



# LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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AN AALE SCHOLARS ESSAY



*Keynote Remarks*

*Kenan Center Quality Assurance Conference*

*Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

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# ABOUT AALE

Founded in 1992, the American Academy for Liberal Education is a broad-based, bipartisan organization dedicated to defending and nurturing excellence in liberal education and assuring access to a quality liberal arts education to all who seek the benefits it portends. The Academy works with a distinguished and nationally representative list of cooperating institutions to develop procedures for assessing general education programs and accrediting liberal arts institutions. AALE is listed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education as a recognized national accrediting agency for the accreditation and preaccreditation of institutions of higher education and programs within institutions of higher education that offer liberal arts degrees at the baccalaureate level. A principal purpose of the Academy is to accredit these institutions and programs in order to enable them to participate in programs authorized under the Higher Education Act (as amended) and other Federal programs not authorized by this Act.

# LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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W. R. CONNOR

Asking an ancient historian to speak about the future may seem like building a Ferrari with only reverse gears. The results of such an invitation are likely to be predictable: he'll begin with an apology saying you can't move forward unless you know where you're coming from. That will let him go back to the Greeks, almost certainly to the high classical period of Athens in the fifth century before our era. Then he will find some analogy back there, trace it through the Romans and Western Medieval traditions, spend some time on the medieval quadrivium and trivium, tip his hat to some nineteenth century works such as Cardinal Newman's *Idea of a University* and then suggest that the good old liberal arts are alive and well today, and if we just stick to our guns they will be alive and well in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

Right?

Not quite.

There is every reason to think that liberal education, however we define it, is in trouble in our society today. That unpleasant fact is obscured in two ways. First, the expansion of American education means that the absolute numbers don't look so bad. Between 1977 and 1994, the number of B.A.'s conferred in the United States rose 39%. A discipline would have to be in pretty bad shape not to show some increase in numbers when such expansion is taking place.

Second, the elite institutions — the finest small liberal arts colleges, the Ivies and their look-alikes in Chicago, Palo Alto, and a few other places, and the great publicly supported universities — are doing very nicely, at least on the surface. They profess a devotion to liberal education, have vast resources, financial and intellectual, and the bright and intellectually venturesome students they admit can get a superb liberal education, if they know where to look.

Look beyond this elite, study the statistics for higher education more generally and a rather different picture emerges. One can see that most clearly by contrasting the change in humanities majors in Liberal Arts I institutions and in Liberal Arts II institutions. Between 1966 and 1993 the percentage of humanities majors in the Liberal Arts I institutions declined from about 40% to about 30%. In Liberal Arts II institutions, it went from about 25% to 10%.

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<sup>1</sup>I do not mean to dismiss historicist surveys of the evolution of the concept of liberal education, but one must guard against the tendency to stress continuity over discontinuity and consensus over dissent. A useful exposition of the tension between rhetoric and philosophy: Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995). For a fuller discussion of the liberal arts in antiquity see the works mentioned in K. Raaflaub (below, note 4) p. 71.

Such figures suggest a significant cultural change. Even within the most prestigious institutions we can detect over the past generation a seismic shift in enrollment patterns, majors, faculty positions and compensation, prestige, and ultimately the power to decide what constitutes a bachelor's degree or a liberal education.<sup>2</sup>

The dreary task of assembling the data has most recently been carried a step forward by James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield; a preliminary statement of their results can be found in the May-June 1998 issue of *The Harvard Magazine*.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately we will need to study their evidence in greater detail, and to assess whether other observers are justified in reporting a recovery in humanities enrollments over the past few years. We will need also to extend the picture from the humanities to the social and natural sciences, for their data largely concern the humanities rather than the social and natural sciences, but the humanities are the bellwether disciplines for all the liberal arts. If they continue to decline, comparable changes must be expected in the pure sciences and many of the social sciences. Here are some excerpts from *The Harvard Magazine*:

Between 1979 and 1994, among all bachelor's degrees in higher education, three majors increased five- to ten- fold: computer and information sciences, protective services, and transportation and material moving. Two majors, already large, tripled: health professions and public administration. Already popular, business management doubled. English, foreign languages, philosophy and religion all declined. History fell, too....On the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test only nine percent of students now indicate interest in the humanities.

Measured by faculty salaries — a clear sign of prestige and clout — the humanities fare dismally. On average, humanists receive the lowest faculty salaries by thousands or tens of thousands of dollars; the gap affects the whole teaching population regardless of rank, within colleges as well as universities. Nationally, in 1976 a newly hired assistant professor teaching literature earned \$3,000 less than a new assistant professor in business. In 1984 that gap had grown to \$10,000. In 1990 it was \$20,000 and by 1996 exceeded \$25,000....Nor is English literature the runt of the litter. Fine arts, foreign languages and education are lower yet.

