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Cultural Traditions II

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9 May 2022

Advocating for the Expansion of Liberal Education

Liberal education is starting to be implemented across colleges in America, however, that is the problem. It is only being implemented in colleges. That raises the question of what students did for the last thirteen years of schooling? Was it a waste? Certainly not, right? Well, this questioning brings up the point that school systems need to implement liberal education and liberal learning earlier in our schooling career than just college. Liberal education means hands-on learning and having the freedom to learn what you want. To describe liberal education is to “describe an educational tradition that celebrates and nurtures human freedom” (Cronon 1). To me, this means, the freedom to learn on our own and the freedom to choose what we learn. Both freedoms can be implemented at a lower grade level than in college. The Honors College can help further this advocation this method because as higher education, they have the means and recourses to research and gather data on how starting liberal education earlier would help and this would gain more funding from the state so that grade schools can implement these practices.

If we start changing the way we learn thirteen years after we started learning, it is going to be harder if not impossible to switch gears and learn a new way of thinking. The younger we are, the more impressionable our minds are so we will retain information better. If we start on the values of liberal education at a younger age, we can implement them more in life so by the time we get to college we can work on narrowing our focus down to how we can use those in our major. “If institutions of higher education do not build a richer network of human connections it is likely that our dealings with one another will be mediated by the impoverished norms of market exchange and profit-making” (Nussbaum 3). The start of human connections is in elementary school, not in the colleges we are learning liberal education from. We start building those friendships and networks of human connection way before college. Many friends that you have growing up go on to be your co-workers at first-time jobs and those friends help you build your network of employers and references. Those first jobs many students get, they are not in college when they are hired. Many students start working at the age of fifteen and sixteen. That is still two or three years before college and before they learn how to “build and make” connections. At this point, it is too late, and we have had to learn this on our own. Liberal education also “means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” and as a kid, one is told to do this as they grow up (Nussbaum 4). It is hard for a kid to see what someone else’s situation is, but that is part of growing up and connecting with others. As a child talks with other kids, they connect on things alike and learn from each other’s differences.

If we start on liberal education young, we can keep the focus of college on preparing us for our major instead of a new way of learning. Everyone can agree that the banking education we have been taught is harmful to our personal growth and development. “Citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone” but this is all students are exposed to in the first thirteen years of their school career (Nussbaum 4). The first thirteen years and what many people describe the school as is a teacher standing in front of the classroom asking questions and then telling you that you are wrong. They, however, rarely show you why you are wrong, so you do not have many of the skills needed for the college curriculum when you must show why that specific answer is wrong or right. This is the harm that the banking style of education is inflicting. So, to combat this we spend the first year of college trying to reverse this. What would help is not teaching banking education and starting with liberal education. This way, college does not have to reverse any way of thinking and we can cover liberal education in the classes designed for our major.

In high school, I was told to take the classes I wanted to take for fun because when I got to college, it would be petal to the metal, and I would only take classes that I would need to graduate. While I was under this impression, I took classes like band and art. I took more English classes than the required ones because I wanted to get to college to focus on the career I was planning on going into, marketing. I was thrilled that whilst in college, I would not have to take English classes or science classes, especially since I took those college-level classes in high school. Now not only do I have to retake those classes, but I also have to do it while retraining my brain to think in a different way than the one I originally learned. If we implement classes that we take to learn what liberal education is and how to apply it, we can use college classes as what they were designed to be, classes that helped further you in your major.

The younger grades have more freedom and resources to use to help with liberal education. The lower grades have the hands-on tools in elementary schools to use that go along with liberal education like the ability to make crafts to go along with the lesson and counting blocks to use for math and other subjects instead of teachers just writing on the board expecting the kids to follow along. The students have resources called manipulatives that can help them think for themselves instead of the teacher standing up at the front of the room telling them that two plus two equals four. The middle school grades have the freedom to do big projects that can pull from these skills to complete instead of doing worksheets and essays. The middle school grades also still have the teacher's guide to help them if they do need help, but also the freedom to take it in any direction they would like to go. Some kids want to participate in the arts, but they are not taught at school. But it has been shown that “courses in literature and the arts can impart this ability in many ways, through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine arts, and dance” can help grow and expand a child’s mind (Nussbaum 4). Despite the proof that schools need these programs and those children want to take and participate in them, they get cut and as a result, so does the student’s education.

I can remember in middle and high school; I dreaded the strict rubric the students had to follow for an essay that was due that month or some big project. There was no freedom in the direction you could take, so every student wrote the same essay about “The Great Gatsby” or did the same project covering the Revolutionary War. I retained the most when I got to choose my topic of research. There was one project I remember doing in a class called Gifted Problem Solving. Gifted Problem Solving was a class that embodied the values of liberal education. We would get an assignment at the beginning of class, for example, a creative way to turn off an alarm and we would, with a group, must solve that problem by the end of class. In this class, one of our projects we had to do was called Pursuit of Knowledge. We got to choose our topic and we would have to do extensive research on it, then teach the class about what we picked. The project I choose was all the different stages on Broadway. To this day I can still name all twelve theaters and talk for hours on end about what I learned about the plays put on at each theater. While this had nothing to do with English, which was the credit I was taking that class to get if schools applied this to other parts of the curriculums, students would retain a lot more information and remember it even after they regurgitated it out on the tests.

If liberal education was implemented in the lower grades, not only would they have the means and opportunities to help the students, but then the Honors College could move on from teaching us new ways of thinking and start earlier with implementing that thinking into our future careers. The way the Honors College can help is to fund research to prove that this will work and advocate for the change. Advocating for liberal education in elementary, middle, and high schools mean that the students would get hands-on learning and have the freedom to learn what they want. This means, the freedom to learn on our own and the freedom to choose what we learn. Advocating for something like this is a step in the right direction for education, so why would you not want to get behind this?

Work Cited

Cronon, William. “Only Connect....” *The American Scholar*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1998.

Nussbaum, Martha. “Liberal Education & Global Community.” *Liberal Education*, 2004.