

Notes for ACS: What is Liberating about the Liberal Arts?
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What is the purpose of education? Why do students go to school?

In Australia, the answer would likely be offered in utilitarian terms. Perhaps the most common assumption today (at least at the tertiary level with which I am most familiar), is that the purpose of education is to enable students to gain employment. This is education as job training.

Another common answer is that the purpose of education is the accumulation of knowledge in a certain area. But even this answer begs the question “knowledge for what purpose?” And most institutions of higher learning answer that question solely in terms of productivity or technological advance or commercial relevance.

But I want to suggest that there’s a problem with viewing the purpose of education solely in a utilitarian way. Don’t get me wrong, useful knowledge is a good and noble pursuit, and, as a parent myself, I want my kids to find gainful employment when they graduate...I get that...but I want so much more for my children than just a job. ... because my children are so much more than empty bank accounts that need to be filled up and sent on their way so they can bring home a paycheck. I want them to become well-rounded, confident, curious young adults who enjoy life and flourish in every dimension. I want them to love learning, love other people, and most of all love the triune God.

And that’s a problem with approaching education for purely utilitarian reasons—such an approach leads to an incomplete education—an education that tends to ignore entire dimensions of the human person—such as the spiritual dimension. Therefore, education merely as job training is not true to who we were created to be as human beings made in God’s image.

And it is not even true to what employers say they want in an employee... nor is it true to the realities of the current job market, which I will address in a few minutes.

In short, education as mere job training can TRAP students—it can trap human beings we are called to love. It traps them in a single career track...in ignorance and inactivity...in the trends and fashions of their day...and they often become enslaved to their personal passions and desires.

But there is a different way of conceiving the purpose of education.

I want to suggest that the goal or *telos* of education should be, first and foremost, NOT to equip students to get a job, nor even to amass a lot of knowledge (as important as those goals are); but the primary purpose of education is to *cultivate a certain kind of person*. C. S. Lewis wrote, “The purpose of education is to produce the good man and the good citizen...The 'good man' here means the man of good taste and good feeling, the interesting and interested man...”

The word “education” itself comes from the Latin *ex-ducere*, meaning “to draw out” or “to educate.” Thus, education is about drawing out or perfecting the potential that God has placed within students. In other words, true education is about more than information; it is about formation. Its purpose is not just to make a living, but to make a certain kind of life...a certain kind of person...the young man or woman of virtue.

Intellectual Virtues

When it comes to schooling, the kind of virtue that most people think about first is intellectual virtue. They think about book learning in the classroom. And for good reason.

As human beings, the Lord gave us the ability to think, to ask questions, to read, to explore, to evaluate, to construct good arguments, and to discern the difference between what is true and what is false. In Isaiah 1:18 the Lord even calls His people to “Come now, let us reason together...” God gave us this reasoning capacity for our own good, and He calls us to use our reason to know and to glorify Him—indeed, when Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment, he responds “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your *mind*.” (Matt 22:37) As with any gift from God, we are responsible to exercise the gifts of intellect and reason well, not to misuse them by allowing the brain to go dull or to dwell in unnecessary ignorance.

In short, as John Mark Reynolds says, if we want to love the Lord God with our mind, it’s best to make that mind as sharp and attractive as possible.

Moral Virtues

So, good education requires cultivating intellectual virtue, but intellectual virtue alone is not enough, for the simple reason that God created human persons as more than just craniums. He formed us with not only a brain that can think but also a conscience that can choose and a soul that can love. And thus educators must attend to their students’ moral capacities as well.

Without the cultivation of moral virtue, all other forms of knowledge are weakened and even potentially dangerous. The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians that even if we can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge—even if we achieve a PhD and an OPI, if we do not have love, we are nothing.

Moral formation should be a focus of all educators for the simple reason that, within schools, moral formation is inevitable. There is no such thing as value-neutral education or character-neutral education. All education is character education; the question is, whose values? what kind of character is being formed?

In short, to truly flourish, we must educate young people not only in the intellectual virtues, but also the moral virtues.

Theological/Spiritual Virtues:

And yet ... it is not even enough to teach critical thinking *and* good behavior. If the goal of a school is to shape a virtuous human, educators must attend to questions about the purpose of human life and Who it is that invested that life with purpose in the first place. In other words, schools must take theological questions seriously, and seek to develop the spiritual dimension of their students.

And this has to mean more than just adding daily prayer on top of what the school was already doing. Just because a chair happens to dwell in a garage, it is not, therefore, necessarily a car; likewise, just because a school offers regular worship services on its campus does not mean that the *education* it provides is necessarily Christian. The relationship between faith and learning needs to be more integral than that. We need to help our kids explore the *purposes* that infuse every single subject, as well as the Creator who purposed those subjects to begin with.

Here I'm reminded of another passage from C.S. Lewis, who claims: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because *by* it I see everything else." In my mind, this is a solid criteria with which to judge any education that claims to be Christian: does it simply take the standard, secular curriculum and add a prayer at the beginning or a class on doctrine at the end, *or* does it challenge students to see every subject—every facet of reality—in the light of Jesus Christ. And is it taught in a way that challenges students to not just to know that truth at a cognitive level, but to want it, to desire it, to be attracted to it.