Humanists' teaching loads are higher, with the least amount of release and research time, yet they are now expected, far more than three decades ago, to publish in order to secure professional posts.

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<sup>2</sup> For the research institutions the decline in research support for the humanities has especially significant consequences. The evidence has been collected and well analyzed by John D'Arms in Alvin Kernan (ed.), *What Happened to the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 32-60. Although there is now some evidence that the negative trend discussed by D'Arms is being reversed, the vast disparity between research funding for the humanities and that available for the natural sciences, and the significant difference in the size and nature of teaching loads mean that humanists are less likely than their colleagues able to demonstrate the research achievements upon which so much depends in the modern research university.

<sup>3</sup> James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield, "The Market-Model University: Humanities in the Age of Money," in *The Harvard Magazine* (May-June 1998): 48 - 111.

In 1960, one of every six faculty members professed the liberal arts; in 1988, one of thirteen.

By all available measures, national performance in the humanities has declined. Scholastic Aptitude Test verbal scores have fallen. Even allowing for the undisputed complexity of the cause, the key fact is that they have dropped far more than SAT math scores, both reported for the same population. Moreover, top performers (scores of 750 or higher) in math have climbed; in language they have plunged.

Past declines of the humanities were changes in degree. In 1998 with weakened faculties and less well-prepared students, we face an imminent dangerous change in kind. As a society we seem to be saying that the more we expand the number of students enrolled in college, the less important it is for them to study the humanities.

Extrapolate these trends — or talk to a typical graduating senior — and you will conclude, I believe, that liberal education at the undergraduate level is an endangered species and likely to face extinction in another generation or so, in at all but the wealthiest and most protective institutions. If recent trends continue, the liberal arts will be replaced by some form of vocationalism, in disguise perhaps, or migrate into other environments, such as Master of Arts in Liberal Studies programs, for adults who recognize what they missed in their undergraduate education.

These kids are panicked — or more precisely their parents are panicked — at the thought of spending \$100,000 for a college education and not finding immediate fame and fortune upon the awarding of diplomas.

That is precisely why I think it is so important to look back to the origin of this concept and to seek there some guidance in our present distress.

So I went off in search of the Holy Grail, the earliest passages that talk about a liberal education. The trail led quickly to Athens in the fifth century before our era but then bogged down in controversy.<sup>4</sup> Classicists agree that the idea of a liberal education originated in contention about the nature of a democratic culture in the Culture Wars of democratic Athens, if you like anachronisms.<sup>5</sup>

I wasn't content with that. I wanted to find the earliest extant passages that apply the word "liberal" to an education. Here are the two earliest I found:

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<sup>4</sup> The most useful discussion of the origin of the concept of a liberal education is Kurt Raaflaub, "Democracy, Oligarchy, and the Concept of the 'free citizen'," in *Political Theory II* (1983): 517-544, esp. sec. IV. As will appear, I disagree in several respects with Raaflaub, but have greatly benefitted from his path breaking work.

<sup>5</sup> The idea of a liberal education may be implicit in Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.7.4, but the terminology is at best an allusion. Similarly, Plato's *Protagoras* explores all the issues, but never explicitly labels the education he has in mind as "liberal."

Stesimbrotus of Thasos wrote during the fifth century before our era, a work, now largely lost, which included these comments on one of the most successful military commanders of that century, Cimon, son of Miltiades:

[Cimon] acquired no literary education, nor any other liberal and distinctively Hellenic accomplishment...he lacked entirely the Attic cleverness and fluency of speech...the fashion of the man's spirit was rather Peloponnesian [sc. than Athenian].<sup>6</sup>

A few decades later Isocrates, one of the most thoughtful of ancient rhetoricians, in his *Panegyricus* (380 BC), argued that his native Athens was the fountainhead of oratorical skill. That skill, moreover, was the most desirable skill anyone could possess:

...whether men have been liberally educated from their earliest years is not to be determined by their wealth or such advantages, but is made manifest most of all by their speech... and that those who are skilled in speech are not only men of power in their own cities but are also held in honor in other states.

These are the two earliest passages to mention a liberal education. Slim pickings, you say. Fair enough, but note three common features in these passages:

First, they refer directly to Athens in the time of its democracy.

Second, they associate a liberal education not so much with content as with skill, specifically skill in public speaking, "rhetoric" they would say, although they included in that the analysis of a problem, the formulation of a response, and an understanding of audience psychology.

Third, they imply that rhetoric is one way to political leadership. That, of course, was just common sense in a developing democracy where most decisions were made in an assembly of debating, squabbling citizens. But the democratic Athenians never had the anxiety so many Americans have about leadership. They would fine, remove from office, ostracize, or exile individual leaders but they never felt that leadership itself was necessarily "elitist" or "undemocratic."

