

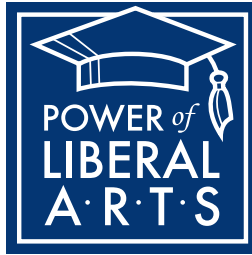
# **The Liberal Arts in Action** *Past, Present, and Future*

**AN ESSAY BY S. GEORGIA NUGENT**



## **About the CIC Public Information Campaign for the Liberal Arts**

This essay was prepared as a component of the Council of Independent Colleges' public information campaign, *Securing America's Future: The Power of Liberal Arts Education*. The initiative promotes the effectiveness and contributions of private liberal arts colleges and universities and the importance of the liberal arts as fields of study. In addition to this essay, the campaign includes editorials, speeches, alumni testimonials, a website, social media activity, data collection and analyses, and meetings with journalists and policy officials. Generous support for the campaign is provided by Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Endeavor Foundation, Jessie Ball duPont Fund, Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, and Teagle Foundation.



**The Liberal  
Arts in Action**  
*Past, Present, and  
Future*

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**The Council of Independent Colleges** (CIC) is an association of 755 nonprofit independent colleges and universities and higher education affiliates and organizations that has worked since 1956 to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education's contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities as well as conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility. CIC conducts the largest annual conference of college and university presidents. In addition, CIC provides support to state fundraising associations that organize programs and generate contributions for private colleges and universities. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit [www.cic.edu](http://www.cic.edu).

## About the Author



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# Introduction and Background

In 2013 the Council of Independent Colleges launched a public information campaign, *Securing America's Future: The Power of Liberal Arts Education*, to disseminate accurate information about liberal arts education and liberal arts colleges to parents, prospective college students, and the media. The project was spurred by pervasive dismay among the leaders of CIC member colleges and universities about the extent to which higher education—and liberal arts education, in particular—was so often misrepresented in the media and in public discourse more generally. Emblematic of the under-valuing of liberal arts education is the tendentious question, “What can you do with a liberal arts degree?” The symposium, “The Liberal Arts in Action,” which serves as the capstone of the campaign, provides a direct response to that question.

*The Power of Liberal Arts Education* initiative marked a new dimension of outreach for CIC, whose primary mission is service to member colleges and universities (particularly to presidents and chief academic officers). We built upon and substantially expanded CIC’s decade-long effort to “make the case” for the quality and value of a liberal arts education. What began as an effort to inform the public also became a learning experience for the association, yielding deeper and broader information about CIC member institutions and the outcomes of the educational experiences they offer. Our knowledge increased as a result of research projects carried out by established scholars and by CIC staff that offered more data-based evidence about liberal arts colleges. In addition, we learned from alumni of more than 100 colleges and universities the transformative role of their education. We also engaged

the public through digital media, and we conferred with college counselors, corporate leaders, journalists, and thought leaders in higher education.

This essay is a reflection on liberal arts education that is informed by the experience of developing and overseeing, with my colleagues, the CIC campaign. That work coalesced around a number of questions about liberal arts education, such as:

- What is it?
- How did it develop in America?
- How does it work?
- What (and who) is it good for?
- What are its outcomes?
- What is its future?

In the context of CIC's particular focus, an important question also was whether and how education at a liberal arts college may differ from a liberal arts education offered in other institutional contexts. Formulating satisfying responses to those questions requires historical, quantitative, qualitative—and imaginative—perspectives. By weaving these together, we may illuminate this uniquely American form of higher education and reaffirm the claim it can make on a distinctive value.



# What Is “Liberal Arts”?

Liberal arts has an identity problem: namely, the inscrutability of the very term, “liberal arts.” Every would-be advocate must begin by explaining what it *is*. This is not true of business, medicine, or even arts education. Most people have an immediate, intuitive understanding of what those terms mean. Not so for “liberal arts.”

The liberal arts champion must begin by clearing the hurdle of the name itself. “No,” (he or she must explain) *liberal* is not a political or partisan term in this context. And, “no,” *arts*, in this case, isn’t referring specifically to painting or music or drama. Rather, the Latin phrase *artes liberales*, from which the term derives, might be translated as “skills for living fully and freely.” Understood in this way, the phrase suggests the potential for a richer and more fulfilling human experience.

The exercise of explaining the liberal arts can be carried out with more or less skill and grace, but the need for explication is problematic right from the start. It situates the person who values liberal arts as an “Other,” someone who knows the secret handshake, who is apparently distinguished from the person-on-the-street by this arcane knowledge (“liberal comes from the Latin and means ‘liberating’ or ‘free’”...). There are good reasons to retain this legacy term. Indeed, efforts at re-christening the term (“education that works,” “the human arts,” or “education for leadership”) aren’t self-evident in their meaning either. Unfortunately, however, the Latin derivation can contribute to a perception that liberal arts education

is an elitist enterprise. We will return to this perception later, both by examining its origins and by clarifying the demographics of liberal arts students today.

# Defining Liberal Arts Education

Even when the nomenclature of “liberal” and “arts” is clarified, the definitional questions still remain: What constitutes liberal arts education? How can it be defined?

Traditionally, the concept of the liberal arts has been defined in terms of subject matter or curriculum. This tradition can be traced back to Martianus Capella in the 5th century C.E., the first to codify (in his work, *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*) “the seven liberal arts.” In Martianus’ account, they were: the *trivium* (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy).

This division of knowledge into seven fields remained dominant for many centuries, although today it is merely an historical artifact. Yet the tendency has remained to identify liberal arts education with the study of particular academic disciplines. The classification scheme probably most often found in recent years is a four-fold division: the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and arts (with the last added the most recently). This taxonomy structured the “distribution requirements” of many college curricula for at least a century and can still be found on many campuses today.

The last several decades have seen some movement away from an epistemological framework based on academic disciplines toward one shaped along more fluid lines of inquiry. For example, while the curriculum once might have required a course specifically in the departments of religion

or philosophy, it may now include a broader expectation that the student will study “moral or ethical issues;” a laboratory requirement in physics or chemistry may now be framed as “study of the natural world,” and the like.

