Of Bookworms & Busybodies

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Recommended Citation
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In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered a withering critique of the state of American higher education to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard. His speech, “The American Scholar,” bristled with barbs at the bearded sages who made up his audience — the Harvard faculty, which had considered Emerson a mediocrity when he was their student.

First, he attacked their worship of old books. “Meek young men,” Emerson said, “grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the view which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given.” When they accept this authority, he went on, “instantly the book becomes noxious; the guide is a tyrant,” and the reader is reduced to a mere “bookworm.”

Second, he chided the members of America’s pre-eminent learned society for their lack of engagement in active life: a man who lives a life without action, he said, “is not yet a man.” Emerson thus argued for liberation from the tyranny of old books and the embrace of the active life as a corrective to the vices of contemplativeness that, in his view, plagued the scholarly audience before him.

Times have changed since 1837. Our scholarly establishment bears only the vaguest resemblance to the one Emerson attacked. Yet we, too, have our characteristic blind spots and weaknesses. What are they? Are we still the passive bookworms Emerson described, or do our difficulties lie elsewhere?

The most obvious problem with American higher education today is its grotesque sticker price. For this, there is plenty of blame to go around. Administrators build legacies by creating programs and positions to address campus concerns, both real and imaginary; these things cost money. Faculty want raises, sabbaticals and research support; these things also cost money. Parents and students want nice gyms and dining halls and dorm rooms, freshly mown grass, ubiquitous Wi-Fi, and, above all, that priceless bubble, reputation. All these things cost money.

But the deeper problem with the contemporary state of American higher education is not financial or even institutional, but philosophical. The present generation of administrators and faculty is not very good at explaining what a liberal education is, and why students and parents should pay the exorbitant price we charge for it.

When asked to explain ourselves, faculty and administrators face two opposed temptations. One is to wrap ourselves in the mantle of faculty self-governance, haughtily asserting that we do not need to justify our activity to students or their parents, but only to each other, as we bearers of Ph.D.s are the only competent judges of what constitutes a liberal education. Behind closed doors, we go along to get along, indulging our colleagues’ research interests, their political hobby-horses, and even their actual hobbies, resulting in incoherent curricula cobbled together out of courses such as “Surfing and American Culture” and “The Horror Film in Context” (real courses, presently taught at prestigious American universities). In the face of this distinctly academic combination of arrogance and fecklessness, increasing public demands for greater accountability are understandable.

This leads to the alternative temptation, perhaps even more dangerous: justifying what we do in terms of the commercial marketplace.

The virtues of liberal education — and why it is worth pursuing.
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This leads to the alternative temptation, perhaps even more dangerous: justifying what we do in terms of the commercial marketplace.
Since we’re asking for a $200,000 investment, we justify its worth in terms of its effects on one standard of living. There is some truth to this, college graduates earn about $1 million more over a lifetime than high school graduates, according to the census bureau. But this kind of cost-benefit analysis to justify liberal education is a dangerous game. The typical liberal arts education is not like most vocational courses in nursing or information technology, for example, mere apprenticeship to some of those courses in Shakespeare, theoretical physics, or my own discipline, political philosophy, areas traditionally understood to be at the heart of liberal education.

What, then, is liberal education, and why is it worth pursuing? What can liberal arts colleges such as Furman say to justify their pricey education, and why is one worth pursuing? For Tocqueville, one of the deities of the liberal arts, the productive citizen of a commercial society — to people who are not aristocrats and have no intention of spending their lives locked in libraries.

A liberal arts education can serve as the foundation of a variety of activities that constitute the leisurely, contemplative way of life so characteristic of old books, friendship centered on conversation, and the cultivation of the capacity and taste for solitary reflection. A liberal arts education is an nurture of all of these activities, begetting a lifelong disposition to engage in them.

For now, I want to argue for the importance of the first activity — studying old books precisely the kind of devotion Emerson attacked in “The American Scholar.” What good does this activity do for students, particularly those who do not plan to be scholars? What does it offer to them in terms of the roles they can expect to play in life when they leave college — as someone’s future husband or wife, as someone else’s future mother or father, and as a human being who longs for happiness and desires to understand his or her place in the world?

A comment from the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau provides a useful starting point for considering this question. According to Rousseau, philosophy is something “man needs in order to be able to understand things of the mind of the bourgeois, the productive citizen of a commercial society — to people who are not aristocrats and have no intention of spending their lives locked in libraries.”

But in his environment dehumanized by work, “the bourgeois” is locked in libraries.

The liberal arts can be understood as nothing less than the arts that teach us how to avoid taking our existence for granted. The gods defeated us, and punished and hobbled us by cutting us in half, an operation that left us longing for our primordial wholeness. We ran away from this in the hope of becoming whole, but our nature evolved in our absence, and our experience of ourselves as painfully, almost unnaturally, incomplete.

