WHY A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IS A VALUABLE INVESTMENT
THE HISTORY OF
ARTES LIBERALES

The ‘liberal’ in ‘liberal arts’ means ‘free.’ Liberal education originally gave the citizens of a democracy (a rare privilege when slavery was common) the moral and intellectual preparation they needed to serve as leaders of a free society. For Christians, who belong to an eternal dominion, this ideal was expanded to include preparation for free faithful, and fruitful citizenship in the kingdom of God. In classical antiquity, the artes liberales were considered those subjects that a person needed to know well in order to participate in civic life.

Today, a liberal arts education generally describes a course of study including literature, languages, art, music, history, philosophy, psychology, mathematics, and science. Beyond specific subject areas, when people speak of a liberal arts education today, they are speaking of an education that is broad, rather than narrowly focused on job training.

A liberal arts education doesn’t just prepare you for a job. It prepares you to live a meaningful life.

The world is rapidly changing, and that means that specific skills and competencies that are highly in demand this year may, in ten years, be considered obsolete. Preparation that’s too narrow runs the risk of becoming irrelevant. The beauty of a liberal arts education is that the skill sets it develops are both broad and timeless. This education doesn’t go out of date — competencies that were meaningful in antiquity are meaningful today, and they will be meaningful tomorrow.
In the wake of the financial crisis that broke open in 2008, some have begun to question the value of a liberal arts education. Articles critical of the traditional undergraduate courses of study — particularly those with strong emphasis in the humanities — circle the Internet, with the general argument that a degree in the liberal arts isn’t worthwhile, because it won’t lead to a job.

The push toward studies in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and professional, vocational, and technical programs comes from concerns that a liberal arts education won’t prepare one for future work. Some question if tuition money spent on anything besides immediately practical ‘job training’ will turn out to be a poor investment.

But the fact is, despite popular misconceptions, a liberal arts education remains a wise investment — financially, professionally, and personally. As a recent study demonstrated, liberal arts graduates close earnings gaps during peak earning years, have low rates of unemployment, and tend to pursue graduate and professional degrees — gaining significant boosts in earnings when they do.

Additionally, liberal arts graduates are likely to be found in social service professions such as social work and counseling — careers that are vital to the common good.
A liberal arts education teaches you how to learn.

That’s really at the heart of it — learning to learn. A liberal arts education prepares you to be the kind of person who can solve his or her own problems, find patterns, think critically and creatively, collaborate with others, understand cultural differences, make ethical and considered decisions, evaluate sources of information, and communicate effectively.

It’s hard to think of a profession that doesn’t require the things that a liberal arts education is best at developing.

When you’ve received a quality liberal arts education as an undergraduate, you’re prepared to pursue a broad range of options, including a wide variety of careers and graduate or professional programs.
WHY EMPLOYERS LOVE LIBERAL ARTS GRADUATES

Employers look for “employability,” and in our current, rapidly evolving information-based economy, that means high literacy skills. Adaptability — being able to quickly acquire new knowledge and competencies — is key, and nothing prepares you better for the unknown and constantly changing future better than a liberal arts education.

Steve Jobs, the visionary at the helm of Apple Corporation, credits the liberal arts with the unique and broad appeal of Macintosh computers and other Apple products:

“Our goal was to bring a liberal arts perspective and a liberal arts audience to what had traditionally been a very geeky technology and a very geeky audience.”

Before Steve Jobs and his team, computers were designed by and for people who were interested in computing as computing. With the addition of a liberal arts perspective — a more fully human perspective — they transformed computers from clunky tools used by a few into something that nearly everyone has in his or her pocket.
BUSINESS EMBRACES LIBERAL ARTS

With stories like Steve Jobs’, then, perhaps it’s no wonder that, according to Judy Samuelson, executive director of the Aspen Institute’s Business and Society program, employers are increasingly turning toward liberal arts, recognizing that “people who have a broad range of skills and talents are the ones who get ahead in business.”

