



2005

Why are Liberal Education's Friends of so Little Help?

Marshall W. Gregory

Butler University, mgregory@butler.edu

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Recommended Citation

Marshall W. Gregory. "Why are Liberal Education's Friends of so Little Help?" *Liberal Education* 91.2 (2005): 56-59.

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Why

MARSHALL GREGORY

Are Liberal Education's Friends

LIBERAL EDUCATION IS IN A BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL in the contemporary university and needs all the friends it can get. But if your friends show up to the broadsword battle carrying only toothpick clichés, what good are they? Liberal education needs fewer friends who are merely well meaning and more friends who train themselves to fight for liberal education's distinctive goals—not to mention its very survival—the way they train themselves to be smart, savvy, and successful in their disciplines.

We can only be good at doing what we're trained to be good at. The reason liberal education suffers today on all possible fronts—financial capital, conceptual capital, program coherence, curricular intelligibility, and persuasive rhetoric—is that no one inside universities receives any particular training in how to think critically, comprehensively, or philosophically about it. We are all trained to think well about our disciplines, and within our disciplines we all know how to nurture and protect a high level of talk. But we are not trained to think or talk at a high level about liberal education. Few faculty members in today's universities would even know where to *begin* to bring themselves up to speed, as the saying goes, about liberal education in the way they know how to bring themselves up to speed within their disciplines.

A great irony is that this deficiency does not make anyone among the administrative and faculty ranks in higher education feel the least bit incompetent to talk extensively and aggressively about liberal education. No university or college teacher feels that s/he has the obligation to bone up on liberal education topics—its history, theory, or primary authors—the way s/he might if the discussion were disciplinary, which accounts for why so much liberal education talk has an insubstantial quality. Every core review committee since 1900 has circulated a few scraps of the same sacred texts with mantra-like repetitiveness but most of the time these scraps amount to little more than slogans, not arguments: that line from the *Apology* about the kind of life not worth living, Hutchins's throw-away line about the best education for the few being the best education for all, Newman's terse line about knowledge being its own end, and Mill's great line that a person cannot claim even to know her own position unless she knows the best arguments against it.

Informed discourse

I don't believe that educational talk, especially talk about the liberal arts, should be turned into another academic specialty. But I do believe that the failure of university and college folk to prepare themselves for discerning liberal education discourse explains in part why colleges and universities never make more progress in thinking through their liberal education programs and aims. Because few faculty or administrators take the time to learn new ideas and phrases, they keep circulating the same ideas and phrases. This kind of conduct runs against the grain of all faculty members' disciplinary training so strongly that it cannot be glossed over merely as a trivial anomaly. It is an anomaly, sure enough, but it is not trivial. It is an anomaly that is threatening liberal education's very survival.

MARSHALL GREGORY is *Ice Professor of English, Liberal Education, and Pedagogy* at Butler University.

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of So Little Help?



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A self-taught task

The truth remains that all of us in academe need to do better than we are now doing at both nourishing and protecting high-quality discourse about liberal education. I know we can do so if we let the issue really grab our attention because I see in our dedication to another task about which none of us ever received any rich or special training, another task that we have largely been left to figure out on our own—namely, our teaching—a model for how much we can accomplish when we really put our minds and wills to the solving of a particular problem or the achievement of a particular goal.

Since the mid-eighties, I have directed pedagogy seminars with hundreds of faculty from many different universities, and while I have encountered many faculty who struggle with their teaching, the overall percentage of the hard strugglers is encouragingly low compared to the overall percentage of strong achievers. I am always astonished wherever I go to find how many college teachers—who overwhelmingly have been left to figure out the art of good teaching entirely on their own—have become remarkably good teachers, sometimes superlatively good teachers, just because they think it is important to give teaching their best shot. They put their personal integrity at stake in their teaching, and then they deliver the goods. They think hard, they read some books—some of them write teaching articles—and most of all they pay close attention.

This model is powerfully suggestive. If faculty members can bring themselves up to speed on their teaching, as a great many do—with no specialized training and with no special resources, relying mostly on their own initiative and their own sense of priorities—it cannot follow that bringing ourselves up to speed about liberal education is beyond us. In the first place, learning how to be a good teacher is a lot harder than learning about liberal education theory. In the second place, the resources for bringing ourselves up to speed on liberal education are a lot more obvious and easier to find than the resources for turning ourselves into good teachers. Knowledge of the best

books on teaching is scanty, but knowledge of the great texts that have shaped the tradition of liberal education discourse is not. These texts are well known; they are just not widely or deeply read. The reason is not because they are too hard but because the specialization that dominates our profession has relegated these texts to specialized niches rather than held them out as resources for thinking broadly about educational issues.