To see the people around us and the natural whole we inhabit on their own terms, to wonder at them and encounter them in their full meaningfulness, not to see them as tricks of the brain.

This is precisely what the liberal arts have to teach. One could give countless examples of phenomena old books can teach us really see it with our own eyes — really experience it. Strongly enough, this self-aware, experientially lively ignorance has to be learned. Perhaps, the most radical thing this self-aware, experientially lively ignorance has to be learned.

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To be clear, I have no intention of disparaging nursing or information technology. Names and nomenclature do real and palpable good in the world, more so than many college professors. But vocational education and liberal education are not the same thing.

What, then, is a liberal education, and why is one worth pursuing? What can liberal arts colleges such as Furman say to justify their enduring existence when Americans have begun to question the costs of higher education? Since we’re asking for a $200,000 investment, we justify its worth in terms of its effect on one standard of living. There is some truth to this; college graduates earn about $1 million more over a lifetime than high school graduates, according to the census bureau. But the use of this kind of cost-benefit analysis to justify liberal education is a danger to this philosophy. The cost-benefit analysis of vocational courses in nursing or information technology, for example, are mere attempts at reducing those of courses in Shakespeare, theoretical physics, or my own discipline, political philosophy, areas traditionally understood to be at the heart of liberal education.

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is minimally delightful. Given this understanding, the seminar room, the surgery, the theatre, the basketball court and the soup kitchen are all mere likely places to look for happiness than the bar or the beach.

Finally, on the question of the character of the world in which we find ourselves, the book of Genesis can help us see that real world anew by raising the question, which is perhaps the most basic question, there are: Why does the whole, the universe, exist at all? Why do we experience it as beautiful, and as ordered in a way our minds can, at least partially, understand? Giving full and final answers to such questions is, of course, probably beyond the capacity of the human mind. Nonetheless, by raising those questions, Genesis allows us to see the world not as a mere collection of natural resources to be exploited for our practical benefit but as an astonishing marvel at whose source we can only wonder.

By opening our eyes to the strangeness of our life and its many gifts, old books can thus help us experience love, family, happiness, and the question of the whole on their own terms. One does not necessarily need to go to college to experience this revelation, but it helps. The books I’ve drawn on are from distant times and places. They contain strange images, demanding arguments, and paradoxical propositions that are most difficult to understand, particularly on a first reading. To pierce them requires a level of attention almost impossible to give when immersed in the functionalities of post-collage life, when work and children typically demand the best of one’s time and energy. Leisure, guidance from properly trained teachers, and the company of fellow inquirers who share the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts.

Perhaps Emerson was right to warn the Harvard faculty about the tyranny of old books and the vices of idleness in 1837. Over the long term, however, it seems to me that Tocqueville more deeply understood the relationship between liberty and liberal education in democratic times. For Tocqueville understood that impracticality, not idleness, is the characteristic vice of democratic peoples, and that the present, not the past, is most prone to tyrannize over the democratic mind. If liberal education can liberate the mind from that tyranny, one could seriously defend it as practical.

“Practicable,” however, is a vague term, and a liberal education in our time costs an enormous amount of very real money. Can universities justify charging, can families justify paying, all these hard-earned dollars for what liberal education has to offer? That is for administrators, faculties, students and parents to decide.

But perhaps we can think more clearly about the proper price of a liberal education if we see it for what it truly is: Liberal education, rightly understood, is the most useful tool available to us in what George Orwell called the “constant struggle” necessary “to see what is right in front of our faces.” Liberal education, rightly understood, is the education that liberates the human person from the very real and costly temptation to take one’s whole existence for granted. [7]

The author, an associate professor of political science, joined the Furman faculty in 2005.

This essay emerged from the inaugural Francis W. Brown American Scholar Lecture, delivered by Benjamin Storey on August 31, 2011. The lecture series was established by Furman’s Phi Beta Kappa Society (Emissaries of South Carolina) to recapture the spirit and tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Phi Beta Kappa lecture on August 31, 1837. The series highlights the ideals of Phi Beta Kappa, the nation’s oldest academic honor society, and the centrality of liberal learning in the American experience, and is designed to give students a better sense of how their degrees fit into a broader world of ideas at the commencement of a new academic year. It is named in honor and memory of Francis W. Brown, longtime university president and academic dean, who championed the establishment of a Phi Beta Kappa chapter at Furman.

Americans, who care so much about the goods of the body, are nevertheless keenly aware that we also have souls, and that souls need their own kind of food.

As Peter Lawler of Barry College, who spoke at Furman in 2010 as part of the Tocqueville Program Lecture Series, has pointed out, the Puritans believed that “nobody was above work, and nobody was below leisurely contemplation about our true destiny.” In this sense, while liberal education may seem impractical when considered from the vantage point of the commercial marketplace, it looks distinctly more practical if we ask what is practical for beings who are more than just bodied, and are possessed of more than just bodily needs.

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