Additionally, because an education in the liberal arts traditionally takes place in relatively small classes with abundant opportunities for collaborative work, a liberal arts education prepares you to work well as part of a team.
A liberal arts education isn’t just a good investment for your career. It’s a good investment for your mind and heart because a liberal arts education teaches you to ask why. It teaches you to consider what is good, what is true, and what is right. It’s about more than storing away knowledge. It’s about gaining *wisdom*.

When your studies aren’t confined to a narrow path, you’re able to put things into a broader perspective. The 19th century Oxford academic and priest John Henry Newman wrote, in his *Idea of a University*, “All knowledge is a whole and the separate Sciences parts of one.” A liberal arts education prepares students to take a comprehensive, interdisciplinary view of things: understanding, for example, how natural sciences inform social science and relate to history, philosophy, language, art, commerce – and just about everything else.

In the words of professor and writer William Pannapacker, a liberal arts education helps you to “become the kind of person who is interested in everything and can do everything.”
Believing that all truth is God’s truth, many Christians seek to cultivate curiosity about creation, a love for great books, an appetite for truth and beauty, a lifelong passion for the life of the mind, the capacity to communicate the gospel across cultures, and the spiritual and intellectual virtues that promote wisdom.

With the apostle Paul, Christians believe that all things were created through Christ and for Christ, in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17). Therefore, learning is a form of worship. As we explore the wonders of the world through the natural sciences and ponder the mysteries of the human condition in the humanities and social sciences, we come to a deeper knowledge and greater love of our Creator-God and Savior-Lord.

We also come to a wiser knowledge of ourselves as we discover the particular gifts and unique passions God has given to each of us. For learning to have its full effect on the mind, body, and soul, it must not be narrowly directed to a particular career, but widely oriented to forming the whole person for all of life’s vocations.

In addition, students should become more interested in and open to the ideas of others, more wide-ranging in their interests, more desirous of truth, more self-aware, more conscious of their surroundings, more filled with gratitude, more humble, and more confident.
THE INSTRUMENTAL BENEFITS OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

In addition to its intrinsic value, a Christ-centered liberal education also has many practical benefits that most graduates reap over a lifetime of kingdom service and gospel witness. These include but are not limited to:

- Highly marketable skills that perennially lead the list for prospective employers, such as analytical reading, critical thinking, persuasive oral communication, effective writing, and innovative, collaborative problem solving
- Strong academic credentials that open doors to top graduate programs, where a majority of our alumni go on to receive the more specialized training of a professional education
- A breadth of preparation that gives graduates the versatility to excel in a wide variety of callings over a lifetime of work and ministry, including their service in jobs that have yet to be created
- Whole person development that enables graduates to maximize their God-given talents and provide exceptional leadership “For Christ and His Kingdom” at home, at church, in the marketplace, and in the wider world
- A strong foundation in moral virtue and ethical reasoning that builds character, fosters integrity, strengthens relationships, promotes stewardship, and earns respect outside as well as inside the church
THE HAPPINESS FACTOR

We don’t know for sure that studying the liberal arts will make you happier — but research does suggest that satisfaction and happiness go along with capacities that are developed in a liberal arts education: lifelong learning, curiosity, relationship building, and critical thinking.
PREPARING FOR THE GOOD LIFE — OF SERVICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

John Henry Newman, writing from a Christian perspective said that the purpose of a university education was, above all, to “train good members of society.” A liberal arts education doesn’t automatically make one a better person, but it provides a rich environment for growth toward a life full of meaning.

Reading literature, for example, has been shown to make people “smarter and nicer.” Understanding different cultures and ways of thinking develops empathy, and knowing how language and psychology work can facilitate meaningful and effective communication. Which is to say that the ancient Greeks and Romans knew what they were talking about when they described the liberal arts as those subjects which helped people live together in a democracy — and it’s no different today: a Christ-centered education is the best liberal arts education of all because it goes beyond preparing you to be a citizen in a democracy to be the citizen of a global Kingdom.

Interested in learning more about what you can do with a Liberal Arts degree? Connect with an advisor today.

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