ROBERT SHOENBERG

How Not to Defend

I OCCASIONALLY LOOK IN ON COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY Web sites to see what they are telling the public, particularly prospective and current undergraduates and their families. On a recent such visit to the Web site of a leading liberal arts college, I came across an article reproduced from the college's alumni magazine that brought me up short. If this is how we defend the liberal arts and liberal education, I thought, the future of the enterprise is indeed in trouble.

The article begins with an epigraph from George Will: "The term 'liberal arts' connotes a certain elevation above utilitarian concerns. Yet liberal education is intensely useful." While I can give total and enthusiastic assent the second sentence, the two taken together reflect a classic confusion between liberal education and the liberal arts. The two terms are not synonymous. "Liberal arts" refers to certain subjects of study, which may be pursued to many possible ends. "Liberal education" may be pursued through any subject matter, but the term implies distinct purposes: breadth of awareness and appreciation, clarity and precision of thought and communication, critical analysis, honing of moral and ethical sensibilities.

Thus an education in the liberal arts and sciences disciplines is not, by definition, a liberal education. Study exclusively in the liberal arts disciplines does not guarantee a liberal education. Indeed, many liberal arts majors are as narrowly specialized as any professional program. Conversely, many career-specific programs are insistent on liberal learning. For instance, the accrediting standards of ABET (Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology) are equally divided between professional content and liberal education.

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Meanwhile, the "open curriculum" espoused by several liberal arts colleges leaves the door open for students to pursue a narrow education. A particular peeve of mine is the absence in such curricula of any insistence that students pursue studies in science. In an age when all citizens are called on daily to evaluate arguments and make decisions in their personal and civic capacities that require some understanding of the sciences, a college's failure to ensure that its graduates have some appropriate grounding in these fields is educational malpractice. Classically defined, the *artes liberales* are the studies pursued by free men and women. If humanity cannot make informed collective decisions about such topics as energy, the environment, or public health, then we will not have many free people left to study the liberal arts.

Do liberal arts colleges "own" liberal education?

That magazine article I found online proceeds by describing the decreasing number of liberal arts colleges, defined as institutions awarding more than half their bachelor's degrees in those fields. The piece notes that as the number of collegegoers has increased, the percentage of undergraduate degrees awarded

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in the liberal arts has declined—although the actual number of degrees in those fields collectively has not. But these data are beside the point! The question is not in what fields of study students are majoring, but rather what kind of education they are getting in whatever studies they pursue.

My experience with many institutions outside the liberal arts college category convinces me of their seriousness about providing a liberal education. Many have highly intentional statements of educational purpose—on which they actually follow through—that would do credit to any liberal arts college. At the same time, I find that the faculties of many liberal arts colleges take it as axiomatic that they are offering a liberal education, giving little thought to the purposes and practical effect of what and how they are actually teaching in the classroom.

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I grant that pursuing an undergraduate education at a college exclusively committed by tradition to liberal education increases the likelihood that students will actually get a liberal education. But that will happen only if faculty members are committed to liberal learning and not primarily to the apparatus of their own disciplines.

The utility of a liberal education

I am in total agreement that a liberal education in the liberal arts, an education that is purposefully designed to develop critical and communicative powers and a sense of the complexity and diversity of the world, is the best preparation for work, for citizenship, and

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for a satisfying life. The article in that liberal arts college alumni magazine that got me thinking about all of this cites the director of an aerospace company who claims that, in hiring, "I'll always go for the philosophy major. They know nothing about aerospace, but they know all about complexity—and that's what I need." I applaud such insight and only wish that the people this executive sends out to do his recruiting had the same understanding of the utility of a liberal education, wherever its locus in the curriculum.

I am the product of a liberal arts college. I attended during a time when its faculty was as clear as it could be about its intention to give students a liberal education. That intention was clearly reflected in the curriculum, which was designed first and foremost to sharpen the intellectual skills we would find indispensable wherever we were. It was a utilitarian education in the broadest sense, directed toward enhancing our usefulness to our communities, our workplaces, and ourselves.

This experience makes me impatient with the argument that the distinctive educational role of a liberal arts college is to "offer students the past." This view seems both mistaken and perverse. History, cultural anthropology, and the arts certainly do that. Philosophy and literature used to and maybe still do sometimes. But science and most social sciences? What do most scientists know of the origins of the concepts and hypotheses with which they work? Are psychology or sociology faculties concerned that students know the history of their disciplines or the application of their disciplines to the past?

But regardless of various disciplines' orientation to the past, the value of a liberal education—whether pursued in a liberal arts college or a research university and whether through the study of literature or architecture, biology or business administration—is most properly directed toward the future of the individual and society. We lead students to study the past for the wisdom and insight to be found there so that it can inform present and future decisions. But the thrust of liberal education (and of the liberal arts when they are part of a liberal education) should be toward addressing human dilemmas: those that we have always faced because we are human, those that loom large now, and those we can anticipate.

What we are—and are not—about

I trust any college wishes to give its students the qualities of intellect and heart to live a responsible and satisfying life. Perhaps liberal arts colleges preeminently achieve that purpose—or perhaps not. But they do not exclusively achieve it. The notion that liberal education goes on in only 8 percent of colleges enrolling 4 percent of students suggests that an education thus oriented requires special pleading to justify it. It reflects an isolation from the rest of higher education that is often self-imposed and only reinforces the unfair accusation that such colleges are elitist and increasingly irrelevant.

Any competent undergraduate education requires a constant battle to disabuse youth of its perennial insistence that what is of the moment is all that matters. That struggle is, if decreasingly, the pedagogical bread and butter of some of the liberal arts disciplines. However, equating a liberal education with the study of the liberal arts and insisting that such an education is to be found today only in those colleges whose hallmark is a focus on the past does not much help the cause of either the liberal arts or liberal education. □

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