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Dear President Obama: The Importance of the Liberal Arts in Our Changeable World

Written by Michelle E. Skinner

Dear President Obama,

In your inaugural address, you made few promises on behalf of yourself and your administration. You reiterate this out of a conviction that it is not a person that rebuilds a nation-it is a whole people.

This is partly why we elected you. You tell us about a nation that we can help create, and this inspires us to act. You also tell us about ourselves-that in light of the "gathering clouds and raging storms," our inborn capacities as human beings can never be diminished. "Our minds are no less inventive, our goods and services no less needed than they were last week or last month or last year," you tell us confidently. In your eyes, we are a nation of "risk-takers, doers, and makers of things," and we respond to this because the notion of possibility stirs our ambitions.

You're right: Being human, we are born with the capacity to go, do, and create, and to use our skills for moral purposes. However, while these original capacities will never be diminished, it is important to recognize that our capacities will cease to be realized if they are repeatedly ignored in our education system. Like muscles, our capacities will atrophy if we do not exercise them.

All across the nation, public schools are cutting their arts programs because of insufficient government funding. This comes as no surprise- in times of economic instability, the arts are generally the first to suffer. By virtue of not being part of what the public school system considers essential to a standard core curriculum, children are quickly losing their chances to sing in choirs, paint at easels, or play a musical instrument. The belief underlying these cuts is the argument that arts programs do not teach students to calculate or think critically to the extent that math or science programs do-that the arts are "extra" rather than an integral part of a full education.

As a student who has had the privilege of having a higher education in the liberal arts at a distinguished university, I recognize the glaring problems in this belief. Because we are the sum of individual experiences, every experience we have is formative. By this logic, I know that education is most successful when its horizons are broad. If we isolate the arts from the sciences, for instance, we risk creating students who feel like they must operate as machines-always creating something new for a market of consumers. If we isolate students in the sciences, we risk creating students who feel like calculating drones. But if we are interested in creating students who regard themselves as unique individuals with the

capacities to do many things-to learn a formula and imagine one-then we must agree that no one discipline is totally effective unto itself, and that each discipline is most valuable when considered as part of a whole fabric. Such is the nature of a liberal arts education.

The sum total of my education in the liberal arts eludes any one category. Rather than prepare me for a particular career, it has prepared me for all of them. It has made me an idealist wherein being an active agent of change in my world isn't just a vague aspiration-it's essential to my self-worth. It has made me want to live an examined, deliberate life, steeped in the cultures I have learned to adore.

Considering my own experience, I therefore know that by not stressing the importance of a liberal arts education in our public schools, we are doing ourselves a great disservice. In denying grade school children the outlets for their creative energies, we are denying them the chance to realize the full range of their humanity. By limiting the opportunities of young people to exercise their capacities in all disciplines, we are by extension the possibilities for the future of our nation.

At this crisis moment, an emphasis in a full education has never been more critically important. Focused study in the sciences and the humanities teaches reverence for our natural world, and conditions the skills that will help fix it. It teaches respect for the other. It installs in its students a healthy skepticism for sinister marketing tactics, excess technology, and inefficient government. Finally, study in the liberal arts promotes a collective spirit, reminding us that though we may often disagree, we share the same bodies and the same human capacities.

I therefore ask that your term in office include an agenda that has a renewed public emphasis on the value of a diverse education in the liberal arts. Central to this is increased expectations and wages for public school teachers as well as protection for disadvantaged children. In addition, there should be greater support for non-profit literacy groups and organizations like Teach for America that create jobs for people who strive for the betterment of our education system.

The thesis of my Butler education might be: A study in all disciplines shows us that the self is made, not inherited. For me, this is the salient point of a liberal arts education. When people realize this, they will begin to regard themselves as agents in a changeable world rather than subjects in a static one.