

Why Liberal Education Matters

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The true aim of the humanities is to prepare citizens for exercising their freedom responsibly.

By PETER BERKOWITZ

In 1867, when he discharged his main responsibility as honorary rector of St. Andrews University by delivering an address on liberal education to the students, the philosopher and civil servant John Stuart Mill felt compelled to defend the place of the sciences alongside the humanities. Today it is the connection of the humanities to a free mind and citizenship in a free society that requires defense.

For years, an array of influential voices has been calling for our nation's schools and universities to improve science and math education. Given the globalized and high-tech world, the prize, pundits everywhere argue, goes to the nations that summon the foresight and discipline to educate scientists and engineers capable of developing tomorrow's ideas.

No doubt science and math are vital. But all of the attention being paid to these disciplines obscures a more serious problem: the urgent need to reform liberal education.

At the university level, enrollments in humanities courses have fallen precipitously and philosophical positivism is rampant. Many social scientists go beyond the sensible view that the scientific method is indispensable to achieving knowledge to a more dogmatic view that it is the one true form of reasoned inquiry and that only its results deserve to be called knowledge. The positivists disparage all other forms of inquiry and analysis as literature or journalism—by which they mean writings that are intrinsically unsystematic, subjective and of little intellectual value.

At the primary and secondary education level, according to UNESCO statistics, America spends more instructional time on math and science than almost any other country surveyed. We also spend significantly more money per student than the countries that beat us in international math and science tests, including Japan and South Korea. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicate that over the

course of a student's primary and secondary education, the U.S. spends around \$123,000 on educating students, Japan about \$92,000, and Korea about \$74,000.

Nevertheless, American primary grade students' overall test scores fall in the middle of the pack of the high-income, democratic countries that compose the OECD, while American secondary students' overall test scores tend toward the bottom. The highest achievers do pretty well, although their performance comes in below the average among the OECD's highest achievers.

So science and math education is a mixed bag, resources are not the problem, and reform is very much in the national interest. But science and math education reform begins with the reform of liberal education, of which it is a part.

Liberal education supposes that while individual rights are shared equally by all, the responsible exercise of those rights is an achievement that depends on cultivating the mind. Reading, writing and arithmetic are the basics that free societies rightly hold parents responsible for ensuring that their children master. Many of these children live productive and satisfying lives with the knowledge and training they acquire by the time they graduate from high school. Still, the liberal education to which our colleges and universities pay lip service represents the culmination of a citizen's preparation for freedom.

The drop in humanities enrollments has a lot to do with the pretentious and opaque theorizing that humanities professors have inserted between students and the study of history, literature and philosophy. Meanwhile, confused faculty and incoherent university curricula encourage students to equate liberal education with studying whatever they please. Education for freedom requires more systematic training.

How can one think independently about what kind of life to live without acquiring familiarity with the ideas about happiness and misery, exaltation and despair, nobility and baseness that study of literature, philosophy and religion bring to life? How can one pass reasoned judgment on public policy if one is ignorant of the principles of constitutional government, the operation of the market, the impact of society on perception and belief and, not least, the competing opinions about justice to which democracy in America is heir?

How can one properly evaluate America's place in the international order without an appreciation of the history of the rise and fall of nations, and that familiarity with allies and adversaries that comes from serious study of their languages, cultures and beliefs?

A proper education, culminating in a liberal education, gives science an honored place. It teaches students, among other things, the fundamentals of the scientific method and the contribution that science has made to human security, freedom and prosperity; it exposes all students to the basic achievements of biology, chemistry and physics; and it encourages

those with aptitude to specialize. At the same time, a liberal education brings into focus the limits of science, beginning with the impossibility of explaining the value of science and math in scientific and mathematical terms—to say nothing of science's incapacity to account for the worth and dignity of the individual.

For the sake of science and math, for the sake of international competitiveness, and even more for the sake of defending the worth and dignity of the individual, the reinvigoration of the humanities and the restoration of liberal education as education for freedom must become a priority.

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