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# The Liberal Arts and Presidential LEADERSHIP

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I'm indeed honored to address this gathering of leaders of colleges historically committed to a strong liberal arts education, and glad that my husband Robert Keohane, who is chairing the presidential search committee of his alma mater, Shimer College, is also attending the conference. All of us are here in part to celebrate the impressive record of our campuses and reaffirm our commitment for the future. But there are also challenges that we need to face together. We should pool our ideas and energies, and think strategically about how we can most effectively champion liberal arts education today and in the future. My task is to set the stage for these discussions.

Here's how I will proceed: first, I'll say a few words about the liberal arts as a historic phenomenon with much resonance in our world today. Then I'll present four arguments that may be useful to you as you confront the skeptics. Finally, I'll talk briefly about leadership and how *you* can make a difference.

## **The liberal arts through history**

Any one of you here today could give a persuasive definition of the liberal arts, and doubtless have done so

many times. I am especially fond of Thomas Cronin's definition of the liberal arts as "the liberating arts—freeing us from prejudice, dogmatism, and parochialism, from complacency, sentimentality, and hypocrisy, from sloppy reasoning and careless writing." A liberal arts education doesn't always accomplish all those things, but it surely gives us a good beginning. Cronin has presided over two liberal arts colleges, and his definition appears in a recent book entitled *Leadership and the Liberal Arts*, edited by J. Thomas Wren. Here's another pungent definition of a liberal education by Louis Menand, in *The Marketplace of Ideas*, as "a background mentality, a way of thinking, a kind of intellectual DNA that informs work in every specialized area of inquiry."

Ironically, of course, this very broad, capacious form of education we call the liberal arts is rooted in a specific curriculum in classical and medieval times, including rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, the *trivium*, and the *quadrivium*. But it would be wrong to assume that because it has such ancient roots, this kind of education is outdated, stale, fusty, or irrelevant. The liberal arts lend themselves particularly

well to contemporary high-tech methods of imparting knowledge.

We all wrestle with the challenges of educating students who are used to multitasking, doing their homework while listening to music on their I-phones, and texting on their I-pods. For such students, the web-based facilities of exciting liberal arts courses are particularly salient. What would Aristotle or Erasmus or Robert Maynard Hutchins not have given for a technique that allows one to tour the world's greatest museums, looking closely at the details of countless masterpieces, explore the ruins of ancient castles and pyramids and forums, join archeological digs at your desk, turning objects around to see all sides of them, visualize problems in geometry or astronomy or mathematics in several dimensions and work out their solutions.

An excellent example of the power of multimedia coupled with the liberal arts is a general education course sometimes taught at Harvard University by Stephen Greenblatt as English 126, "Imaginary Journeys." The course is described as being "about global mobility, encounter, and exchange at the time that Harvard College was founded in 1636. Using the interactive resources

of computer technology, we follow imaginary voyages of three ships that leave England in 1633. [Each student is assigned to one of the ships, which are separated by a storm and therefore visit different destinations and experience different fates.] Sites include London's Globe Theatre, Benin, Barbados, Brazil, Mexico." The course was inspired by Yo Yo Ma's Silk Road

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project, and the website provides an incredible wealth of material from many different sources—music, art, literature, architecture, history, geography. With this kind of course in mind, it seems that the liberal arts could almost have been designed for sophisticated online learning, so far from being stale or fusty are these ways of knowing.

And this kind of education is more and more appealing to students and teachers at universities around the world. Donald Markwell, the warden of Rhodes House, recently gave a series of lectures in Canada, entitled "The Need for Breadth." He referred to a "surge of interest" in liberal education in "many other countries." He mentions new programs at the Universities

of Melbourne and Western Australia, the Universities of Manchester and Warwick in the UK. He cites a major address in London by Yale's Richard Levin in which Levin noted that "Asian leaders are increasingly attracted to the American model of undergraduate curriculum," specifically because of the two years of breadth and depth in different disciplines provided before a student chooses an area of concentration or embarks on professional training. Levin described liberal arts honors programs at Peking University, Yonsei University in South Korea, and the National University of Singapore; he also referred to liberal arts curricula at Fudan University, Nanjin University, and the University of Hong Kong. In her recent book entitled *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Martha Nussbaum notes that she has been recently involved in discussions about creating a liberal arts curriculum in the Netherlands, Sweden, India, Germany, Italy, and Bangladesh.