These three features of our earliest allusions to the liberal education have a close parallel in the picture of the Sophist Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of that name. Although that dialogue does not use the phrase "liberal education," Protagoras' teaching and the Socratic-Platonic critique it provoked make this the foundation document for understanding what Greeks in the time of Athenian democracy meant by a liberal education. The dispute between Protagoras and Socrates in the dialogue turns on a question about a political-rhetorical skill, clearly a recurring topic in educational thought in this period. Can this skill which Protagoras professes to teach in fact be taught? The Platonic dialogue, in other words, shares with the other passages we have examined a focus on skill, rhetoric, and political leadership in a democracy.

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<sup>6</sup>Plutarch, *Cimon*, in the *Loeb Classical Library*, trans. B. Perrin. It is clear, I believe, that Stesimbrotus meant this lack of Attic characteristics was a good thing.

Etymology also points in a the same direction. When we say “liberal” education, we are not, of course, talking about the dreaded “L” word of recent American political sloganeering, nor are we even referring to the free play of ideas as in traditional liberal political theory. We are borrowing and translating a Greek term *eleutherios*, “free,” a word used most commonly to contrast free people from slaves.<sup>7</sup>

A “liberal education” means what a free person ought to know as opposed to what a well educated and trusted slave might know. Such a slave might well know a trade, manage a business, run a bank, cut a deal. Athenian slaves did these quite well from time to time, and sometimes did quite well for themselves, too. Some of them developed a craft or a skill, a *techne*, the Greeks would call it, using the word from which we get “technique” and “technology”. (There is nothing highfalutin’ about the word *techne* in Greek, hence my preference for translating it “skill” rather than “art.”)

Some slaves possessed valuable skills and could be better managers than their masters.<sup>8</sup> What slaves (and women, alas) were not allowed to do, was speak in the assembly, or participate in any other of the rights and duties of a free citizen, the jury system, diplomacy, war. Those activities also took skills — *technai*, but skills of a kind quite different from those looked for in a slave.

Our term “liberal arts” is derived directly from a Latin translation of the Greek *technai*. Since the skills needed to be an effective citizen are so prominent in the Greek conception of a liberal education, it’s not too much of a stretch to retranslate “liberal arts” as “the skills of freedom.” Since freedom or slavery was so often at stake in citizen decision makings, these were, as well, the skills needed to preserve freedom.

The emergence of an idea of liberal education in democratic Athens was, in my view, not an accident, but a necessity. Athens had to create a democratic culture and a “liberal education” if it was going to survive among the piranha states of the ancient Mediterranean. Over the course of the fifth century we can see an older, largely literary and aristocratic culture, transformed into an education adapted to the needs of a new more nearly democratic society. The old education with its emphasis on the memorization and performance of literary texts did not disappear, but was largely subsumed in a new pattern aimed at the development of new skills.

Those skills certainly included the ability to speak correctly, persuasively, and cogently — grammar, rhetoric and dialectic as they would be called in the later trivium. They included enough arithmetic to keep an eye on the city’s books, enough geometry to deal with surveying and land issues, and eventually enough astronomy not to be trapped in superstitious dread every time an eclipse appeared. Add harmony to arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, and you have the quadrivium of medieval times.

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<sup>7</sup> It also has connotations of generous, spirited, outspoken, and living the way you want.

<sup>8</sup> On well to do slaves in Attica see E. E. Cohen, “Wives, Slaves and the Banker,” ch. 4 in *Athenian Economy and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).



These seven liberal arts derive ultimately from what had happened in the century during which democracy was hammered out in the political controversies of classical Athens. This civic origin for a liberal education blurred before long.

Intellectuals preferred to talk about “all round education” – or “in-a-circle education” – *enkuklios paideia* – Yes, that’s the etymology of our word “encyclopedia.”<sup>9</sup> And the tendency was to expand an older education focused on the specific skills needed by the free citizen to a broader and more comprehensive education. There was, moreover, snob value in being a citizen, so liberal arts sometimes became synonymous with a “gentleman’s education.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as city states found themselves eclipsed by the monarchies of the period after the conquests of Alexander the Great and eventually by Roman domination, the original, highly civic sense of “liberal education” waned. As new populations, Carians, Egyptians, Syrians, and others made their accommodations with the Romans and wanted their share of the benefits of the Pax Romana, they found they needed to become part of the shared culture of the Mediterranean basin — and that required speaking Greek well, knowing Greek literature, at least a little, and acting like Greeks as well. They Hellenized in order to become part of the educated elite. A liberal education, when all was said and done, was the best route to social advancement and economic opportunity.

Vocationalism triumphed.

And so eventually did Christianity and with it a reconceptualization of the liberal arts as “propaedeutic,” that is as the essential preliminaries for understanding a theology that had grown up in the Greek culture of the Roman period. This view of the Liberal Arts helped preserve classical literature through the barbarian invasions and from fanatics and book burners. But it was a far cry from the old classical Greek idea of a liberal education. To be sure, the goal was still a leadership elite, but the elite was for the Christian *ekklesia*, not for the old pagan assembly.

