

The Liberal Arts Experience: An Education I Did Not Know I Needed

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I did not want to attend Truman State University. Even better, I was dead set against considering any small liberal arts university for my undergraduate education. As a junior in high school, I had been enrolled in small parochial institutions in a mostly rural area for the entirety of my education and I wanted, even needed, a change. My ideal undergraduate experience included a sprawling campus, bustling college town and massive tailgates for Saturday football games. I had already decided that I was going to be a dentist and was determined to thoroughly enjoy every second of my undergraduate journey while striving to reach that goal. Then something happened. For some reason, likely to avoid the nagging of my all-knowing mother, I finally relented and prepared to go on a college visit to the same university where I had already cancelled two previously scheduled tours.

Throughout the entire four-and-a-half-hour drive from my home to Kirksville, Missouri, all I could talk about was how much I was going to hate this school and how nothing could sway me from the big southern universities I had already visited. As we neared our destination, my sentiments only grew stronger as we passed field after field, fly-over town after fly-over town. After that visit, however, my mindset was completely changed. The staff, students, and professors I met were different than anywhere else I had toured, as they did not attempt to sell me on the frills and extras offered by the institution. They simply discussed topics revolving around the education standard, the relationships between students and their instructors, and the engagement within the community — topics of actual substance. Now, as a senior graduating from a liberal arts university, I reflect on these topics and how the liberal arts approach to knowledge,

community engagement and focus on the development of informed, active citizens shaped my college experience, and future, in the best manner possible.

The hallmark of a liberal arts institution is an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. However, an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge means something just a little different to every liberal arts student, professor, or administrator. To me, it means not only being well-rounded in a variety of subjects, but also understanding how these subjects build off each other and combine with cultural factors to create a comprehensive knowledge base to be focused upon and used by the student in their endeavors. I entered college with the basic desire to meet the requirements to get accepted into dental school. Now, after attending nearly four years at a liberal arts institution, I prepare to graduate and enter dental school with a different mindset and a new goal — to prepare myself to serve my future patients as best as I am able.

The interdisciplinary approach to knowledge has certainly set me on my way to reach this goal. Is there anywhere else but a liberal arts institution where a student could enter with only a major in health sciences on a pre-dental track and end up graduating with minors in Spanish for the professions, business administration and biology? I did not plan on pursuing any of those minors, but through my varied coursework I was able to clearly see how each of these aspects should fit into my educational background to help me become a better dentist. At what other type of institution could, on a whim, a student take a Junior Interdisciplinary Seminar course on music and political protest just to discover through a research project that Zimbabweans developed an entire genre of protest music as a health communication channel for countering the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980's? These are just a few examples of

what it means to have an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. Through this approach, relationships among topics become clear and students are transformed by the power to connect segments of knowledge in ways they never imagined.

Similar to interdisciplinary knowledge, community engagement is at the heart of liberal arts education. Liberal arts universities are structured in a way that allows and encourages students to see the importance of community and doing what you can to support those in the area you reside. My first experience with this topic was during Truman Week my freshman year which simply consisted of a trash pick-up day. Although this seems like a simple endeavor, it immediately introduced me to the importance of staying vigilant for ways I can make a difference in my community. This has been a recurring and instrumental aspect of my collegiate career as I have personally gone on to conduct a donation drive for basic oral health supplies for students at the local schools through the Harry S. Truman Leadership Program. As the recipient of several scholarships, I am required to hold a scholarship job in which I gladly volunteer for the Rural Community Workers Association by assisting in interpretation, grant writing and community advocacy for a largely overlooked and abused population segment composed of immigrant and refugee workers in the local meat processing industry. This mindset is equally shared by organizations on the campuses of liberal arts institutions. As a member and current president of Blue Key Honor Society I have helped to organize blood drives, coached YMCA youth soccer teams, volunteered in thrift stores and soup kitchens, visited nursing home residents, and numerous other activities. Granted, this innate desire to help others and engage

with my community was not initiated by the liberal arts process, but it was certainly developed, cultivated, and grown to the magnitude it is today.

I fully believe that the components of an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge and community engagement in a liberal arts environment leads to the development of informed, active citizens. In my specific circumstance, as a white male in the US, I never could have imagined I would help to fight the stigma against menstruation in Uganda. But, as the president of GlobeMed at Truman, I helped to do just that. Through education on an array of social justice issues in the club and via the liberal arts environment, I was able to speak to many organizations on campus and in the local and global community to raise awareness and funds for our partner in Uganda.

The development of an informed, active citizen is also reflected in my future goals. Next year I will be attending the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Dentistry as a member of the Health Professions Scholarship Program of the US Navy. Upon graduation from dental school, I will provide top tier dental care to the men and women who serve our country and those we seek to protect. Following the completion of my time in the Navy, my dream is to open a practice dedicated to providing oral healthcare to the largely underserved Latinx population in addition to participating in local government. I believe the liberal arts environment has not only been imperative to the formation of these plans and dreams but has made realizing them achievable. In summary, attending a liberal arts institution such as Truman State University completely revolutionized my undergraduate career, and I could not be more appreciative for the experiences and education I received.