

# Is a Liberal Arts Education Still Relevant in Today's World?

By Linda Porter and Joseph Huber



**Linda Porter** has both an A.B. and Master's degree from Youngstown State University. She wrote for and later served as editor of *The Polyglot*, the YSU's award-winning foreign language journal. She took additional course work at the University of Akron and in France at the Sorbonne and l'Université de Caen. She taught for 35 years in a suburban high school near Warren, Ohio. Though retired as a full-time educator, she has continued teaching part-time at various area schools. For many years Miss Porter was the Secretary of the Youngstown Torch Club. She has served as IATC Region 5 Director and is currently serving her second term as President of the Akron Torch Club.

A 50-year career electrical engineer with two MIT degrees, **Joe Huber** specializes in electromagnetic waves and holds several patents. His designs supported keeping the Cold War cold and protecting our troops. A survivor of Japanese prison camps and the Battle of Manila, he did a great deal of world traveling, taking advantage of opportunities for history, museums and culture. His unusual education led to his interest in liberal arts education. A member of the Akron Torch Club for thirty years, he is currently its Secretary.

Their jointly-authored paper was presented to both their clubs in April and May of 2017.

*At an Akron Club board luncheon, a French teacher and an engineer (who had only had time in college for two one-semester liberal arts courses) found themselves in a discussion on liberal arts education. Such was the genesis of the April 24, 2017 program at the Akron Torch Club. The timeliness of the topic was underlined the very next day, when the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) carried an article showing the number of liberal arts degrees to be the same as ten years ago while specialty degrees had increased 100% or more. The day after that, another WSJ article indicated that only one-fortieth of college seniors were humanities majors even though an eighth of companies sought such graduates.*

*The paper follows the debate format. Teacher Linda Porter starts with the desirability and necessity of a liberal arts education. Engineer Joe Huber then discusses its lack of usefulness for obtaining an initial job and suggests changes to our educational system in order to include liberal arts.*

## Linda Porter

Times of economic stress bring renewed scrutiny of higher education, particularly liberal arts education (Christ). News headlines

and online media stories proliferate concerning the need for narrower vocational training for students (Hall). With the rising cost of tuition and increase in student loans, many students feel the pressure to select a major that will make this financial investment pay off quickly after graduation (Harriman).

Liberal education is under siege. Critics, of whom there are many, call it an overpriced indulgence for the affluent few who do not have to worry about earning a living upon graduation. University presidents and professors of history, classical and modern languages, literature, philosophy, sociology and similar specialties have long commended the value of liberal arts in the education of citizens, whatever their career objectives, but over the past half century business courses have gained popularity among undergraduates. Fewer and fewer of today's undergraduates are pursuing the liberal arts, with most of them studying practical subjects (Rimer). More recently, colleges and universities are responding to renewed interest in STEM careers—science, technology, engineering and math—while our political leaders promote job readiness as the main purpose of a college education (Dunn).

There is no denying that the STEM disciplines are eminently worthy fields of study. Anxious parents often advise their children to pursue these disciplines because job prospects are seemingly better in STEM areas. But in our world of changing demographics, 24/7 news cycles and a global economy, the liberal arts are critical to success in every economic sector. A liberal arts education plays an essential part in providing a foundation for learning in every professional field (Ray).

Despite not being as likely as STEM degrees to show immediate career results after graduation, liberal arts degrees have many (though often overlooked) long-term benefits and advantages.

First, liberal arts degrees give students a broad-range of skills, many of which employers weigh with significant importance. A national survey of business and nonprofit leaders conducted by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU) reported that:

- 93% of employers agree that “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, and solve complex problems is more important than a [a candidate’s] undergraduate major.”
- 95% weigh with importance “ethical judgement and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning.”
- More than 75% want to see more “critical thinking, complex problem solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.”

Second, liberal arts degrees allow for flexibility and adaptability to new positions and new careers. Due to the broad and encompassing nature of a liberal arts education, students may apply their wide range of skills in an astonishing variety of ways. Courses can range from philosophy and anthropology to art history, economics and creative writing. Subjects such as philosophy and sociology can help students learn and question ideas, beliefs and people, in turn allowing them to reason inductively and analyze contexts and people to make the most meaningful decisions in the workplace and beyond. A liberal arts education does not prepare students for a specific profession; rather, the field of study is broad in nature. With a long-term career perspective in mind, in the end liberal arts majors may be better prepared than their STEM peers for constantly shifting and changing global job market demand and conditions.