Along similar lines, the definition of liberal arts education seems to be shifting from being strictly discipline-based to more methodologically-based. For an increasing number of colleges, the traditional four-fold division of disciplines does not encompass the full spectrum of today’s curriculum, yet these colleges continue to self-identify as “liberal arts” institutions. Such colleges also may be offering degrees in education or nursing or business or computer science—fields not included within the traditional spectrum of liberal arts studies. Today, for example, one can major in business at St. Lawrence University or study corporate finance at Bard College—both quintessential examples of liberal arts institutions. How can this be?

The answer lies in a definitional focus based more on mode than on matter—that is, a concept of liberal arts education that places increased emphasis on the manner of pedagogy, rather than on subject matter alone. In the broadest terms, the distinctive approach of liberal arts pedagogy emphasizes inquiry over inculcation, broad context over specialized content, and synthesis over separate bits of information.

Differing methodologies for language learning may provide a good example. In an immersion Berlitz course, for example, the objective is for the learner to reproduce the appropriate sounds, phrases, and sentences in response to specific stimuli. Deeper understanding of the target language’s grammar, structure, or history is neither expected nor sought. In a liberal arts language classroom, by contrast, the student will be expected to understand how the parts of the language make up a larger whole, to gain knowledge of the cultural context in which it is spoken, to become acquainted with its literature, and the like. In short, inquiry beats inculcation.

If the key to liberal arts learning is the *manner* in which it occurs, rather than simply the *matter* it includes, does that mean that the curriculum is

irrelevant? Not at all. What appears to produce the extraordinary result of a liberal arts education is the particular combination of matter and manner, a broad-based curriculum with specific pedagogical practices in a context that also contributes to learning. One educator from abroad, who spent time studying a liberal arts college, described this combination as, “the secret sauce.” Before exploring these pedagogical elements and their implications further, let’s turn to a brief history of this form of American higher education.

# Origins and Development of the American Liberal Arts College

It is striking that, only eight years after arriving on the North American shore, the colonists in Massachusetts felt it was important to found a college. Thus, Harvard was born. America's Founding Fathers were steeped in the history of Greece and Rome, and they carried with them to this new land many of the ideas they found in classical authors. Just as they self-consciously conceived of themselves to be founding a nation in accordance with the political ideals of the Roman Republic, so their reading of Roman authors such as Cicero, Seneca, and Quintilian also influenced their ideas of education, including the importance of the *artes liberales*.

But the need for founding the colonial colleges came as much from Christian as from classical precepts. In this new land, the people of God would need pastors to lead them. Not only distance, but also political and theological differences made it unlikely that those pastors would come from the homeland. They would need to be trained in America. At Harvard, "Producing ministers with the proper interpretation of Puritanism was understood to be the mission of the new college" (Geiger).

Here we encounter a frequently overlooked paradox of the American liberal arts college. It was surely founded on the principles of the *artes liberales*, those studies that are intended to develop the highest human capacities. But the original colonial colleges also were clearly "professional schools." They were explicitly founded for the purpose of educating the pastors who would be needed in this new world.

The curriculum of the earliest liberal arts colleges, which consisted almost exclusively of the study of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, was not established because these languages would expand the mind. Rather, these languages are the prerequisites for reading and being able to explicate the Old and New Testament scriptures; they are the necessary toolkit for the minister. At its very founding, then, the American liberal arts college was intended for the dual purpose of both “liberating” the mind *and* preparing the graduate for useful work in the world.

Between Harvard’s opening in 1636 and the early 19th century approximately 50 liberal arts colleges were founded in America. From 1820 to the outbreak of the Civil War an “explosive proliferation” of colleges occurred, as municipalities and denominations saw college-founding as a means of raising their profile and extending their influence (Kimball). Some continue as liberal arts colleges today. And some—for example, nine of the first ten colleges founded in America—are no longer identified as liberal arts colleges today but, rather, as research universities. What is this distinction and how did it come about?

In everyday speech, Americans tend to call all institutions of higher education “college.” But, in fact, one of the greatest strengths of the American system has long been considered its diversity of institutions. American higher education includes community colleges, state universities, private and public research universities, and liberal arts colleges—each with distinctive missions and features. One important distinction is between public and private (or independent) institutions. The extent and quality of the private sector is unique in America. Throughout Europe and other continents, higher education has been and continues to be almost entirely a function of the state. But, despite both George Washington’s and Thomas Jefferson’s desire for America to have a national university, one never materialized.

America’s early colonial colleges were all founded as independent, liberal arts colleges. But, beginning in the 19th century, two new concepts of higher education began to emerge. One exemplifies the tension we already have seen

between the *artes liberales* model and more pragmatically-oriented training in the “useful” arts. A watershed moment in American higher education was the passing of the Morrill Act of 1862. This legislation granted to the states thousands of acres of federal land, on the condition that the state establish “at least one college where the leading objective shall be...to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanical arts.” The resultant “land grant” universities (such as University of Maryland, College Park and Purdue University) opened a new era of higher education, with universities both supported by public funds and devoted to pragmatic fields of study.

The second new development in American higher education was adopted from a European, primarily German, model. This was the research university. Preserving and passing on established knowledge was the purview of the traditional college; but the purpose of the research university was to create and disseminate new knowledge. Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago (along with tiny Clark University in Massachusetts) were among the first examples of American research universities.

The research university emphasized a new level of education, beyond the undergraduate years, for the purpose of producing new knowledge. While post-graduate study was not unknown in the colleges (James Madison, for example, stayed on after his graduation from Princeton to extend his Biblical studies with President James McCosh), it was an anomalous occurrence. The development of research universities required not only faculty members who publish but also graduate students, both to assist in faculty research and to be trained as research scholars.

As “upstart” universities such as Johns Hopkins and Stanford began in the late 19th century to gain significant recognition as centers of learning through their research-oriented faculties, the original colonial colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton had to take note. Each in its own way—and at differing paces—began the transformation from a liberal arts college into a university, offering graduate study and degrees, as in the European model.