The last time most of us faculty members read any of the primary texts that constitute the 2,500-year-old tradition of discourse about liberal education was when we were undergraduates in something like an honors course or a freshman writing seminar. We were only eighteen or twenty years old at the time and we read only pieces of these texts. Twenty-five years later, this reading becomes a thin and shaky foundation for those of us who want to express certitude about why a liberal arts major is better than a major in accounting or business. I refer to such texts as Isocrates's

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

There are many other authors and texts that are important for a deep understanding of liberal education (my file of articles contains over 350 and grows weekly).

Think for a moment of the books or essays on education by Erasmus, John Milton, Matthew Arnold, Cardinal Newman, and Henry Adams. More recently, think of works by Alfred North Whitehead, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, John Dewey, Yvor Winters, Michael Oakeshott, Isaiah Berlin, Wendell Berry, Jacques Barzun, Stanley Katz, Jacob Bronowski, Jacques Maritain, Loren Eiseley, Northrop Frye, Charles Wegner, Bartlett Giamatti, Jay Parini, James Redfield, Joseph Schwab, Francis Oakley, Neil Postman, Paolo Friere, Martha Nussbaum, Jaroslav Pelikan, Richard Rorty, Mary Midgley, Louis Menand, Gerald Graff, Alvin Kernan, Azar Nafisi, Derek Bok, Sven Birkerts, Robert Audi, Jackson Lears, Deanne Bogdan, bell hooks, Earl Shorris, Mark Edmundson, Michael Dyson, William Durden, Jonathan Z. Smith, Sam Wineburg, A. D. Nutall, W. R. Connor, Leon Kass, Andrew Abbot, Wayne Booth, Marshall Gregory, and Bruce Kimball, to mention only a few modern and contemporary authors.

Panegyricus; Plato's *Republic* and his Socratic dialogues; Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, his *Rhetoric*, his *Politics*; and Cicero's essays on old age, friendship, and duty. The only people who would read all of these texts today are philosophy majors. No, that's too broad an audience. The only people who would read all of these texts today would be graduate students in philosophy who were also specializing in classical philosophy.

Having a large number of good ideas available becomes an irony, not a virtue, if the large number of ideas are not largely read. Since the study of at least some of the authors and texts I mention in the sidebar—and this is only a random sample of what is available—is essential for anyone who wants to think deeply about liberal education, is it any wonder that the academic discourse about liberal education that is *not* enriched by these ideas sounds all too often stale, thin, and hackneyed?

We could do better in our thinking about liberal education even if none of us read any of these books because we can accomplish much *if we only pay better attention to liberal education* the way we pay attention to our teaching—without doing much reading about teaching in general. To do this we need to do at least some of the following three things.

First, we need to make conversations with our students about the overall aims of their education a clear and distinct part of their education (so that we can help them learn how to think more comprehensively and less materialistically about the education into which they are pouring so much money and energy).

Second, we need to resist the pressure to conform to the utilitarian notions that currently dominate discourse about higher education. We need to resist this pressure not by merely having objections to utilitarian discourse—mere objections never derail a dominant discourse—but by being able to offer an alternative vision of education that is more generous, humane, and conducive to human flourishing than that offered by utilitarian education. At its heart, the utilitarian vision of education views students not in terms of what they may become as moral, civic, and personal agents but in terms of how they may serve commercial, bureaucratic, or procedural aims that all too often have nothing to do with human flourishing at all.

Finally, we need to start thinking more comprehensively about liberal education as a program of personal development, not as indoctrination into the values of a particular curriculum. We need to think more about large developmental ends, that is, rather than concentrating on a hidebound set of narrow means. It matters less, in other words, whether every student graduates having read *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III* (or any other set of “required” texts) than whether every student who graduates knows how to think more productively, more deeply, and more analytically about the moral, social, political, existential, domestic, religious, and philosophical issues raised in these texts. The aim of liberal education was succinctly but accurately stated by Philip Sidney as “the aim of well-doing, not just well-knowing” (*The Defense of Poesie*, 1595).

If we can pay this kind of attention to liberal education issues, and fill out our own education about liberal education when we can and as we may, we can do better than we now do. This is a goal within our grasp. It is doable. In addition, and most important of all, reaching this goal means that when we show up for the education wars on the side of liberal education, our lances will not be made of toothpick clichés but will be formed of robust ideas and energetic thinking. This is all that is required for liberal education to fare better than it is now faring.

We owe it this much not primarily for our own sake but for the sake of our students who, without the enrichment of a liberal education, will have to make their way in life in a condition of professionally accomplished helplessness when it comes to dealing with the great ethical, moral, social, political, and existential conundrums that—much more than our professions or jobs—set the parameters for the quality of everyone's existence. □

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