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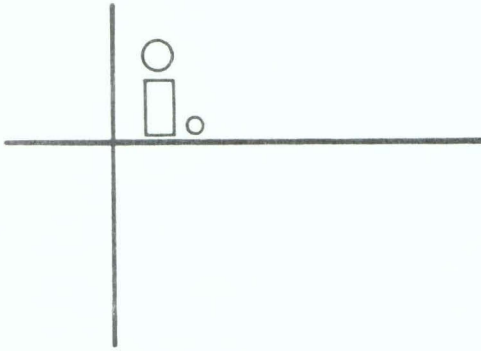
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“LIBERAL ARTS; PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE”

Dwight L. Ling

The Greek poet Pindar stated that the wise man is one who knows by nature, while those who know merely because they have been taught are to be scorned. The suggestion that there is intuitive knowledge or an elevated type of common sense is not new; however, I would argue that we must study and ponder the wisdom of the past if we would be wise today or in the future. Many liberal arts colleges have detracted from this wisdom by dropping classical studies and catering to the whims of an ahistorical generation of students. To gain the insights that Pindar admires we need to preserve a liberal arts education that includes the wisdom of all of the traditional fields represented in our faculties. These traditional studies are still valid and valuable; the mistake that American higher education has made is assuming that an 18 year old person will be able to choose what he needs from this noble list of studies. We, as specialists in higher education, must think seriously about the relationship between liberal studies and contemporary society and help the students choose wisely. Each one of us must be committed to the idea that a liberal education is valuable and useful for our students.

There was a time when we could blithely define the liberal arts in a vague and pious way and satisfy the American public. That time has passed; now we must justify liberal arts study not to a poetic Pindar, but to people of the market place. To merely tell the laymen that liberal arts are studies that liberate or free someone is like telling them that a lubricant—lubricates. Today increasingly the value of a college education is measured in economic terms rather than by humanistic standards.

How then can we show the worth of the liberal arts in our contemporary society? It is important to review the historical cycle that has determined the value of liberal studies. The greatest danger in our society is that we want to make education an idea for all seasons and all reasons, rather than giving it historic strength and meaning. In this day when we emphasize human “roots,” let’s look at the “roots” of education in western civilization. Far be it from me to disappoint those of you who would expect a historian to subject you to at least a brief journey with Clio.

At the beginning of western civilization, Plato in his *Gorgias* defined knowledge for the good life:

We are at issue about matters which to know is honorable and not to know disgraceful; to know or not to know happiness and misery—that is the chief of them. And what knowledge can be nobler?—or what ignorance more disgraceful than this?

To understand life itself is the goal. This means a thorough understanding of ourselves, and, through this, an understanding of the human condition. To know happiness and misery for the Greeks meant more than having factual knowledge; it involved education in morals and values. Therefore, two educational objectives appear in western civilization from the very beginning. They are: (1) training in the practical arts and skills necessary for the good life and (2) the values and morals necessary to know happiness and misery and thus the good life. The freedom to know and to learn are the very nuclei of western educational philosophy. In stating that morals, ethics, and values should be a part of an education for the good life, we do not mean a narrow, sectarian definition of them, nor even confining them to western civilization alone. Western man has much to learn from Eastern cultures; for example, the Arab definition and understanding of hospitality to the stranger has much to teach western mankind. Certainly the West can learn from the East and vice versa, but it is still essential for a civilization to be true to some of the goals and values that make it distinctive. Not to honor some basic principles and values destroys a civilization's *raison d'être* and leads to a collapse into nothingness. Many of today's economic and social problems are global; especially, energy and pollution are good examples of these. Global cooperation will be necessary to solve these problems, but this in no way suggests that the western world should abandon a heritage, which may contribute to the solution of some of these universal difficulties that are obstacles to a more humane world.

For the West, the Greek word *areté* is vital to the topic of morals and values. Although this term can be translated as virtue, its real meaning is general excellence. The Greek hero, who expressed perfect *areté*, was both a warrior and an orator equally suited for the battlefield and the court. It is important to notice that *areté* is not a passive idea; it demands action, one must do the excellent, not sit around and contemplate it. Respect for justice, personal honesty, and integrity, and the search for truth are the main qualities of *areté*. This concept led the Greeks to the formation of an ideal man. They were not primarily concerned with the individual alone, but with the general laws of human nature in every man. Early then education became the shaping of character in accordance with an ideal, which embraced both practical and moral values. To the Greeks knowledge required prudence as well as study. Socrates, like Pindar, placed the greatest emphasis on the "intuitive" discovery of truth and quarreled with the sophists, who traveled about the Greek world expounding a more practical type of education.

