above institutions all have in common? What, in particular, do small liberal arts colleges have in common with colleges of letters and science in a large research or a large comprehensive university, other than that they simply claim to offer a liberal arts education?

The best way of understanding what they have in common is to look at the design of the course of study. A “liberal arts” education emphasizes both *depth* and *breadth*.

Typically, students have a major, which is designed to take up between one and two full years of their study time, and which constitutes the *depth*. The major may be in a traditional academic subject, such as biology, physics, English, history, philosophy, linguistics or art. Or it may be administered by an interdisciplinary unit – such as Afro-American Studies or Legal Studies; but will not, typically, be in a professionally-oriented field. (Pre-dentistry, or pre-law, or pre-med tracks may be established in a liberal arts college, but will consist of the courses in traditional academic disciplines typically required for matriculation in those professional post-Bac programs.)

The *breadth* is provided by a series of requirements that are designed to take between one and two years of study to fulfil. A typical liberal arts breadth requirement would include several classes each in social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, as well as one or two courses in math or quantitative reasoning, one or two writing and/or communication requirements, and several courses in a foreign language.

The difficulty with using this way of characterizing a liberal arts education is that, typically, *some* level of breadth and depth are provided in programs of study which are not usually considered “liberal arts.” Engineering and Business degrees frequently have some sort of “liberal studies” component – one or two courses in the social sciences and one or two in the humanities, as well as, usually, an ethics requirement and, often, an ethnic studies requirement. In the US the difference is typically one of degree. (But, notice, a difference in degree can sometimes constitute a difference in kind, and that may be the case in this instance.)

3. Appeals to the aims and objectives of a liberal arts education

A further way to characterize a liberal arts education is in terms of its aims and objectives. The Yale College website says “The essence of such an education is not what you study but the result—*gaining the ability to think critically and independently and to write, reason, and communicate clearly*—the foundation for all professions” (our emphases). Derek Bok (in his indispensable book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*) talks of teaching students to communicate, to think, building their character, preparing them for citizenship, for a career, and for living in a global society, teaching them to live with diversity, and facilitating the acquiring of broader interests. The AAC&U characterizes the aims of a liberal education as developing:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

Intellectual and Practical Skills, Including: Inquiry and analysis; Critical and creative thinking; Written and oral communication; Quantitative literacy; Information literacy; Teamwork and problem solving

Personal and Social Responsibility, Including: Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global; Intercultural knowledge and competence; Ethical reasoning and action; Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Integrative and Applied Learning, Including: Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

The exact items in the lists differ some, but it is not hard to discern a common core of competences that are generally considered among the aims of a liberal arts education.

4. Why the three ways of defining liberal arts education are not co-extensive

It is implausible that the aims of the liberal education are *always* fulfilled by the kinds of institution and/or courses of study we have described and equally implausible that those are the

only ways through which those aims could be fulfilled. Attending and graduating from a SLAC or College of the Liberal Arts is neither necessary nor sufficient for meeting the stated aims of a liberal arts education. Similarly taking a course of study in a liberal arts discipline with accompanying breadth requirements. One can easily imagine someone with few if any of the qualities of the liberally educated person emerging from a SLAC or from a College of Liberal Arts, having either learned nothing in, or having taken nothing away from, their breadth courses. And one can equally easily imagine someone with all the qualities of a liberally educated person emerging from a narrowly-focused pre-professional college or course of study, having spent their leisure time reading literary fiction, following politics, and singing in an a cappella group. Some countries—for example, the UK—have higher education systems with no “liberal arts” component: the standard is that students pursue just one discipline (or, sometimes, two disciplines, but usually, if so, *cognate* disciplines²) throughout their undergraduate years, and take no formal courses outside of those disciplines at all. But presumably at least some British students emerge with the characteristics that a liberal arts education aims at.

Second, while most Colleges of the Liberal Arts in universities would proclaim some version of the liberally educated person as their aim, many instructors in such colleges may not have the liberally educated person as their aim. If instructors of breadth courses discipline their pedagogy by reference to those aims, then there is a fair chance that what actually goes on in the college meshes well with the aims. But instructors vary in what their aims are, and for some breadth courses (e.g., frequently, organic chemistry) gatekeeping regulates the pedagogy whereas, conversely, but equally unaligned with the aims of a liberal education, for others the aim of inducing students to major in the discipline, or to give students the information they need in order to “shop” more effectively for a major, regulates the pedagogy. The actual behavior of the institution and the people within it is not necessarily aligned with the stated educational aims of the institution.