Yet, as we know, the trends in the U.S. are in the opposite direction. And this is not just a recent problem. Louis Menand cites evidence that in the U.S., "the proportion of undergraduate degrees awarded annually in the liberal arts and sciences has been declining for **a hundred years**, apart from a brief rise between 1955 and 1970, which was a period of rapidly increasing enrollments and national economic growth." Thus, paradoxically, as a liberal arts education becomes more appealing to leaders and families in Asia and elsewhere in the world, it is losing ground in our own country.

At least three factors are at work in this decline: a) the creation of increasingly specialized disciplines, and the rewards for faculty members of advancing knowledge in those areas; b) the economic premium that is thought to reside in a highly technical form of

preparation for careers; and c) a growing focus on graduate education from the early 20th century to the present day. These developments have clearly not been beneficial for American undergraduate education.

"Liberal education in crisis" is a tiresomely familiar theme, and countless commissions, reports, and study groups have attempted to address it. I am under no illusions that I have the magic key to resolve a problem that has stumped so many brilliant educators. But these questions are not just theoretical quandaries for you. They are the issues you confront almost every day: how do we defend liberal education against the skeptics—parents, potential students, the media, the marketplace, even some trustees and students?

**Arguments for the liberal arts today**

I will offer four arguments designed to defend the liberal arts (as distinct from vocational or narrowly pre-professional training) as the best education for undergraduates. I'll discuss these arguments in order from the narrowest to the most capacious, so you can take your pick depending on your audience or your personal preference.

The first, most practical defense: I would argue that the liberal arts (and sciences) are **the best possible preparation for success in the learned professions**—law, medicine, teaching—as well as in the less traditionally learned but increasingly arcane professions of business, finance, and high-tech innovation.

There are many ways to study any discipline; the subjects that make up the liberal arts curriculum are not themselves inherently liberal. As our colleague President Lynn Pasquarella of Mt. Holyoke has recently reminded us, one can study the humanities in a technical rather than a liberal fashion—narrow, esoteric, with no attempt to

broaden or challenge the mind to consider critically what one has learned. And one can also study biology or physics, political science or anthropology, even economics, in a more or less liberal fashion. So my first claim is that a liberal arts education, including a liberally oriented study of the natural and social sciences, *presents material in a context that will be much more useful to budding lawyers or physicians or venture capitalists* than a narrowly construed preparation in their “own field.”

For example, if you study neuroscience with a sense of awe about the complexities of the human brain, and some attention to questions about what it means to be human, not just a technical focus on the darting neurons, or study biology with an awareness of the bewildering diversity and richness of our natural world rather than attending only to the way the molecules fit together, you will have a better background as a physician when you go to med school, or a scientist when you get your PhD. Surely your bedside manner or your classroom techniques will also be much improved! And if you study some history and philosophy, you will be much better prepared as a lawyer or financier than if you study only law, or a narrowly construed pre-business program. Our eldest granddaughter Charlotte (a very happy although slightly chilly first-year student at Bowdoin College this year, and a prospective MD) is going to major in neuroscience, which is taught at Bowdoin in a way that surely engages critical thinking and liberal learning.

So my first defense of liberal learning is **what you are taught and the way you learn it: the materials a doctor or financial analyst or physicist or humanist needs to know, but taught in a liberally construed fashion**, so that you look at the subject from many different dimensions and

incorporate the material into your own thinking in ways that will be much more likely to stay with you, and help you later on. There are several distinct advantages of this way of learning: it’s *insurance against obsolescence*; in any rapidly changing field (and every field is changing rapidly these days), if you only focus on learning specific materials that are pertinent in 2012, rather than learning about them in a broader context, you will soon find that you have no use for these bits of knowledge and your training will have become valueless. Most important, with a liberal education you will have *learned how to learn*, so that you will be able to do research to answer questions in your field that will come up years from now, questions that nobody could even have envisioned in 2012, much less taught you how to answer. That’s all part of the first defense!