The next major phase in the development of higher education in America can be attributed to broad cultural changes associated with the Second World War. The post-war G.I. bill, which provided funding for returning service members to attend the college of their choice, dramatically altered the composition—and size—of the college-going population. The war effort also brought tremendous new resources to the research enterprise, as the federal government directed substantial funding to universities for both defense-related and basic research.

This trend continued in the late 1950s, when the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union fueled a fear that the U.S. was falling behind Russia in the Cold War technological competition. Once again, federal legislation was a determining factor in the evolution of higher education. Passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 eventually brought billions of dollars to research universities.

With these developments, the distinctions between liberal arts colleges and research universities became more sharply defined. A few of the colonial colleges (notably Dartmouth, Princeton, and Yale) had retained a primary focus on undergraduate education, with a smaller graduate and research focus. But as the 20th century proceeded, research (and its concomitant funding) took on a higher profile.

The prominence of research activity also began to re-cast the role of faculty. Particularly in the sciences—but, to varying degrees, across all disciplines—faculty members were increasingly expected to devote primary attention to publication and research, the mentoring of post-graduate students, and gaining external funding. In the sciences, many faculty members were now expected to “bring in their salaries”—that is, to garner enough grants to pay for their own employment. In such a system, there are clearly incentives for faculty members to shift attention from the mentoring and personal development of the undergraduate student to the professional training of the graduate or post-doctoral individual.

Consequently, the specific niche of the liberal arts college in the overall ecology of American higher education became more clearly defined. A narrower focus on the education and development of undergraduate students, a relatively small student body, a faculty primarily dedicated to and evaluated for its teaching, a low student-to-faculty ratio, on-campus living for all or almost all students—these easily observable characteristics differentiated the liberal arts colleges not only from public universities such as the University of Michigan or Ohio State University, but also from the institutions initially founded as liberal arts colleges that had now evolved into research universities.

# Liberal Arts Education and Liberal Arts Colleges

It's relatively easy to grasp the distinction between a liberal arts college, with its small, often wholly undergraduate student body, and a research university, with its graduate student and post-graduate population. But what is the distinction between “liberal arts colleges” and “liberal arts education”? Even professionals in higher education, let alone the general public, wrestle with this question. Is there really a distinction? If a student majors in English or history or philosophy but happens to attend Harvard or the University of Virginia is that somehow a different education from that of the physics major at Swarthmore?

Research indicates that there is a difference between the experience of a student at a smaller liberal arts college and the experience of a liberal arts major in a large research-oriented university. Although there is evidence for the benefits of a liberal arts curriculum in any context, including large university and community college settings, the small- to medium-sized, private, liberal arts colleges show greater gains for students, both cognitively and developmentally.

Over recent decades, a number of research studies that explore both the experience and the outcomes of post-secondary education, using differing methodologies, all point to superior outcomes from small liberal arts colleges—both in terms of students' subjective satisfaction and their objective educational and post-graduation attainment.

One such study (released in 2011 by the higher education consulting firm Hardwick Day) conducted telephone interviews with almost 3,000 alumni of public universities, private universities, and small, private liberal arts institutions. The responses showed some stark comparisons, particularly between the experiences of students at liberal arts colleges and at “flagship” public institutions. On the most fundamental issue of college completion, 87 percent of students at liberal arts colleges graduated within four years; at the flagship publics, only 51 percent did so. Asked whether they benefitted from “high-quality, teaching-oriented faculty,” 79 percent of liberal arts alumni said, “yes,” compared with 40 percent of public university alumni.

With respect to the outcomes of their education, 60 percent of liberal arts college graduates indicated they felt “better prepared for life after college” than graduates of other types of institutions. Only 34 percent of the public university alumni expressed this perception. As well, the number of liberal arts college alumni who gave their alma mater a “high effectiveness rating” for preparing them, both for their first jobs and for career change or advancement, outpaced the public university alumni by about 10 percent.

With regard to pedagogical practices (a topic to which we’ll return), 72 percent of liberal art graduates indicated that they benefitted from “many small classes with fewer than 20 students” compared with only 16 percent of the public university graduates. And fully 83 percent of liberal arts alumni agreed that their professors “challenged me academically and also personally helped me meet those challenges” compared with 46 percent of public university graduates.

A second study (by the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College) carried out longitudinal research at 49 institutions, including community colleges, regional universities, research universities, and liberal arts colleges. Students were assessed three times: upon matriculation, at the end of the first year of college, and at the end of the fourth year. The students completed a series of questionnaires designed to measure aspects of both cognitive and personal development. This study found that, relative to their

peers at research universities and regional institutions, liberal arts college students “realized significant advantages” in both critical thinking skills and cognitive development. These researchers suggested that “a significant part of the cognitive impact of liberal arts colleges may be exerted by their distinctive instructional and learning environments.”

And a third recent study by the Council of Independent Colleges, *Expanding Access and Opportunity: How Small and Mid-Sized Independent Colleges Serve First-Generation and Low-Income Students*, finds—contrary to the popular myth that private colleges are only for the affluent—that students of all academic and social backgrounds enroll in smaller private colleges, and that these institutions provide a more rigorous and engaged college experience than larger public universities. In particular, first-generation and low-income students in these smaller colleges are at least four times more likely to experience a personalized academic environment with smaller class sizes, three times more likely to be taught by a faculty member (rather than by a graduate student) or have informal meetings with a faculty member, and nearly twice as likely to discuss academic matters outside the classroom with a faculty member. For first-generation and low-income students at smaller private institutions, the higher levels of engagement in the academic and extracurricular environment result in much better graduation rates and degree attainment and ultimately upward social mobility.

What are the distinctive elements inherent in the learning environment of a small liberal arts college or university that might be determinants of such highly positive and desirable outcomes? A number of characteristics typify the liberal arts college. Most often, it is a full-time, residential learning experience that includes a robust co-curricular student life and participation in athletics, theatre, musical groups, clubs, and—increasingly—service activities and involvement in the local community. The smaller colleges also often express an explicit commitment to the formation of character and to an ethical value system. In some instances, this may be associated with the institution’s roots in a religious denomination; in others, it may arise organically from the very nature of an intimate, residential community.