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Lastly, liberal arts degrees do pay off in terms of income, but

more in the long run. A joint study by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) and the AACU found that although liberal arts majors make less than professional majors in terms of annual income right out of college (age 21-25), they make more on average at their peak salary age (age 56-60):

- Right out of college (age 21-25), the average annual salary for liberal arts majors is \$26,272, compared to \$31,183 among professional majors.
- At peak earning ages (51-60), the average annual salary for liberal arts majors is \$66,185, compared to \$64,149 among professional majors (Ray).

The skill set acquired by learning a variety of subjects can range from communication and critical thinking skills to language, listening and linguistic skills. Such skills are essential prerequisites for the global marketplace, which is becoming more competitive than ever, and requires candidates to possess multiple skills, even if they are specialists in specific areas (“The Value of Liberal Arts Education”).

People trained in the humanities who study Shakespeare’s poetry or Cezanne’s paintings have learned to play with big concepts and to apply new ways of thinking to difficult problems that can’t be analyzed in conventional ways. Any great work of art—whether literary, philosophical, psychological or visual—challenges a humanist to be curious, to ask open-ended questions, and see the big picture. This kind of thinking is just what

you need if you are facing a murky future or dealing with tricky, incipient problems. Similarly, an understanding of history is indispensable if you want to understand the broader competitive arena and global markets.

Some prominent American politicians argue the opposite, that students, especially in public universities, should not even be given the option to major in anthropology, philosophy, or religion studies because these fields have no “practical” use, value or benefit. But our times do not call for more narrowly trained technicians; we need more creative thinkers who see the world’s problems as more than technical challenges. This is not to say that philosophers will solve all world crises—far from it. A philosophy or art student will benefit as much from exposure to math, science, and business courses as students in technical fields will benefit from exposure to art and literature.

It is no surprise that Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs, two of the most revolutionary thinkers of the 20th century, were also individuals who loved music, art and culture. They had a complexity of vision acquired through a deep exposure to the original thinking and creative expression that leads to innovation. Jobs attributed some of his most cutting-edge innovations in designing the first generation of Apple computers to the influence of a calligraphy class he took at Reed College. The modern personal computer is partially the result of an immersion in the art of writing Chinese characters.

Similarly, Einstein studied and played violin and had a deep love of German philosophy. These were not narrowly trained technicians (Hall).

Harvard professor Steven Pinker summarized what an educated person should know:

[...] a liberal education should make certain habits of rationality second nature. Educated people should be able to express complex ideas in clear writing and speech. They should appreciate that objective knowledge is a precious commodity, and know how to distinguish vetted fact from superstition, rumor, and unexamined conventional wisdom. They should know how to reason logically and statistically, avoiding the fallacies and biases to which the untutored human mind is vulnerable. They should think causally rather than magically, and know what it takes to distinguish causation from correlation and coincidence. They should be acutely aware of human fallibility, most notably their own, and appreciate that people who disagree with them are not stupid or evil. Accordingly, they should appreciate the value of trying to change minds by persuasion rather than intimidation or demagoguery (qtd. In Hall).

Beyond the career advantages that a liberal arts education confers, there is a broader case for offering such an education to the hundreds of thousands of

students who graduate every year with business and engineering degrees. Such an education does not merely increase their economic competitiveness; it also strengthens their ability to contribute to the broader society, to lead fulfilling lives. Educational institutions have two jobs: to prepare students to enter a profession, yes, but also to prepare them as human beings and as citizens (Wladaswky-Berger). This debate really need not be about choosing one or the other; it is the cooperation and interplay of the liberal arts with vocation-specific training that holds the most promise (Halisky).

### Joe Huber

Linda makes a great case for the liberal arts. They inform us of our place in history and culture, give a perspective of the richness of art and literature and are highly worthwhile. Unfortunately, they are of little help in obtaining most jobs requiring a college degree, and though useful later, their study, as education as currently structured, is unaffordable for most.

Our sons split. One became an old-style classics major: Greek, Latin, solo backpack scholarship tour of ancient Italy and Greece, dendrochronology team touring Turkey, and honor’s thesis on Troy. His undergraduate job was analyzing images and entering ancient Greek inscriptions. He fully agrees with Linda. The other, an electrical engineer involved in computer chips, had a co-op education with little time for the liberal arts, but has broad interests and agrees with me that familiarity with the liberal arts can be acquired

outside of college.

An engineer without a standard education and with little teaching experience is at a disadvantage debating education. My only paid teaching job was a couple of years doing graduate and upper-level undergraduate math courses in the University of Akron's evening division. In high school I was substitute Latin teacher thanks to Principal Oliver Ocasek, later a noted figure in Ohio politics and education, and I taught first grade alone for a half day—great experiences unthinkable today.

