

“When Am I Ever Going To Use This Stuff, Anyway?”

### Lessons from a Liberal Arts Education

“So why do we read these guys?” my professor asks. “Because they’re smarter than we are,” he replies without missing a beat. He is referring to the group he calls “The Biggies”: Dante, Shakespeare, and Chaucer. With those words, he sums up part of a public liberal arts education: reading and learning from those who are smarter than we are. This has value not because we come in as empty minds to be filled with the words of smart people, but because in reading and learning we discover truths about the outside world and our innermost selves. This kind of education is enduring.

In my experience, everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten, and everything I want to know I learned from “The Biggies.” I learned that when we ask if it’s either/or, the answer is often both/and. I learned that speaking truth to power comes at a cost, but we must do it anyway. I learned that ethical choices come at an equal cost, but we must make them anyway. I learned that human desire is fickle, and once we get what we want, we no longer want it. I learned that community demands individual sacrifices, and that love and duty are not simply abstractions, but ideals to be lived out every day. As my professor often says, there are not many problems which have not already been considered at some point in the history of the human race. Reading “The Biggies” has taught me to look beyond the present and situate my problems within the context of our shared experience of the human condition. A public liberal arts education teaches us to be humble.

Dante wrote in *Paradiso* that “different voices make sweet notes.” His commentary on the model community is a precursor to one of the foundational ideas of public liberal arts institutions. We believe people of different backgrounds can and should combine to create

something special. My experiences as a voice major and singing in Geneseo's Chamber Singers also prove Dante right. Singing is another aspect of my education which has taught me truths about how to live my fullest life, both as an individual and in my community. I have learned to never sing louder than I can sing beautifully. To listen to those around me. To know when I need to step back and let others' voices be heard. There is no greater exercise of community to my mind than singing in a choir. For a short time each week, the cares of the world fall away and all that remains is the experience of making music together.

I was also fortunate enough to travel to Italy for twelve days with Chamber Singers after the spring semester of my sophomore year. I'll never forget singing in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, tears streaming down our faces, as our voices filled the space. When we finished singing, there was no applause. The music simply dissipated, and the spell was broken. The tourists returned to milling about, examining the frescoes on the wall. It was as if we had never sung. But in that moment, I felt one of the most intense human connections I have ever experienced. Studies have shown that as singers perform together, their heartbeats fall into sync. We felt that connection, and singing there in Assisi I understood what "The Biggies" were trying to say: the human experience is bigger than us. The "sweet notes" we created with our "different voices" exemplify the community which we should strive to be a part of every day. The exercise of shared music-making has had a deep impact on my personal formation, and the greatness of public liberal arts education lies in the fact that formative experiences like these are accessible to anyone and everyone. The idea that people from different backgrounds can come together toward a shared goal is the essence of the principles underlying our society. A public liberal arts education prepares us to engage with our community and live in harmony with each other.

Interdisciplinary learning also reflects the ideals of accessibility and community, and the notion that anyone who attends a public liberal arts institution gets a great education which forms the whole person. When I tell people one of my majors is music, sometimes they ask why I did not audition for a conservatory, to which I usually answer that music was not my path of choice when I applied to colleges. However, as I look back on my undergraduate career, my answer changes. If I had attended a conservatory, I would not have been able to study Dante through geometry, read philosophy and English literature, or work on a theatrical production, all through courses I took outside my majors. The sheer breadth of disciplines from which public liberal arts students can choose underscores the greatness of this type of education. I often hear students complaining about having to take general education courses which, in their opinions, are irrelevant to their majors or future career paths. However, I more often meet people whose lives changed when one introductory-level course sparked an undiscovered passion. The idea that we take courses in order to have this outcome is behind the basic public liberal arts mission: to form whole people, who can succeed in a career and in society. A public liberal arts education allows us to nurture our diverse interests.

Interdisciplinary learning goes hand in hand with the ability to learn by doing. Active learning and applying what we learn is equally as important as learning from different disciplines. Where else but a public liberal arts institution would I have the opportunity to write an honors thesis about food in medieval Iberia while simultaneously conducting a piece of music I arranged for our men's choir? I have been lucky to have had many opportunities in my undergraduate career, from writing a paper which was submitted to the Dante Society of America to mixing the sound for three musicals. It is through this applied and active learning that

I have indulged my many passions and put the ideals I have learned here into practice. A public liberal arts education allows us to make our dreams happen.

My education has shown me that we do not live in isolation. We are part of a tradition of humanity stretching back thousands of years. We experience the same love, loss, agony, and triumph that characterized the struggles of our ancestors. My education has taught me to think critically about what I am told by smart people. Even “The Biggies” were human and flawed. It has taught me to live with others in community formed by mutual respect and understanding. We can live harmoniously if we learn to listen. My education has taught me to seek new experiences. This past fall I applied to the Cultural Ambassador program run by the government of Spain, and if I am accepted I will live in Spain for seven months to assist with teaching English. Public liberal arts education has inspired me to chase my dreams, and it inspires countless other students to live out the values they learn as undergraduates throughout their whole lives.