As noted earlier, liberal arts colleges are relatively small. Although the size may range from under 1,000 to as large as 4,000, typically the student body is approximately 1,000–2,000. The small student body makes possible an intentionally low student-to-faculty ratio, most often ranging from 8:1 to 12:1. As a result of this structure, classes are small (often seminar and discussion formats, rather than large lectures), faculty members are very accessible to students, and personal, mentoring relationships are encouraged and easily formed. Increasingly, opportunities are available for the student to engage in original research, mentored by and/or collaborating with a faculty member. Each of these characteristics has significant, even unique, implications for students' learning and developmental experience.

Let's explore specific pedagogical practices before considering the living and learning environment more broadly. Over the past several decades, developments in cognitive sciences, behavioral sciences, and psychometric analysis have enabled us to understand much more about how people learn and what factors contribute to effective learning. It's illuminating to compare the results of these studies with the kinds of pedagogical practices most prominent at small liberal arts colleges—where the student-to-faculty ratio is low, and faculty members are both hired and evaluated primarily for their commitment to teaching.

An early and influential study, published in 1976 by two Swedish researchers (Ference Marton and Roger Säljö), introduced the distinction between “deep learning” and “surface learning.” Scholars in Australia and the U.K. later extended this work. Put simply, the student who uses a deep learning approach seeks “understanding” (looking for patterns and making meaning), while surface learning focuses on “reproduction” (memorizing bits of information in anticipation of being tested).

Importantly, the researchers stressed that a preference for “deep” or “surface” learning is *not* an inherent characteristic of a student. Rather, a student's perception of context and environment influences the approach he or she takes to a learning task. For example, in a large lecture course where the

final exercise will be a multiple choice test, a student might well decide that the “reproduction” or surface mode is probably what’s called for. But if student-faculty and student-to-student interaction will take the form of a small group discussion, a deep learning approach will likely seem preferable. Not surprisingly, pedagogical researchers agree that “deep learning” leads to higher quality learning outcomes.

While some researchers have focused on the characteristics of effective learning, others have turned more attention to effective teaching practices. One of the most extensive of these efforts has been the work of George Kuh and his team at Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research. His own research, as well as the work of others, showed that specific classroom activities and specific faculty and peer practices improved undergraduate outcomes. On this basis, Kuh launched in 2000 an ambitious survey project, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

NSSE has now been administered to more than 4.5 million students at over 1,500 colleges. The detailed survey instrument has helped colleges identify the extent to which they are actually providing best practices in pedagogy and, at the same time, the accumulation of massive data has enabled Kuh to refine what are now widely considered “high-impact practices.” Most often, six high-impact practices are cited: a learning community (i.e., groups of students taking two or more classes together), service or community-based learning, research with a faculty member, an internship or field experience, study abroad, and a culminating senior experience (such as a capstone course or thesis).

In June 2015, researchers at NSSE completed a special analysis for CIC of survey results for more than 540,000 students enrolled at more than 900 institutions, including private and public undergraduate colleges and private and public doctoral universities. Factors examined included the six high-impact practices just listed, as well as indicators of student engagement and students’ own assessments of gains (in knowledge, skills, and personal development) and satisfaction.

These independent researchers reported that “students at private institutions had significantly higher mean scores on all measures.” And they concluded that “these students can claim experiences that are more academically challenging, better relationships with faculty, higher quality interactions with others on campus, and consistently greater perception that they have learned and grown throughout their learning experiences with their institutions.”

Among many comparative differences, the largest was that students in the small private colleges reported greater development of a personal code of values and ethics in their college years. Further, in comparison with students in large doctoral institutions, seniors at small private colleges reported more frequently than their counterparts that they were challenged in courses to evaluate differing points of view and form new ideas. Seniors also were more likely to discuss career plans with faculty.

In conclusion, the NSSE researchers found “several areas of distinction” between the students in small private colleges and students at public institutions, including “greater exposure to academically challenging experiences, especially with coursework emphasizing higher-order learning and reflection...more effort dedicated to studying, writing, and reading, more frequent and high-quality interactions with faculty and exposure to effective teaching practices...and a more supportive environment for learning.”

It’s clear that multiple types of research studies, carried out over five decades—ranging from observational studies of students (Marton), to polling of alumni (Hardwick Day), to highly structured surveys of students (Pascarella; Gonyea; and Kuh)—all indicate that the pedagogical practices and the learning community environment most commonly found in small, private liberal arts colleges are those proven to provide the most effective learning experience for students.



# The “Usefulness” of Liberal Arts—A Classical Perspective

Even if the research indicates that the small liberal arts college provides an exceptional learning environment, the questions remain: learning for what? Is a liberal arts education useful? Just as the very definition of liberal arts is controversial, so is its purpose—in today’s favored term, its “outcome.” Specifically, the usefulness (or uselessness) of liberal arts has been contested over many centuries. To add yet another element of paradox—for some, “useless” is understood as a condemnation, while to others it’s actually an approbation. Is liberal arts education “useless”—even intentionally so?

This controversy stems originally from classical times, specifically from discussions of education by Aristotle and Cicero. A brief foray into that classical background is worthwhile, because it still informs thinking about education, especially higher education, particularly when the question of the practicality or usefulness of college looms so large. Indeed, one scholar of liberal arts has claimed that “the tension between what is ‘liberal’ and what is ‘useful’ is one of the oldest and most persistent problems in education” (Kimball).

The Greek philosopher Aristotle developed an elaborate argument, explaining the distinction between knowledge for its own sake and knowledge as a means to an end—that is, what is “useful.” For Aristotle, the former—a desire to understand the true causes and nature of things—is a much higher form of knowledge than the latter, directed more narrowly toward achieving a result. Aristotle might have illustrated this as the

difference between a philosopher's systematic inquiry into the nature of species and a blacksmith's skill at shoeing horses.