In the Middle Ages the emphasis on the seven liberal arts, as seen in the trivium and the quadrivium, was a strong expression of the need for the scholar to understand the nature of life, as it were "to know." The scholastic professor of the Middle Ages passed on knowledge in an authoritarian manner to his students. He spoke the "truth" and it was accepted in the spirit of deductive reasoning. Aristotelian logic dominated. When the more practical-minded Renaissance scholars took the trivium and emphasized grammar and rhetoric over the medieval emphasis on logic, a broader concept of education emerged. They extracted the ideas from classical rhetoric and grammar and did not merely use these subjects as grammatical exercises in Greek and Latin. Now the whole person was to be educated for a role in society as a clergyman, government official,

lawyer, athlete—after all, the humanists were the first to see the value of physical education for more than just the elite. Women, that is those of noble lineage, were to be educated. Unlike the medieval thinkers the Renaissance scholars saw mankind's position on God's great chain of being as one that could be improved and not as a fixed position. Think of the important ramifications for education—mankind could improve and move closer to the angels on the great chain of being. We see that one cycle has already taken place. Renaissance education for a purpose and not just "to know" has reached over the Middle Ages to the classical concepts of all around excellence or *areté*. With the coming of industrialization and the changes which radiated from it, it was inevitable that the tension between liberal arts and career education would grow.

The current criticism of a liberal arts education is not only coming from the general public, but from educators themselves and, yes, our own graduates. The former United States Commissioner of Education, Dr. Bell, wrote, "The college that devotes itself totally and unequivocally to the liberal arts today is just kidding itself. Today, we in education must recognize that it is also our duty to provide students with salable skills." Harvard Professor Christopher Jencks, recently called a college diploma, "a hell of an expensive aptitude test."

Let's admit that the pressure for career education is beginning to bombard the liberal arts college. What is our response? What does the future hold? To survive liberal arts education must go through a neo-renaissance. This neo-renaissance would hold to the historic values of the liberal arts and see where they can be of great value to the educated person in our present society. There are five essentials for a good liberal arts education:

1. To offer students an understanding and appreciation of the achievements and failures of the human race;
2. To create an atmosphere in which students have the freedom and the encouragement to examine who they are and hopefully to find answers to personal as well as societal problems;
3. To make students sensitive to and able to learn from their scientific, natural, aesthetic and cultural environment;
4. To see that students examine their attitudes and acquire the necessary skills in writing, oral communication and analytical thinking;
5. To deal with morals, ethics and values.

To elaborate briefly on this last component, please hear the words of President Tucker of Dartmouth College, as he talked to his students about values:

Seek, I pray you, moral distinction. Be not content with the commonplace in ambition or intellectual attainment. Do not expect that you will make any lasting or very strong impression on the world through intellectual power without the use of an equal amount of conscience and heart.

This quote is a fine expression of Greek *areté* or excellence.

John Stuart Mill expressed it this way:

Men are men before they are lawyers, physicians or businessmen, and if you educate them to become capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or businessmen.

I believe that beyond this it is our responsibility to help our students understand more clearly the strengths and weaknesses of liberal education when it has to compete in the

world outside of the academy. For example, recently I received a letter from the Thunderbird Graduate School of International Management stating that a member of their staff considers an undergraduate major in history as the best preparation for their degree. Now, this would be a fine opportunity for students, but they would have to be counseled early that they should plan on graduate work. Colleges should create a course on the freshmen or sophomore level that will give students guidance in planning a career. They must understand what they may need to add to their basic liberal arts education in order to meet their career goals. Obviously, we can not change the adverse aspect of our national economy, but we should help our students understand the situation. Let none of our students be able to complain that they were misinformed and led blindly into an impasse. Think of the problems ahead in this nation, if a sizable group of students and their indebted parents say that a liberal education is a "rip-off."

The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that total employment will increase by approximately 20 per cent between 1974 and 1985, from 85.9 million to 103.4 million. Throughout the mid-1980's, there will be a continued growth of white-collar and service occupations, a slower than average growth of blue-collar occupations, and a marked decline of farm workers. The question now becomes, what can a liberal arts education contribute to the growing number of white-collar workers?

We cannot just do business as usual, we must show that liberal education can produce the type of white-collar workers needed for the 1980's. Like the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance humanists, we must show the useful aspects of a liberal arts education. We need to think seriously about the skills and knowledge that our graduates will need in the future.

A liberal arts education that teaches a student to think clearly, to solve problems, and to understand society and people is practical. This is education for leadership, and we sorely need leadership in all areas. Some argue that even in our depressed economy a liberal education is valuable because it makes the person versatile enough to adapt to many kinds of occupations. In a sense, a liberal education is preparation for the unexpected. It will take persons in the world of humanities and social sciences to help solve such problems as pollution, poverty, crime, breakup of the family, and even issues of war or peace. We are inundated with "people problems." If a more humane life is to be preserved, the Western World must afford to meet both its vocational and liberal arts needs. It will take a dedicated faculty and administration with the wisdom of a Pindar to assure a future for liberal learning.