The second, slightly less utilitarian defense of a liberal arts education is that it **hones the mind, teaching focus, critical thinking, and the ability to express oneself clearly both in writing and speaking**—skills which are of great value no matter what profession you may choose. It’s not just that you are taught specific materials in a liberally designed context, but more generally, the way your mind is shaped, the habits of thought that you develop.

When I discussed this talk with Nancy Malkiel, a Smith graduate who was dean of the college at Princeton for 24 years, she told me a story that makes this point exactly. As dean, Nancy worked hard to create appealing incentives for students to major in some of the less frequented fields, to take the pressure off econ or poli sci. At Princeton’s commencement last year, the mother of a student Nancy had advised, who had chosen quite happily to major in religion, accosted her and said: “Dean Malkiel, you told my daughter

to major in religion and she still doesn’t have a job!” Nancy gently pointed out that the young woman had graduated only a few minutes earlier and assured the mother that things would almost certainly work out. And sure enough, a few weeks ago the mother was riding a bike across the Princeton campus and stopped to say hello to Nancy, and said: “Guess what? My daughter did get a job! She was volunteering at a non-profit global organization and they were really impressed that she could write so clearly and elegantly, do research on any topic she was assigned to cover, assemble the evidence to make persuasive arguments, and analyze complex problems, so they offered her a job.”

These are the skills a liberal arts education instills in us. They were well described by no less an authority than a former dean of Harvard Law School, Erwin Griswold, cited in a recent speech by Dean Martha Minow. Griswold was discussing an ideal vision of the Law School, but his arguments fit a liberal education wherever it is provided: “You go to a great School not so much for knowledge as for arts or habits; for the art of expression, for the art of entering quickly into another person’s thoughts, for the art of assuming at a moment’s notice a new intellectual position, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time; for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage, and mental soberness.” That’s the second argument.

My third argument for a liberal arts education is that **a liberal arts education is the best education for citizenship in a democracy like our own**. In the book I cited earlier, *Not for Profit*, Martha Nussbaum points out that from

the early years of our republic, educators and leaders have “connected the liberal arts to the preparation of informed, independent, and sympathetic...citizens.” Nussbaum argues that democracies need “complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements.” She lists the skills democratic citizens need: to “think well about political issues affecting the nation; to recognize fellow citizens as people with equal rights; to have concern for the lives of others; to grasp what policies of many types mean for the opportunities and experiences of one’s fellow citizens; to imagine well a variety of complex issues affecting the story of a human life; to judge political leaders critically, but with an informed and realistic sense of the possibilities available to them; to think about the good of the nation as a whole, not just that of one’s local group,” and “to see one’s own nation, in turn, as part of a complicated world order.” These are the kinds of skills a liberal arts education fosters.

At a time when democracy is struggling to be born in countries around the world, and countries that have long enjoyed democracy are struggling to sustain it against pressures of multiple varieties, this may be the best of all the arguments for a liberal arts education. We need citizens who can think for themselves, who can assess arguments made by people who have a stake in a particular outcome, attend to nuances in difficult policy situations, and respect the interests and the dignity of others who are not like them.

The fourth argument for a liberal education, in addition to the way materials are presented, the habits of mind that are instilled, and the preparation for democratic citizenship, is even broader; it is in many ways my favorite of the four.

When I was at Wellesley and Duke, I occasionally used a memorable image at convocation as the new academic year began. With due credit, I borrowed it from Michel de Montaigne’s 16th-century essay, “Of Solitude.” Montaigne lived an active life in many ways, with family, friends, political positions, much travel; but he was exceptionally well aware of the importance of occasional solitude. Montaigne’s favorite place for writing and reflection was the tower library on his estate in Southwestern France, to which he climbed by a series of narrow staircases reaching to the very top of his domain, with a view of the vineyards and grainfields, a ceiling carved with some of his favorite quotations, and lines of books and manuscripts around the shelves. If you visit his estate, you can still see that library and understand directly what his life was like.