A similar distinction is later reiterated by the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero, who was a tremendously influential thinker for America's founders. In Cicero's Latin version, the relevant distinction is between what is *utile* and *inutile* (useful and useless); the "useful" is often what is merely expedient.

It's an unfortunate accident of history (and linguistic usage) that later, English-language discussions of liberal arts latched onto the "useless" characterization and often aligned it with social class. Thus was born a concept that, regrettably, we still encounter today: namely, that the "useless" learning of liberal arts is a rarified privilege intended only for members of the elite who, presumably, can afford to spend their time on such luxuries. The (mistaken) corollary to such a view is that preparation for a productive and "useful" life must be associated with more technical, job-oriented training.

Attention-getting examples in recent American life have included President Obama's (at least implicit) dismissal of liberal arts with the remark, "folks can make a lot more potentially with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree." Florida Governor Rick Scott's rhetorical question, "Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don't think so," gained a peculiar resonance when it was discovered that his own daughter has a degree in anthropology. Notwithstanding that, his policy stance was clear: "I want [public] money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state." Bill Gates also has widely expressed the view that only those subjects that will prepare students for entry into the local economy are worthy of support—and it seems clear that he, too, (incorrectly) assumes that the liberal arts are not among those subjects.

It is true that this view, aligning the study of liberal arts with a leisured elite, in some ways reproduces a conflation of class and education found in the

ancient authors. (It also is true that college-going—at least until the mid-19th or even early-20th) century—was almost exclusively a privilege of the wealthy in America, which reinforces the notion.) But Aristotle’s or Cicero’s understanding of what is “useless” must be understood and interpreted in historical context.

A simple way to illustrate this is to consider some specific terms in the Greek and Latin languages and their implications. The point is perhaps easiest for English speakers to see in Latin terminology. The Latin word for leisure is *otium*. In the context of Roman culture, this was one of the highest goods, an aspirational state. To have *otium* meant that you had the time to engage in reading, discussion, and contemplation, that you could develop your mind and nurture your soul. *Otium* was the pre-condition for flourishing as a thoughtful, cultured individual.

Latin had a term for the opposite or the negation of *otium*: *negotium*. Indeed, this is the etymological basis for our English term, “negotiate” and its derivatives, such as “negotiation.” For the Romans, this negative term denoted “business,” perhaps merchandising or shipping or running a restaurant. Considered in the context of Roman culture, this was an undesirable state, even a derogatory term.

Now, of course, we must see these valuations as embedded within a social context—namely, the context of Rome as a slave-based economy. The merchant class (as well as doctors, bureaucratic officials, or bankers) tended to be slaves or former slaves. The Roman elite eschewed engagement in such activities, in *negotium*. But the point, for our purposes, is that for Aristotle or Cicero to claim that education was “useless” was actually to accord it the highest status. The *artes liberales* (liberal arts) were useful for the cultivation of the human being’s greatest capacities, rather than for the acquisition of low-level skills.

The Classical Greek language presents a similar example. The Greek term for leisure is *skole*. Again, the etymological implication is clear: This is the

term from which we derive “school.” Once again, learning is associated with leisure. Greece, too, was a slave-owning society. Interestingly, the teachers (Greek: “pedagogues”) in schools would have been slaves. But those who had the opportunity to attend those schools were the non-enslaved population, the free members of Greek society, for example in the nascent Athenian democracy.

Viewed in the context of the slave-owning cultures of Greece and Rome, we can recognize the alignment of liberal arts education with what it is to be a free person. It is this alignment that offers a particular resonance—and relevance—to us, an American society founded on democratic principles (even if those principles were not fully realized until the abolition of slavery in 1865).

The American liberal arts college today embodies a commitment to democratic principles in very meaningful ways. In particular, the liberal arts college—once the province of affluent white males—has worked hard to increase access by students from a wide range of family educational and economic backgrounds and thereby offer a pathway to social mobility. Today, smaller, private colleges enroll approximately the same proportion of minority students as do public universities (about one-third of the student body) and a slightly *higher* proportion of low-income students and first-generation students than public and private doctoral universities.

Not only have private colleges become as diverse as public universities, they also lead to greater rates of success for African American students, Hispanic students, and low-income students. These students graduate from private four-year colleges both at higher rates and more quickly than they do from public universities. Compared with for-profit institutions, in particular, the graduation rate of each of these groups at small private colleges is approximately twice as high.

This diverse student body is assisted in attending college by the colleges’ own commitments to financial aid, with institutional resources providing six

times as much financial aid in the form of grants as the federal government. Students at private colleges are twice as likely to receive grants from their colleges as students at public institutions, and the average grant from the private college is three times larger than the average public university grant. A higher proportion of first-generation and low-income students (approximately one-third) graduate with no student loan debt from smaller private colleges than from public doctoral universities.

Thus, although the persistent stereotype that associates liberal arts education with an elite class has historical underpinning, it is not an accurate representation today.

# What Can You Do with a Liberal Arts Degree?

“Success” is, in many ways, an elusive concept, defined in the eyes of the beholder. But, in some instances, remarkable achievement or eminence accrues to a defined set of individuals. For example, there are a fixed number of American presidents, Nobel Prize winners, and Fortune 500 CEOs. Within such closed sets, how do liberal arts graduates fare? In looking at such data, it’s important to contextualize the results, recognizing that today, only about 13 percent of college-goers attend CIC member institutions. The data show that, in each of these “closed sets” of high achievement, liberal arts graduates achieve a rate of success substantially higher than their distribution in the population.

For example, of the 19 U.S. presidents in the 20th and 21st centuries (the era when college-going really took hold in America), four (or 21 percent) graduated from small liberal arts colleges. And if we note the study of liberal arts, independent of the type of institution, 14 (or 73 percent) had undergraduate degrees in liberal arts fields. Currently, almost 90 of the 100 U.S. senators studied liberal arts, and 18 graduated from small liberal arts colleges. In addition, analysis of the Fortune 1,000 as well as Fortune 500 CEOs shows that approximately one-third have liberal arts degrees.

