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Reflections on My Liberal Arts Experience

By dedicating my undergraduate career to the study philosophy and music, I exposed myself to a crucible of inquiry familiar to many liberal arts students. It became the norm for family friends to ask me “What can you do with that?” I could sense their hope that my decision was just part of some phase of youth, and I quietly endured their implicit criticisms. After all, they were only concerned for my financial well-being. But that’s exactly the problem. Americans have come to see college simply as a means to accommodate themselves to the competitive job market. The belief that job-specific vocational schools are the only means to a successful life undermines the value of the liberal arts education. The overarching problem is rooted in the widespread belief that the most important lessons in life revolve around the achievement of wealth and status.

However, life is far more complicated than the quest for security. The economy is changing as the world is becoming more interconnected and complex at an exponential rate — and I have my liberal arts education to thank for introducing me to globalizing effects of hyper-connectivity. Future generations not only need specific career training, but also need adaptability, critical and ethical reasoning skills, and personal enrichment to help us realize our potential — and only an interdisciplinary educational approach can provide these tool sets. Steve Jobs said “It’s in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough — it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing.” I see no reason to draw a line between the arts and sciences, and this is why I’m genuinely inspired by the progressive modus operandi of liberal arts colleges.

Students need to feel a sense of purpose, and they must be taught how to think, not what to think. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education.”¹ No type of educational institution echoes this sentiment as loudly as the liberal arts college, and these indispensable values are exactly what my college experience has helped me to cultivate. I’ve been trained to be both a professional philosopher and musician. And although the latter training can be

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., 1947.

commercially viable, I've never felt I was in a job factory. Walking around a liberal arts campus feels like being surrounded by troves of accessible knowledge from a plethora of diverse academic fields. My education has consistently provided insight into how apparently disparate academic fields effectively tie together.

A degree provides a set of skills and experiences. By providing these from a holistic pedagogical approach, liberal arts colleges create protean graduates who have more overall adaptability, acuity, and creative potential. I'm genuinely thankful that I have the skill and experience to apply myself to a broad range of career options. For instance, in my philosophy classes I've studied ethnomusicology, aesthetics, political and race theory, cognition, and evolutionary theory. These disciplines directly intersect with my music classes, where I study music history, politics, theory, and performance. I didn't just learn musical and philosophical theories, I learned how music in the U.S. is directly influenced by the African diaspora, and I gained insight about philosophy itself by exploring authors from outside the typical canon. Architect Matthew Frederick aptly said "An architect knows something about everything. An engineer knows everything about one thing"² His point is that engineers who can draw upon a more extensive knowledge base will be vastly more innovative since their specializations will be manifold.

My education continually sharpens my creative and critical tools, and I apply what I've learned to my own compositions, where I've deconstructed rhythms and melodies from particular genres and periods. I'm fascinated with how brains recognize and construct patterns by anticipating parts of rhythmic and melodic structures that have yet to come, effortlessly extrapolating from past experiences. In order for my creative endeavors to succeed I must be able to select, synthesize, and channel appropriate information directly into my passions. My liberal arts education is far more than learning how to pursue a career of my choice, I've also been taught how to develop a personal and unique voice that reflects my values.

My studies have grounded my passions by teaching me how to pursue them independently, and I'm eternally grateful to my teachers for their encouragement and support. I now have the fundamental knowledge and skills to pursue my passions to an even greater extent once I graduate. My foremost plan is to volunteer at a great ape sanctuary in South Africa. I wish to aid in the conservation of the

² Matthew Frederick, 2007

chimpanzee and gorilla species by working with locals and studying both the behavior of individual apes and the complex social structure of their troops. During my volunteer time I'll apply my research with the aim of augmenting my personal understanding of our endangered relatives and assisting with their preservation. The scientific training afforded by my liberal arts education will be indispensable, as field data collection, entry, and evaluation are necessary tasks for the volunteers.

I'm eager to immerse myself within a completely different culture; to be around dissimilar lifestyles, personalities, and perspectives. We tend to define our identities through our similarities and differences with others, and I'm looking forward to furthering my self-understanding and opening myself up for new transformative experiences. I'm unsure if I would have developed such a respect for varying lifestyles and opinions if it weren't for my discussion-based classes that encouraged inclusivity. Engaging with others about important - and controversial - topics helped me to work through my own thoughts and background beliefs, helped me develop confidence in my identity, and directly demonstrated to me the value of listening. Some of the most insightful conversations have been with those with whom I disagree. It is part of our modern condition to realize that there are numerous ways to interpret and engage with the world. That being said, if I had any advice to give myself as a first-year student it would be to keep your head up and don't let anyone persuade you that your aspirations are too idealistic.

My liberal arts education has informed and inspired me to become a citizen of the world, an artist, and an individual equipped for personal fulfillment and success. My thoughts and ambitions are vastly more organized and articulated than they were when I started college. I've learned to patiently take a step back from the world and cultivate my understanding of my relationship to it methodically, one slice at a time. I'll always value the role my teachers played in my education, and the personal classroom settings promote strong bonds required to generate deep knowledge. For me, confidence is proportional to experience, and I'm satisfied knowing that my education experience has helped me develop the ability to flourish in various milieus. The world is pleading for positive change that requires the synergy of a new generation of multitalented proteans eager to engage. It is liberal arts schools, by the merit of their own pedagogy, who are at the forefront of answering this call and providing the means for such a generation to thrive and contribute.

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