I was home schooled through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade on a remote rubber plantation by my mother, who had not gone to college, using Calvert, an English style correspondence system. Having lost years in WWII prison camps, we thoroughly enjoyed going year-around to catch up. Completing lessons took only half a day, leaving much time for fun and free-range roaming the jungle. Later, at a small high school, one had to sign up nine students to get desired math courses.

Today, a college degree is the screening tool of employers, even for many jobs that do not need a degree (Gee). In this debate, the fundamental issue is *whether there is time* for a liberal arts education in college for most people and, if there is not, *when and how* one can obtain one. (Mine came through home schooling, self-directed reading, Torch Club, and a liberal-arts-educated wife.) The real questions are who college is for, when college should begin, and whether we can decide the question

without considering the whole educational process. My position is based on our current education model which, for the reasons given below, needs changed.

## Sixteen is a proper age for apprenticeship in well-paid fields.

My position is based on experience as well as reading. We taught our pre-school children informally at home when circumstances and interest presented opportunities. My non-teacher wife taught them in Greece for three months in grades two and five when I worked there. They returned well prepared and more than three weeks ahead of their class. The easiest learning years are those before first grade. Children can grow up with the ability to read and to speak more than one language. Without force feeding, they can have an excellent and enjoyable start on education and can learn the independence of being “free range.” Given responsibility, they can learn important skills that are excellent preparations for life.

School divisions have been frozen for generations despite the enormous changes of the modern era and the more rapid physical development of youth. In less complex times, grade school prepared one for many jobs and for life (taxes, health insurance,

government regulations), high school for management jobs, as was true for my father, and college for specialized or leadership roles for a small number. A liberal arts college education prepared one to take almost any job and learn any special skills required.

Other than in computers, today's young are not maturing as quickly as formerly due to the current education model, regulations, minimum wages, taxes, and helicopter parenting. For those who do not plan to go to college, waiting until after high school to begin a career is way too late. As demonstrated in Germany and England, sixteen is a proper age for apprenticeship in well-paid fields. If the money spent on the last two years of high school education went into apprenticeships, with classes included to achieve a high-school diploma, and regulations minimized, such programs would take off, filling the needs of these young people, and industries' requirements. There are currently 150,000 such unfilled jobs with many retirements coming.

For those choosing fields requiring a college education, starting college after four full years of high school is far too late. Fortunately, recent developments let high schoolers earn college credits, basically starting college early and inexpensively. These college level courses should and must include liberal arts. With young people able to advance faster due to new technology, sixteen becomes the old eighteen.

So, what should college be?



Knowledge has so flourished and expanded that a liberal arts education does not help in starting most careers. 150 years ago, all new scientific and art knowledge for a year could be printed in a small book that an educated person could read and understand, such as the *Annual of Scientific Discovery; A Year Book of Facts in Science and Art* from 1859 (Wells).

Rapid changes and enormous developments dictate that today's students devote their time to their specialty, for which a four-year curriculum is barely adequate and a five-year co-op program better. The extra time that comes from starting college level education at sixteen is becoming essential. It allows both a modicum of liberal arts education with the literacy and expanded horizons that are needed later, and the specialty education needed for a job. Such a combination is highly competitive in the labor market.

This is easy for good high schools near colleges, and for others the internet offers learning at a distance. But truly good schools are not so common, since public grade and high schools are forced to work with the pupils, budget, and location they have. A school's only means to change its situation significantly is to reach such a level of excellence that families move to the area so their children may attend the school (as my wife and I did, and a recent example showed a family moving across Texas to an area of high home prices to get the "right" school). This level of achievement has a positive effect on property values, hence on tax revenues, and provides a student

body with many parents committed to education.

Some schools may claim to have achieved excellence based on their students' grade point averages, but grades often merely reflect sociological factors; worse, they do not pinpoint successful teachers and programs. Big data analytical techniques may make it possible to link student progress and outcomes to school, staff, programs, and teachers. By introducing real world competition and incentives, such assessments would permit determining who and which lead to success and need to be rewarded and continue. Successful schools and successful teachers could be better compensated. The many excellent teachers I have the privilege to know, including my debate opponent, would then be better paid.

Teaching is, after all, among the most satisfying of occupations. With suitable financial rewards and reforms suggested by close family members who were career public school teachers, many more excellent people would be drawn to teaching. More teachers would have a real depth in their subjects, and be more likely to be literate, unlike the example set by New York state, where something approaching half could not pass a mandated literacy test, which New York then dropped (Taylor).

To conclude, while there is little necessity for liberal arts education for initial jobs in today's world, we must change and eliminate impediments to including it. Then our young would find their niche

with excellent preparation and a good measure of liberal arts—the best objective of a complete and profitable education.

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