These indicators of success, for the most part, take a long view—that is, an individual who rises to become a CEO or a president has obviously done so a number of years after graduation from college and in many cases obtained additional degrees. Today, public discourse about higher education very often

takes a short view—that is, whether a graduate will be employed directly after graduation. For the first time, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) recently produced (after two years of development) a study of the outcomes for college graduates, six months after graduation. The report, *First Destinations for the College Class of 2014*, represents “the most comprehensive view of baccalaureate degree outcomes currently available.”

The widespread belief that college graduates today are unsuccessful in finding jobs is not supported by the data. The NACE report shows that 80 percent of college graduates are either meaningfully employed or continuing their educations within six months of graduation. But there is a differential among types of institutions. For those who graduated from a public university, the rate of employment is 73.4 percent, while for those who graduated from a private, nonprofit college, that rate is 89.5 percent.

These data indicate that liberal arts colleges and universities have equipped graduates for long-term success across many fields of human endeavor at a disproportionately high rate and that, even in the short term, liberal arts graduates enjoy positive outcomes.

# What the Graduates Say—Liberal Arts Education and Creativity

Do the experiences of students support the research findings? As we have seen, numerous researchers and organizations have undertaken surveys and polls of both current students and alumni, which indicate superior outcomes in terms of both personal satisfaction and educational attainment. But what about qualitative assessments of graduates' experiences? Quantitative data, after all, provide only part of the picture. To gain a richer understanding of graduates' lives, during the *Power of Liberal Arts Education* campaign, CIC gathered reflections from alumni of the association's more than 600 colleges and universities. In short, we invited alumni to tell their stories in videos, in print, and online.

Although this material does not have a comparative aspect, it does indicate very high levels of satisfaction, as well as a strong sense that the undergraduate experience contributed significantly both to personal growth and professional success.

Particular themes emerge among the many accounts of alumni. These include:

- The transformational role of college;
- Development of self-confidence;
- Exposure to a broad range of studies and experiences;
- Interaction with a diversity of persons and perspectives;
- Persistence and the ability to learn from and overcome failure; and
- Realization of distinctive strengths and values—pursuing a “passion.”



If we couple these personal recollections and accounts with the strong evidence of successful outcomes, a suggestive pattern emerges. The experiences that liberal arts alumni highlight bear a striking resemblance to research findings on factors that seem to contribute to creativity (and, by extension, innovation and entrepreneurship).

The topic of creativity has drawn researchers' interest, particularly since the mid-20th century. Initially, the field tended to emphasize a "great man" approach—that is, how can we understand the genius of Mozart, Picasso, or Einstein? This initial approach yielded some important findings. For example, creativity was often associated with trauma in the family (such as the early loss of a parent) and turmoil in the state (such as multiple conflicting political entities).

Multiple studies of creative individuals have shown that they tend to have particularly strong egos. They have confidence in themselves and do not feel constrained to adhere to the status quo. It also has been recognized that this type of ego-formation is most likely to take place in the adolescent or early adult years—that is, the traditional college-going age (Albert).

These findings in the psychological research seem consonant with what many graduates say about the ways in which their undergraduate experience built self-confidence—often through the attention and encouragement of a faculty mentor. As one former astronaut put it, the variety of experiences at a liberal arts college "made me fearless to attempt new endeavors, even when the odds of success were low.... Never before or since have I felt such autonomy to explore, to become a leader, to think independently..." (Hilmers).

As a college president, I have witnessed over and over this growth in confidence and self-actualization—often in ways that have amazed me. An instance that particularly stands out was meeting a quiet and physically slight student who had never previously left his native Katmandu before arriving at college in rural, central Ohio. Meeting him during first-year orientation, I had doubts about whether he would persist and complete his

degree. In fact, he went on to be elected president of the student body and to pursue a PhD at Oxford University. Another striking example was a young man with a speech impediment who became the head spokesperson for the student government. I could never have predicted these outcomes. But something special about the living/learning environment enabled these students to attain a high degree of self-confidence, which in turn permitted the full development and deployment of their abilities.

In reflecting on their undergraduate experiences, alumni of liberal arts colleges frequently emphasized their exposure to a broad variety of fields. In some instances, such a range of studies was fostered, even mandated, by curricular “distribution requirements” of various sorts. In other cases, wide-ranging studies may have been recommended by a faculty advisor or mentor. However such a catholic approach to the curriculum came about, it is striking how strongly alumni feel about its benefits to them.

Here, again, research findings on creativity are potentially illuminating. At least since the 1962 publication of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, it has been widely recognized that innovation often comes, not from those who are most expert in a particular domain of knowledge, but from those who are *outside* the field. Kuhn explains this somewhat surprising observation by the fact that the newcomer can often see a problem or situation in a new way precisely *because* he or she has not been deeply immersed in a particular mode of thought. The “expert” may be constrained by fully internalized assumptions and explanatory modes, while the novice can truly bring fresh eyes to a situation.

Time and again, graduates in all walks of life (from corporate leadership to crime prevention, from diplomacy to dentistry, from medicine to media) speak passionately of the value of having been introduced to art, anthropology, philosophy, history, world religions, literature, languages—no matter what their college major or their career path. In fact, they often attribute the success they have attained to this undergraduate exposure to many different modes of thought.

A foreign affairs specialist at the U.S. Department of Defense wrote, “Without classes in philosophy, anthropology, theology, and other fields, I would have been ill-prepared to adapt to a rapidly changing world and career” (Savage). A scientist wrote, “In addition to my science classes, I took classes in English, public speaking, and history during my freshman year. These classes...opened the door to...unique ways of looking at the world that could not be described by mathematical equations. They underscored the importance of art or an artistic approach in every profession, even biology” (De Lanerolle).

An even more widely acknowledged finding about creativity is that it often consists of bringing disparate concepts together to yield new insights. In one researcher’s formulation, “The greater the number of associations that an individual has to the requisite elements of a problem, the greater the probability of his reaching a creative solution” (Mednick). This thought strategy has most often been compared to metaphor, with the additional observation that juxtaposing fields that are the most disparate (or “farther apart”) is likely to yield the “most creative” result. This may help to explain why an oncologist, for example, noted that his undergraduate study of philosophy was one of the most significant factors contributing to his success in cancer research (Forman).