Inspired by that beloved space, Montaigne used the arresting image of the “back room of the mind.” He thought of his own mind as a kind of tower library to which he could retreat even when he was far from home, filled with quotations from wise people and experimental thoughts and jokes and anecdotes, where he could keep company with himself. He suggested that we all have such back rooms in our minds, and that the most valuable and attractive people we know are those who have rich and fascinating intellectual furniture in those spaces rather than a void between their ears. When I used this image I would counsel students to think of their college education as above all a way of furnishing the “back rooms of their minds.” In this way, they would be much better conversationalists, so that their company would be sought out by others, rather than being regarded as a simpleton or a bore, and they would also be better prepared to relish solitude,

whether they chose it or it was imposed on them.

Countless students and their parents have told me that they recalled that image of the “back room of the mind” many years afterwards and had found it helpful through many periods in their lives. Virginia Woolf used a different spatial image to make a similar point in her book *Three Guineas*, when she talked about the importance of cultivating taste and the knowledge of the arts and literature and music. She argues that people who are so caught up in their professions or business that they never have time to listen to music or look at pictures lose the sense of sight, the sense of sound, the sense of proportion. And she concludes: “What then remains of a human being who has lost sight, sound and a sense of proportion? Only a cripple in a cave.”

One more spatial image in support of this fourth argument, from a recent speech by my successor as president of Duke University, Richard Brodhead. Dick Brodhead is an eminent scholar of American literature and strong proponent of the liberal arts. He spoke of the human capacity to “make things that outlive their makers,” and he asserted that as we make or enjoy such things, “we go out in spirit toward the works of others.” Humans have the distinctive ability, he continued, “to exit the confines of our own experience and take up mental residence in spaces created by others.” And when we do so “with sufficient intensity of feeling, we in turn have a chance to be changed. This is the way we annex understandings that have been struggled toward by others that we would never have reached on our own. This is how we get to see the world differently from the way our own minds or culture habitually present it.”

One example here: in addition to neuroscience, my Bowdoin granddaughter Charlotte is also planning to

concentrate in art history, a passion that she never knew she had until she got to Bowdoin and discovered the excellent museum, fine arts department, and engaging colleagues. Although there are good art works in her home, no one in her family is an artist, so this is not something she cared much about as she was growing up; instead, it's a newly discovered personal dimension that will enrich her life immeasurably going forward. And that's my fourth argument for a liberal arts education: furnishing the back room of your mind, preparing yourself for both society and solitude.

My final argument for the liberal arts will resonate with many of you in this gathering, although it is unlikely to convince the skeptics. This is the argument that **a liberal arts education admits you to a community of scholars, both professional and amateur, spanning the ages.** Here I would quote one of my predecessors as president of Wellesley, Alice Freeman (later Alice Freeman Palmer). When she presided over Wellesley in the last part of the 19th century, it was quite unusual for girls to go to college (as indeed it still is today in some parts of the world). She gave a well-known speech to answer the repeated question she got from girls and their families, "Why Go to College?" Alice Freeman said: "We go to college to know, assured that knowledge is sweet and powerful, that a good education emancipates the mind and makes us citizens of the world." The sweet and powerful knowledge imparted by a liberal arts education is specifically designed to fulfill this promise, as no other kind of education can be: it emancipates the mind, and makes us citizens of the world.

Alice Freeman Palmer's phrase "citizen of the world" has impeccable liberal arts credentials. It was first coined by Plutarch to describe Socrates. Martha Nussbaum published

a book with that title in 1997. And it nicely loops back to my third and fourth arguments: liberal knowledge, sweet and powerful, broadens our perspective beyond the narrow confines of our own experience, and makes us good citizens not just of our countries, but of the whole world. As the time-honored phrase used by the presidents of several colleges and universities in conferring the baccalaureate degree would have it, "I welcome you to the company of educated men and women."

So, five nested arguments for the liberal arts: a) providing the "deep background" materials people need for their professions and business occupations, in a long-term, capacious fashion rather than a narrowly technical immediacy that will quickly become obsolete; b) honing the mind with skills that are useful in any profession, and any life; c) preparing us well for citizenship in a democracy; d) furnishing the back room of the mind; and admitting us to a community of learned and curious men and women, making us better citizens not only for our communities and our country, but the world.

