

Chapter 3

Rethinking the Liberal Arts General Education

Kristina A. DuRocher
Kennesaw State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the value of a liberal arts education by considering how this educational model functioned in the past, how various stakeholders currently view it today, and how to reconceptualize general education from the current distributive model. By delving into the historical context while maintaining a clear understanding of the present, we can engage in a thoughtful analysis of existing challenges. Addressing present-day shortcomings can be effectively accomplished through a liberal arts-based general education, which has the potential to fulfill the global requirement for informed and engaged global citizens, the national need for an inventive workforce, and students' aspiration for profound higher education experiences.

RETHINKING THE LIBERAL ARTS GENERAL EDUCATION

In order to be entertaining and understood, humor must reflect the prevailing beliefs of a society. Thus, the common joke, “How do you get a Liberal Arts graduate off your porch?” “Pay them for the pizza,” activates a set of assumptions in the listener (Jodłowiec, 1991). In the United States, this humor would be amusing, founded as it is on the assumption of the poor economic prospects for graduates who possess a liberal arts degree. The segregating of the economic value of types of knowledge in American higher education, while a well-established and accepted practice, creates an unnecessary divide. As Chris Gallagher’s book *College Made Whole* notes, it is

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“neither accurate nor helpful to think of STEM as promoting economic prosperity” in contrast to other programs of studies (Gallager, 2019, p. 105). While higher education’s STEM-based curriculum is currently venerated in the United States for its perceived ties to prosperity and social standing, this perception diminishes the liberal arts as a humanistic area of study based purely on the assumed lack of monetary prospects such degrees offer, as noted in the opening joke. As a result, there is a damaging perception in modern society that is detrimental to those programs of study defined as liberal arts but also to general education curricula, which is often based on the core ideas of a foundational liberal education, designed to develop informed and engaged citizens. This devaluing of select disciplines requires a rehabilitation of not only the perceived value of a liberal arts college degree but also of benefits of a liberal arts-based general education for all majors.

Higher education has always been representative of what the populace values for its citizens. Throughout history, each society has constructed a narrative around knowledge: defining it, determining access to it, and assigning it a social and cultural status. Thus, the current American view of the liberal arts has been cultivated; this is advantageous, for it means the current narrative can be reconstructed. Tracing historical rationale for various curricula in higher education, as well as current challenges, offers modern institutions insight into how best to advocate for and develop a general education core that demonstrates the advantages of a foundational liberal education. In doing so, institutions can become agents of change in reshaping the narrative around the liberal arts, which in its current state serves as a barrier to a truly integrated curriculum.

PART I: A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIBERAL ARTS

To fully consider the opportunities that a liberal arts-based general education core curriculum can offer to United States colleges and universities first requires an understanding of higher education’s historical purpose and evolution. Often referred to as general education in modern American institutions, this foundational or core curriculum was historically referred to as a liberal arts or liberal arts education. The term “liberal” stems from the Latin phrase *artes liberales*, signifying “skills for living fully and freely” (Nugent, 2015, p. 3). Typically, it is defined as a common set of curricula that encompasses the societally determined requirements to be a responsible and engaged citizen.

The first to define a common curriculum were the ancient Greeks, which developed a scaffolded three-tiered educational progression where one set of skills was foundational to the next step, with the intention of preparing the free population for a civic life. (Abelson, 1906; Klauke, 2019). Over the next few centuries, the

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