It could be argued that the liberal arts curriculum is remarkably suited to enabling the cross-pollinations that are a hallmark of creative thought. But the liberal arts college experience is not limited to the curriculum alone. The residential community itself, as well as the many avenues for engagement, from athletics to governance to special interest clubs and community service, present the student with yet another array of diverse experiences and practices. One graduate, for example, found that her extracurricular activities in college of acting, public speaking, and athletics, proved invaluable in her field experience in the Peace Corps (Hayes).

In recent decades, studies of creativity have evolved from a strictly individual point of view to a broader perspective offered by social psychology.

“The enduring belief that great creativity is developed largely alone, without assistance from teachers, mentors, peers, and intimate groups is largely a myth” (Feldman). Fruitful lines of inquiry have gone beyond the “lone genius” concept to consider the broader socio-cultural factors that contribute to the development of creative capacities. This line of investigation has yielded a richer understanding of the interaction between factors in the individual psyche of a creative individual and his or her environment.

The research finding that “teachers, mentors, peers, and intimate groups” make a significant contribution to an individual’s ability to realize his or her creative potential, rather than the belief that individual genius simply arises in a vacuum, accords well with the reported experience of alumni that it was the sum of their experiences—curricular, extra-curricular, mentoring, coaching, volunteering—that enabled them to succeed and excel in later endeavors.

One researcher who has focused on the specifically social aspect of creativity is Teresa Amabile of Harvard University. She and her team have worked to identify factors that foster (or inhibit) an individual’s development of creative potential. Their first finding underlined the significance of environmental factors. For example, when a large group of research scientists were asked to reflect on their own experiences of creativity, Amabile’s team found that “environmental factors were mentioned much more frequently than personal qualities.” Again, this would accord with alumni perceptions of how significant the overall college environment was to their personal development and success.

Going further, however, a second finding arose—namely, that while external environment is a major factor enabling the expression of creativity, a task that is carried out *exclusively* in response to extrinsic motivators, such as (in Amabile’s terms) “evaluation,” “surveillance,” or “competition,” is unlikely to elicit creative thinking. Rather, both experimental designs and personal accounts indicated that the *most* creative work flowed from intrinsic motivation. That is, the likelihood of creative performance in any endeavor

is greatest when the person is motivated to undertake the task “for its own sake,” because he or she has “a passion” for the work.

Considering these two findings in light of alumni reflections we can see that they are not contradictory, but complementary. What the graduates of small liberal arts colleges remark upon again and again is that their alma mater provided a rich and supportive environment that enabled them, ultimately, to discover their “passion”—work that they found intriguing “for its own sake.” One of the foremost researchers on creativity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, stresses the same point: “The first step toward a more creative life is the cultivation of curiosity and interest, that is, the allocation of attention to things for their own sake.”

These contemporary insights of Amabile and Csikszentmihalyi on creativity bring us full-circle, back to Aristotle’s emphasis on the importance of studying things, “for their own sake”—what he called the liberal arts. We have seen that liberal arts education, from its origin in classical times to the present day, has often been associated with learning “for its own sake,” something that more recent liberal arts graduates often characterize as “finding your passion.” Viewing the reflections of these alumni through the lens of the psychological research suggests that the success of liberal arts colleges in sparking the passion to pursue learning for its own sake is not some sort of esoteric ideal, not at all “useless” or divorced from “real world” application, but is actually the fertile ground from which creative thinking arises. And creative thinking, perhaps more than ever, is the eminently practical (“useful”) skill needed for the future of our society.

# Liberal Arts and the Creative/Knowledge Economy

Although liberal arts education has a proven history of success for graduates, it is legitimate to ask—as many do—whether this pattern will continue into the future. We seem to be living in a period in which a “knowledge” or “information” economy has superseded the industrial economy of the past two and a half centuries. Some prefer the term, “creative economy,” summed up by one scholar as a world order in which information and ideas “establish economic value chains and encourage further technological innovation and diffusion of knowledge” (Peters). The sociologist Richard Florida has gone so far as to claim that “human creativity is the ultimate economic resource.”

Others offer an even more radical view that challenges traditional notions of “economy” altogether, noting that “knowledge defies traditional understandings of property and principles of exchange.” This claim stems from a recognition that knowledge is not depleted by use, is non-consumable, and its re-use, sharing, or modification may even add—rather than deplete—value (Peters). A perhaps utopian extension of this view is that a creative economy might offer such a substantial departure from traditional, scarcity-based economic thinking that it presents the potential not only of “increasing economic efficiency, innovation, [and] the quality of goods and services,” but also “equity between individuals, social categories, and generations” (Foray). The transformative experience of liberal arts education has traditionally led to success across many different fields in American society, but it stands to make an even greater contribution to success for persons and societies in the knowledge economy than it has in the industrial economy.

An understanding of this potential is motivating a number of countries around the world—whose educational systems have permitted less freedom, emphasized being “right” rather than taking intellectual risks, and favored rote learning over inquiry—to develop a strong interest in the American style of liberal arts education. In recent years “American-style” colleges and universities have been introduced in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, the former Soviet republics, and Latin America. These are indigenous phenomena, distinct from the “branch campuses” or partnerships that a number of U.S.-based universities have developed in non-U.S. venues. China and India, in particular, are recognizing that their highly rigid systems of post-secondary education have not been particularly successful in fostering creativity, innovation, or entrepreneurship. Even very prestigious technical universities are eager to introduce “liberal arts” into the curriculum. Ironically, others around the world are eagerly embracing the educational system that Americans themselves developed but have been increasingly prone to undervalue.