### **Presidential leadership**

Armed with these arguments and others you will devise or read about, how do you, as a college president, go about making the case for the liberal arts? What tactics should you use? Here's an especially delicious quote from President Emeritus of Whitman College Tom Cronin, who notes that "effective leadership remains in many ways the most baffling of the performing arts. Intuition, flare, risk-taking, and sometimes even theatrical ability come into play." This point really resonates for me, as I'm sure it does for some of you as well. Leadership is itself an art, and to make the case for the liberal arts you should be quite ready to use your personal flare, intuition, theat-

rical ability, and even take some risks. Don't feel you have to confine your arguments to sober and conventional arenas. However, you also have to be savvy and cagey, or your theatricality can backfire; as Cronin says, this is a particularly baffling kind of art.

In my book *Thinking about Leadership*, I define a leader as follows: "Leaders determine or clarify goals for a

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group of individuals and bring together the energies of members of that group to accomplish those goals." Leaders do this in all kinds of groups, from the most informal committee to the largest nation state. The responsibilities of the president of a college or university are among the weightiest of the forms of leadership. If you take my definition as one guide to action, you can think of your role as a presidential leader in this way: you are clarifying what a liberal arts education means for your college (and the world), and galvanizing the energies of the faculty and trustees and student leaders to pursue that goal. In fact, one of the primary responsibilities for you as president of a liberal arts college is to support the liberal arts, which are basic to the historic mission and

*(Continued on page 71)*

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## PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

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*Continued from page 39*

self-understanding of your institutions. There are a number of ways to do this; I'll briefly suggest four of them.

First and most obvious, you should use the bully pulpit of the college presidency deliberately and effectively to make the case for the liberal arts. You should consider how you can use the occasions of convocation, commencement, ground-breakings for new buildings, speeches to the local Rotary Club or the state 4-H club convention, addresses to alumni clubs, all the kinds of events where you are called upon to speak. This is a truly precious opportunity that few other leaders have, to address your community in situations where there is likely to be respectful attention to your message, at least for awhile! Use the opportunity with zest!

A few minutes ago I referred to my having cited Montaigne on the "back room of the mind" at several convocations, and mentioned how many students and their parents had later recalled this phrase and how it had helped shape their lives. I remember also the speech I gave to the faculty of Duke soon after 9/11. I was scheduled to present the annual report of the president to the

Academic Council, and I used that opportunity to speak from the heart about the crucial importance of the liberal arts to help us deal thoughtfully with the horrors of that day. I paid homage, of course, to the scientists and engineers who would help us understand how buildings can be built to withstand shocks and exitways constructed; but I noted that nothing the engineers could teach us would keep crazed men from smashing large jets into tall buildings to make a point about their political views. I talked about the importance of the social sciences in helping us understand that human, social dimension of 9/11 and do our best to prevent a repetition of the day, and also understand and appreciate the motives and sacrifices of the people who gave their own lives to save others. But I reserved my deepest praise for the humanities, which provided the context and frameworks for sharing and dealing with our grief and shock. So many people spoke of how poetry or music had provided for them the best, indeed the only way to grapple with what had happened.

As part of my speech I told a personal story, as one can sometimes do

very effectively on such occasions. Shortly after 9/11, when all our Duke obligations and events had been cancelled to allow everyone to focus on understanding what had happened and honoring the dead, Bob and I decided spontaneously to drive to Wilmington, to walk along the ocean at Wrightsville Beach. I was driving at one point, Bob was napping, and the local classical music station played the Fauré *Requiem* somewhere along a stretch of Interstate 40 in eastern North Carolina. I listened with intense emotion to the movement entitled "Dona Eis Requiem," "Give to Them Peace." I was overcome with emotion and had to pull over to the side of the road. And as I told the Duke faculty, that was the first time I fully acknowledged the sorrow and shock of the events, and found solace.

This is the kind of use you can make of the bully pulpit: in your speeches you can draw on the particular credibility and dignity of the president, and use it to make the case for the education your college provides.