The transition from an original “civic” understanding of a liberal education to an emphasis on broad content has been recapitulated in our own country. The earliest colleges in our land were created with a view to producing an indigenous educated leadership for the colonies. We were not yet a republic, let alone a democracy, but somehow these settlers knew the skills that were needed, and found ways to develop them. A cadre of leaders attained them, not all from colleges and universities, and applied them in the founding of this republic.

Over time things expand. In the curriculum this often involves a gradual change in emphasis from skills to content. In antiquity liberal education came to be equated with the *enkuklios paideia*, the circle of subjects with which the educated person was expected to be acquainted. A similar movement can be seen in modern times in the expansion of the curriculum and in

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<sup>9</sup> See L. M. de Rijk, “Ἐγκυκλιος Παιδεία: A Study of its Original Meaning,” in *Vivarium* 3, (1965): 24-93.

<sup>10</sup> On “Gentleman’s Education” see Kimball (above, note 1) pp. 110 - 113. In Greek antiquity there was a similar tendency to contrast “banausic” skills with the culture of the liberally educated: Plato *Republic* 495d; Raafflaub (above, note 4) n. 60.

the effort to make it more inclusive. The results have been, in my view, a net gain. I for one would like to take some of the courses that are now available but simply did not exist a generation ago. But expansion drives up costs and, unless shaped by a clear sense of purpose, makes it difficult to explain in clear terms the rationale behind the curriculum. Parents, even more than students, start asking what return they will get on their investment. Curricular expansion thereby builds the pressure for a more vocational education.

The alternative, to *my* way of thinking is to be very clear about the goals of a liberal education, not to hesitate to define those goals as “skills” rather than content, and among them to give special emphasis to leadership and citizenship, and to insist that each course and program make clear how it helps develop those skills.

I realize this will seem excessively rigorous to some and insufficiently alert to the ways in which a liberal education enriches personal lives, especially through a heightened appreciation of literature and the other arts, or to the sheer delight that comes from knowledge for knowledge’s sake. There is much to be said about the importance, even the centrality of literature and the arts in a liberal education — and not only for purely personal reasons. These subjects also have a civic significance, not least through the invigoration of the moral imagination. My purpose here is simply to suggest that the balance between the personal and the civic, between private gratification and public duty, has been skewed in our educational system and needs to be redressed.

You see where this line of reasoning leads. If I am right in thinking back to the origins of these skills of freedom in the developing democracy of Athens, then the central question for the liberal arts today is not: How do we market ourselves? How much vocationalism do we put into the curriculum? Or how closely can we imitate the research university? It is, What does it take to create a truly open, free society in this strange new world we have entered in recent years? What are the skills of freedom today?

I do not believe any of us has an adequate answer to that question or the many related questions it entails: Are we still essentially citizens of nation states or are we ready to act as citizens of a global community?<sup>11</sup> What does it take to make wise decisions in a world as complicated as ours? How does a citizen know when to trust and when to distrust the experts? How much science and what kind? How much math and what kind? How much economics and in what context and how do we bring into the open the values and premises behind “economic rationality?” Do foreign languages matter any more when everything is in English or Java? What place should the study of the media have in a liberal arts education?

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<sup>11</sup> For a strong case for a globalized understanding of the liberal arts see Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press, 1995), e.g.: xi for several years before I began work on this book, I found myself living and raising children in a multicultural and multinational family, whose origins were in India, Germany, Italy, and England. Through my own awareness of my ignorance, I learned to ask questions about the education I had received, which gave me no information about Hinduism and Islam, about Indian history, or indeed about the economic and social situation of the developing world in general....

I do not claim to know the answer to these questions, but I believe that the key to answering is to keep clearly in focus the original understanding of the importance of the skills of freedom. I am confident, moreover, that many of the traditional humanistic disciplines have nothing to fear, and everything to gain, from encouraging a thorough re-assessment of the liberal arts along the lines we have been discussing. The ability to read texts closely, an alertness to turn of phrase or shift of argument, clear thinking and effective argument in all their forms, good writing, an understanding of how individuals and communities in the past have dealt with practical challenges and moral perplexities, alertness to the ironies of history, the ability to imagine the situation of others and to assess the responses most likely to prove effective are still rare commodities in our society. The greatest problem confronting the liberal arts is not a glut of graduates possessing these qualities, but the difficulties of developing them more fully at every stage of education. In that effort we have perhaps more allies than we might think, including those outside academia who know how much they are needed in our society today. Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, so the liberal arts cannot be the exclusive prerogative of those of us in academia. Thoughtful, committed people from outside academia — we all know some of them — can help keep us focused on the importance of these skills of freedom in this time of radical, unpredictable change.

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