But public perception in America may be changing. In recent years—and particularly since the economic downturn of 2008—the age-old charge of “uselessness” has frequently been levelled at liberal arts education. Now, in 2015, there is evidence of a change in tone. In late July, for example, the liberal arts had three notable media appearances: 1) U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan for the first time alluded to the success of liberal arts graduates in a major speech; 2) *The New York Times* published a story detailing the remarkable success of graduates from one liberal arts college (Haverford) in a somewhat surprising field: management positions in major league baseball; and 3) *Forbes* magazine carried a cover story titled, “That ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech’s Hottest Ticket.” (This last topic—the success of liberal arts graduates in the technology field—also had been highlighted last year in a *Fast Company* article.)

It just may be that this increasing interest in liberal arts graduates is an overdue response to mounting evidence of the value of a liberal arts degree. In the painful period of recession, it was easy to assume—and many policy

makers and pundits did assume—that narrowly based technical training was the key to economic rebound and job growth, while fields of study such as art history, philosophy, and anthropology seemed esoteric and disconnected from economic realities. Now, however, “reality” is setting in. It turns out that the liberal arts skills of strong written and oral communication, addressing complex problems, team work, and creative thinking today trump—as they have in the past—sheer technical expertise. As one writer has noted, “Such nuances elude policymakers, who can’t shake the notion that tech-centered instruction is the only sure ticket to success” (Anders).

The *Forbes* article, cited above, provides fascinating evidence. In company after company, the need for technical positions has declined, while the need for more broadly trained individuals has increased. One tech start-up profiled in the article (Slack Technologies)—with a market valuation of \$2.8 billion—provides insight into why this might be true. The co-founder and CEO is a philosophy major with a graduate degree in the history of science. “Studying philosophy taught me two things,” he says, “I learned how to write really clearly. I learned how to follow an argument all the way down, which is invaluable in running meetings. And when I studied the history of science I learned about the ways that everyone believes something is true...until they realize that it isn’t true.” The article’s author quips, “Considering that Butterfield [Slack’s CEO] spent his early 20s trying to make sense of Wittgenstein’s writings, sorting out corporate knowledge might seem simple.”

Is liberal arts education likely to become the global system of choice for developing creative thinking and successful individuals? If so, there might be cause for celebration. But there is a problem.

As currently constituted, and in its historical form, liberal arts education typically takes place on a small scale. As we have seen, studies of pedagogical practice, as well as the statements of alumni, emphasize the centrality of personal attention, engagement, and mentoring relationships. It seems that “small” is a crucial factor in “success.” Would it be possible to scale up



the benefits found in the small liberal arts college? Indeed, we may be at a moment when, for the first time in history, it could be possible to do so, through the thoughtful and sensitive use of technology.

Admittedly, many early efforts have not been promising. The most egregious example was MOOCs (massive open online courses), the alleged value of which was grossly inflated by media frenzy in 2012. Undoubtedly we will learn something from this (mostly failed) experiment. It would be hard to imagine a use of technology more antithetical to what we know about effective learning. The concept of the MOOC was to utilize two pedagogical modes now gauged to be among the least successful—the lecture and the “chalk talk”—and to broadcast these to hundreds of thousands of would-be students.

Columnist Tom Friedman, among others, hailed the coming of a “revolution” in extravagant terms. He opined that, “Nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty... Nothing has more potential to unlock a billion more brains to solve the world’s biggest problems...” The reality, however, was that a scant 7 percent of enrollees actually completed a course—and those who did were typically already degree-holding adults, who were primarily adding a credential that they had the persistence and incentive to gain.

But, just as with individuals, so with institutions—failure can often lead to learning. Presentations and discussions at a recent global education conference in June 2015 of more than 500 international thought leaders in education and technology at Harvard were illuminating and heartening in this regard. While educational technology entrepreneurs have not given up on “scale,” there was virtually universal recognition that, even if one wishes to reach thousands—or hundreds of thousands—of students, successful instruction must be based on small-scale, human-to-human interaction.

In education, if we seek ways to make the demonstrated benefits of a liberal arts education available to more learners, to increase “access,” this turn

toward the use of technology for enhancing, rather than diminishing, personal interaction holds out new promise. Creative developments like this may hold the key to a future pedagogy in which “high tech” and “high touch” can truly combine to yield the best of both worlds. Technology has given us access to information broader than has ever been available before, but the personal guidance that characterizes liberal arts education is the alchemy that can transform information into knowledge—and even wisdom.

# The Future of the Liberal Arts

Liberal arts education has continuously evolved, arguably from the days when the Athenian sun glared down on Socrates to today, when learning increasingly takes place in the glare of a computer screen. Those who care about this kind of education and want to preserve and nurture it need to be clear about this fact, as well as about many other aspects of liberal arts learning that may not be broadly known or well understood (as outlined in this essay: What is its history? How does it work? What are its outcomes?) Indeed, I consider it a responsibility for each of us to dispel the myths about liberal arts education and seek opportunities to voice the facts. We need to take upon ourselves, individually, the work that CIC's *Securing America's Future: The Power of Liberal Arts Education* campaign has begun.

No one has a crystal ball to understand precisely how liberal arts education will evolve in the future. Undoubtedly, it will be intimately bound up with the continuing development of our information technologies. Since the time of the great library at Alexandria, humans have dreamed of a "universal library." Today, we have virtually realized that dream. The ubiquity and speed with which we can access information must and will play a large part in how we think about teaching and learning in the future.

What the recent past also has taught us, however, is that the core practices that have made liberal arts education so successful in the past cannot be effectively replaced by technology. Research in recent years has deepened our understanding of these core practices and their importance, at the same time

that experimentation with digital media in education has increased. A faculty member who is both excited about his or her discipline and cares personally about students' development; a community of learners, diverse in many ways but sharing a common commitment to understanding; a lived belief in education as a transformative experience for the whole person, not just as a transactional exchange—these are the characteristics of liberal arts learning that must and will continue to be a part of its development in the future.

It would be folly to predict just how these two imperatives—the full exploitation of technology's strengths and continuing respect for the centrality of personal relationships—will intertwine in the education of the future. But I believe that they can do so, in ways that will open even broader possibilities for liberal arts education.

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