Interlude:

Amy Gutmann, in her contribution to *The Aims of Higher Education: Problems of Morality and Justice*, (ed. Michael McPherson and Harry Brighouse, University of Chicago Press, 2015) argues that the division between a liberal arts education and a vocational or professional education emerged in the 19th century, driven by the efforts of Charles Eliot at Harvard to make a Baccalaureate a prerequisite for professional education in certain professions, and argues that it was a mistake. She adopts the view of Benjamin Franklin, which is that because life is short, and higher education is shorter, all students should be taught only “what is most beautiful *and* what is most useful.” This alternative vision suggests that a liberal arts education should be part of everyone’s education, but that so should a professional education. On this view some students should major in accounting and others should major in philosophy, but professional schools do students a disservice if they do not ensure that, whether in their business course or through classes they are required to take elsewhere, the accounting major gets a rich education about the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. And a liberal arts college does the philosophy major a disservice if it does not ensure that she becomes acquainted with some aspect or aspects of a professional education: maybe an understanding of accounting, or of human resource management, or engineering.

Section B.

Some comments arising:

- a. Whether the aims described above are, *actually*, desirable aims for higher education institutions to adopt is disputed. Stanley Fish, in *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford University Press, 2008), for example, says that we should eschew the character-focused aims, and treats higher education primarily as a vehicle for the perpetuation and further development of the traditional academic disciplines. William Deresiewicz, in *Excellent Sheep* (Free Press, 2014), has argued that the main point of a higher education should be to enable students to explore the meaning of their lives. Both, in other words, eschew the plurality of aims and objectives attributed earlier to Bok. Whether the aims of a liberal arts education are the right kinds of aims for *any* institution to have is an open philosophical question.
- b. As an educator, or as an institution, one might have the aims of a liberal arts education, and take realistic steps to fulfil them, but nevertheless fail. One live question is whether the kinds of institution or courses of study we have described above do, in fact, achieve these (or some subset of these) aims. Do the students actually learn what the institutions believe they are teaching? To answer that question confidently we would need more sophisticated measures of learning than we currently have. Another live question is whether it is possible to identify specific kinds of institutions or specific kinds of courses of study that achieve them better, or more efficiently, than others.
- c. Some definitions of liberal arts education explicitly refer to the Socratic method (see Wikipedia e.g.). The University of Chicago Law School characterizes the Socratic method thus:

Socrates engaged in questioning of his students in an unending search for truth. He sought to get to the foundations of his students' and colleagues' views by asking continual questions until a contradiction was exposed, thus proving the fallacy of the initial assumption. This became known as the Socratic Method, and may be Socrates' most enduring contribution to philosophy.

As described, the Socratic method demands a complex set of well-developed skills. Yet, the major form of delivery of breadth requirements in universities is still the large lecture; neither instructors nor TAs typically receive training in the Socratic method (or any other pedagogical method). The method, as described, can only work in most disciplines in conjunction with certain structural supports that are difficult to implement, such as mechanisms that successfully induce the students to do all the reading, do it well, and do it sufficiently close to the class time that they haven't forgotten it.³ Any class containing more than a handful of students, furthermore, may contain a good deal of variety in who, actually, is being questioned: instructors rarely distribute their questioning equally among class members, and many focus on the students who seem most engaged. If Socratic method (or any other specific pedagogy) were an essential

part of a liberal arts education, researchers trying to measure the effect or cost of a liberal arts education would face a large challenge in finding exactly which students are receiving the treatment.

¹ I wrote this with help from Erin Driver-Linn, and input from Michael McPherson, Mariët Westermann, William Damon, and Peter Bearman, and other members of the Mellon Research Forum.

² Common combinations would be English and History, Math and Physics, French and Italian, Sociology and Economics, Theology and Philosophy. Of the Humanities disciplines, very few would ever be combined with a science or social science discipline (the main exception is Philosophy: e.g. Philosophy, Politics and Economics, Philosophy and Physics, Philosophy and Psychology, Philosophy and Mathematics).

³ Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, in *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), suggest that these structural supports are often missing.