The second way you can use your presidential leadership in supporting the liberal arts is to "put your money

where your mouth is.” That means using your fund-raising skill and obligations to raise money for exciting programs like Greenblatt’s “Imaginary Journeys.” You can make this case effectively to foundations and generous alumni who remember their own liberal arts education fondly, and thus enhance the resources available for this purpose.

I remember with particular delight a fund-raising conversation with Kathryn Wasserman Davis, a dedicated Wellesley alumna and close friend. Kathryn wanted to make a major gift to the college to advance international understanding, which had been her own PhD field many decades earlier. Together we worked to an outcome that gave joy to both of us and many other people: Kathryn’s gift would be the naming, foundational gift for a new art museum at Wellesley, a badly needed enhancement of our liberal arts mission. We had one of the earliest and best art history departments in the country, and a fine collection mostly donated by alumnae and their families, but only paltry and badly designed space to show and study these works of art. Kathryn and I agreed that art is a truly international language and that Wellesley’s museum would include works that would speak directly to that purpose, works from many countries and eras. And after our partnership in building the museum Kathryn herself took up painting in her 80s, and has become a highly respected artist on Mt. Desert Island, Maine.

In addition to using your bully pulpit wisely and putting your fund-raising acumen where your mouth is, the third example of presidential leadership in support of the liberal arts could be the way you honor faculty members. With the teaching awards and other distinctions your college offers, make sure to single out for praise and support those who have been most effective in

advancing the liberal arts mission of your institution through their teaching. You can cite their innovative course work and impact on the lives of their students, linking this specifically to the power of the liberal arts. You can ensure that these awards and recognitions are appropriately highlighted in college publications and in messages to parents and prospective students.

One more way in which you can use your leadership as president, perhaps the most effective of all: you can be a model for emulation, by others on campus and by the outside world, in the ways you use and embody liberal arts learning in your own discourse, both formal and informal. If you cite examples of fine literature, draw on instances from history, refer to the arts and describe learning in the sciences in liberal terms, you will set an example for others and have an influence greater than you may expect. Rhetoric was one of the original *artes liberales*, and it can still be one of the most transformative.

### Conclusion

Taking my own advice about larding your language with liberal learning, I will conclude by quoting from three poems I discovered in a brochure on a recent visit to the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Doha, Qatar. Each poem is about journeying; I was myself on a fascinating journey, visiting universities in the Gulf States, where I had never been; and I was impressed to find ten poems in different languages featured in the admissions brochure for a school of foreign service in the Middle East. Because journeying is an apt metaphor for a liberal arts education, one that I and many of you often use, these three fragments provide an especially appropriate conclusion to this speech.

The first lines were written in Greek by Constantine Cavafy, a late-

19th/early 20th-century poet who lived in Alexandria, from one of his best-known works, *Ithaca*. In translation: “When you start on your journey to Ithaca,/then pray that the road is long,/full of adventure, full of knowledge.” This captures for me the lifelong learning aspect of a strong liberal arts education, full of adventure, full of knowledge, and we hope that the road is long.

The second citation is a few lines from Emily Dickinson, 19th-century American, written to a grieving friend: “Intimacy with Mystery, after great Space, will usurp it’s place/Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Nights,/though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness.” A good liberal arts education makes us intimate with mystery, and also helps us move in the dark by providing a sense of byways through the boundlessness.

And the final poem, in Arabic, is by Al-Sha’afi:

*According to the measure of hardship are heights achieved,  
And he who seeks loftiness must keep vigil by night;  
As for he who wants heights without toil,  
He wastes his life seeking the impossible—  
So seek nobility now, then sleep once more (finally),  
He who seeks pearls must dive into the sea.”*

As this final poem reminds us, a liberal arts education is not always easy; it involves close attention, taking risks, exploring uncharted territory, diving into the sea. But despite these challenges, the deep rewards of a liberal education are surely worth it, for all the reasons I’ve mentioned and many others that you will each devise to make your case vigorously as presidents committed to this cause. Good luck with your task, and happy journeys! ■