

Why is a liberal education relevant today?

This question is a great example of the soul-searching individuals and institutions have been doing for some time. Other closely-related questions are “*What is the right kind of education?*”, and “*Given a finite amount of time and money, what should be studied and what should be omitted?*” These are important considerations not just for an individual’s edification, but also for our society and our world.

An initial response to the question must include a definition of liberal education. A common approach to a definition includes *an integration of learning across curriculum and between academic and experiential modes, usually with a variety of options for the student to choose from*. But within the deeper context of the opening question, a more pointed rendering might be *the appropriate education to cultivate a free human being or an education every free person (that is to write, all people) should have*.

With these later definitions, choice becomes an interesting dimension. Will *anything* suffice to cultivate a free person? Almost certainly not. But if you don’t specifically read this or that book are you excluded from the realm of the free? Probably not. So, perhaps the focus is not specifically on particular authors, rather on disciplines or areas of thought and societal development. Of course developments are achieved by human beings, and there are some individual authors who, if they were to be omitted from the conversation (e.g. Aristotle and philosophy, or Newton and physics) one could reasonably argue that the studied subject is lacking. Still, if we were to focus on areas of study, perhaps the following would be a natural starting point:

What is the best way to live a life?

How do we know what we know?

What is the best political system to encourage human flourishing?

What is the nature of reality and of human kind?

What is the nature of matter?

Is there a God and what might God’s nature be?

How can we recognize the good, the just, and the moral?

What is happiness?

From the farthest antiquity to the present day, these are among the questions of liberal education.

The most business-driven student has the above questions as central cares, even if they are not at the foreground of consideration. If this is true, then an education that addresses these areas would be one that is serving a great purpose. If the business- or practically-focused education does not address these cares, at least in part, then perhaps this is an education that will need to be amended. But the reverse is also true... as a part of living a good life, people need to support themselves financially, and that means having skills not just of value but hopefully of enjoyment. A proper education, within a school or outside of it, would seem to need to address these practical concerns as well.

A further dimension to consider is development over time and place. A criticism of liberal education, specifically within the accepted great books variety, is that the vast majority of the included authors are European males, which may miss a wide variety of experiences and understandings. The criticism is worth careful consideration on at least three points. First, the West has set the primary pattern for the larger world in politics, science, technology, mathematics, logic, and economics (there are many reasons for this, but that is the subject of another paper). It is true that part of the West's dominance came through colonization and violence. It is also true that this dominance came from discovered truths (at least in the hard sciences and mathematics). It follows that a deep understanding of these discovered truths and Western development in general would begin with Egypt and Greece and move forward where developments occurred. It also follows that Western citizen men were allowed and encouraged to explore and develop these ideas where others were not, hence the disproportional representation. Second, when all genders and nationalities are allowed and encouraged to develop exploration, thought, and creativity, we see production completely on par with Western men. Therefore, there is nothing particular about Western men that can produce these works, rather this work is the imperative of any interested and dedicated human. Third, if we are to focus on areas of study instead of authors, the liberal education cannon vastly opens to keep Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and everyone else in the great books conversation, but can also include the Tao Te Ching, the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran, Confucius, Murasaki Shikibu, Toni Morrison, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Hannah Arendt, Mahatma Gandhi, Richard Feynman, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Flannery O'Connor, and too many others to mention. The preliminary work for teachers and leaders is to strive to understand this expanded thinking, to incorporate these developments into the full response to the central cares mentioned above, and to modify, augment, redefine, and re-evaluate how knowledge, progress, and flourishing are accomplished. This is the task that belongs to everyone, to all people... naturally and self-evidently free. So...

Liberal education will only become irrelevant when human nature changes to such an extent that we are no longer human.

"The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in the groves of Plato, that formed the trivium and the quadrivium, and is to-day laid before the freedmen's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its contents richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal, — not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes."

— W.E.B. Du Bois - *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter Five