

# The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

By Dr. Lee Evans

## Introduction

Over the years, there has been quite a lot of talk about whether students would be better off with a college education that centers on the humanities, including the arts, or instead focuses on learning a marketable profession or trade. Op-ed writer David Brooks in his NY Times article of June 20, 2013, "The Humanist Vocation," and Verlyn Klinkenborg in his NY Times article of June 23, 2013, "The Decline And Fall Of the English Major," have written brilliantly about this subject.

## The Humanities — A Definition

The dictionary defines the humanities as "the study of literature, philosophy, art, etc., as distinguished from the natural sciences." But Klinkenborg provides a more compelling definition in his article cited above. This writer, whose unfailingly interesting short articles about nature have appeared frequently over the years in The New York Times, defines the humanities as "a set of disciplines that is ultimately an attempt to examine and comprehend the cultural, social and historical activity of our species." He goes on to say that "No one has found a way to put a dollar sign on this kind of literacy, and I doubt anyone ever will. But everyone who possesses it — no matter how or when it was acquired — knows that it is a rare and precious inheritance."

## Ramifications of the High Cost of a College Education

Increasingly, students feel the need to justify the high cost of their college education by pursuing a course of study ultimately aimed at resulting in a job, which usually means that students have less room in their educational program for humanities courses, including art and music; which also means that fewer students are majoring and graduating in the humanities.

My principal counter-argument to the anti-humanities attitude falls along the following lines: If I as an employer am interviewing a candidate for a job, and the candidate tells me he has diligently studied and become proficient on a musical instrument, that information gives me a strong sense that this person is able to establish a goal and then work unceasingly towards it until its mastery is achieved. That's the kind of individual I would want to have working for me, notwithstanding the absence of that person's possession of a specialization in a given field. I would frankly rather take an individual like this and train him in the work required for the job in question, than hire an intellectually narrow individual who has come to me with that specialization already in hand.

Specialization, which dominates the college curriculum, to some extent reflects professors' personal interests and scholarship focus, but also generally hints at doubts about whether studies in the humanities will ever result in a practical payoff. Part of the problem, it should also be noted, is that many humanities professors do a poor job of selling the idea that the humanities matter. In this regard, Klinkenborg says: "What many undergraduates do not know — and

what most of their professors have been unable to tell them — is how valuable the most fundamental gift of the humanities will turn out to be. That gift is clear thinking, clear writing and a lifelong engagement with literature...Maybe it takes some living to find out this truth."

David Brooks says "The job of the humanities [is] to cultivate the human core, the part of a person we might call the spirit or soul... the most inward and elemental part of a person." Brooks writes that when a person dies, what is said at his eulogy is usually not a recounting of information about his job, but rather what describes "the person's care, wisdom, truthfulness and courage...the million little moral judgments that emanate from that inner region." He goes on to say: "The humanist's job [is] to cultivate this ground — impose intellectual order upon it, educating the emotions with art [and music] in order to refine it, offering inspiring exemplars to get it properly oriented."

## The Legacy of a Liberal Arts Education

The most enduring legacy of having received a liberal arts education lies in one's "learning how the world works," as one respondent to Brooks' article put it; in becoming "a well-rounded person," as another wrote. Still another respondent stated that "specialization subjects teach us how to make a living. The humanities teach us how to live."

Another NY Times article, on June 29, 2013 ("What It Takes To Make New College Graduates Employable") spoke of a March 2013 report by the Chronicle of Higher Education and American Public Media's Marketplace that stated: "When it comes to the skills most needed by employers, job candidates are lacking in written and oral communication skills, adaptability and managing multiple priorities, and making decisions and problem solving." I maintain that a solid liberal arts college education will go a long way towards meeting those goals.

In conclusion, a liberal arts education is immensely life-enriching. It broadens the individual and provides the basis for a deep appreciation of culture in its various forms. If our rich legacy of historical, literary, and cultural understanding is ignored, we abandon the very essence of our humanity and the qualities that distinguish us from mindless worker bees.

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