So, the purpose of education is to form a certain kind of person—to cultivate within young men and women intellectual, moral and spiritual virtues.

The Millis Institute

This is what a new institute at Christian Heritage College aims to do at the tertiary level. We are calling it The Millis Institute and are currently seeking accreditation for a new Bachelor's degree in the Liberal Arts.

The liberal arts refers not just to humanities subjects; instead, it refers to a certain *approach* to learning, with a certain goal or purpose in mind. That goal is to pursue not just training for a specialized job, or the mere accumulation of knowledge, but to teach students how to love God and his creation with their whole heart, soul, and mind. As Albert Einstein said, "The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think."

At The Millis Institute, we plan to teach young people how to think by making them apprentices to the best thinkers who have ever lived. Being an apprentice means learning from masters how to be like them, not just by listening to their words but by walking along beside them—exploring the times in which they lived and the obstacles they faced (history), how they worshipped (religion), the manner in which they spoke (language and literature), the ideas that shaped their thinking (philosophy), and the way they applied those ideas to the challenges of their day (ethics). As apprentices to the greatest thinkers of the Western tradition, our students will not only read their works; they will also rehearse their arguments, participate in their conversations, and practice their way of thinking and speaking until it becomes habit.

Thus, the liberal arts studied at The Millis Institute will include logic, geometry, history, philosophy, literature, theology, ethics, science and mathematics. These are subjects that help students acquire the foundational skills of learning. In short, these are the subjects that develop in students the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and understand the world in which they live.

Now, these skills and ways of knowing are valuable in themselves. The liberal arts need no justification beyond the intrinsic value of learning. Yet, the liberal arts do have very practical benefits, which are often not understood.

Relevance to Job Market

When many people here about this sort of education, they tend to respond, “That all sounds well and good, but the liberal arts won’t really help students to get a job.” And I realize that each of you has a vested interest in making sure your graduates go on to the kinds of universities that will help them to get good jobs. So I want to spend a couple minutes looking at the assumption that a liberal arts degree is not relevant in the job market—especially in today’s highly technological world.

First, I would argue that a liberal arts degree is actually more relevant for today’s job market than it was for my parents’ generation. In that generation, it was typical for someone like my dad to graduate from university, get a job, stay with that same company for 45 years, and retire with a golden watch. That is simply not the world that the students who graduate from your schools are entering. In Australia today, the average university graduate changes jobs once every five years...and we need to ask whether universities are preparing them for the challenges and changes associated with that reality. I would argue that, whereas a vocational degree may help students land their first job, a liberal arts degree provides the flexibility they need to move into their second, third, and fourth jobs.

And research backs this up. On a purely economic level, studies have found that, over the long run, the highest paid workers in Western society—those who rise to leadership positions—are those with a liberal arts degree.

Second, I would also point out that the liberal arts produce the kind of graduates that employers seek to hire.

Several years ago, a board member of a small university in Australia was having lunch with an employment recruiter for IBM—let’s call him Mark, who was noting the large number of university graduates who apply to work in entry-level jobs at IBM. The board member asked Mark what he looks for in applicants to narrow down the field and make successful hires. The recruiter answered that their ideal candidate did three things: played sports, played chess and has studied Latin. Why? Because IBM wanted people who were team players and who could think strategically and whose minds worked in a certain ordered way—figuring out strange or foreign codes and so forth. IBM would train their employees once they got there, but IBM wanted to find people who had already developed those basic competencies that are much more difficult to teach. Google has said the same thing, and Apple has said the same thing. And yet we continue to hear the belief that the most strategic education one can pursue is a vocationally-specific degree, full-stop.

I believe that a Liberal Arts education is a time-tested way to produce these kinds of people—the kinds of managers, and teachers, and engineers that employers so desperately want. Liberal Arts graduates are valuable in the job market because they have been trained to think creatively and independently, to see the big picture, and to work with teams and communicate with citizens of other cultures to strategize and solve problems.

But I think it’s worth drilling down into why exactly this is the case.

Direct vs. Indirect Approach

One reason Liberal Arts colleges are able to produce this kind of person is because they are willing to take an indirect rather than a direct approach.

-Think about training in the piano by teaching students to play simple scales.

-Or think about training new soccer players by having them dribble around cones set up in a straight line on the field, or lifting weights in the gym.

-Or thinks about the training received by cadets in the army, who run for hours in perfect formation and participate in call-and-response chants while they run.

Now, it is highly unlikely that any of these practices will be performed in exactly this way once those students become professionals. Virtually no advanced piano piece includes a simple scale; no professional soccer player dribbles around a pole—yet alone a long line of opposing players standing still—in a match; and no soldier in the heat of battle runs in formation while chanting. Yet all of these practices are considered valuable and even necessary in the formation of a novice.

In other words, in most activities in life people are willing to acknowledge the need to master fundamental skills—to spend time in certain activities and drills—even if those activities are not directly repeated during the highest level of action. The drills are valuable because they train a student’s fingers, and their feet, and their disposition-to-authority to respond automatically. That is, the student engages fundamentals for the purpose of cultivating certain habits and dispositions that are needed at those highest levels. Practicing the fundamentals may be tedious along the way, they may not be fun, and they may not make sense to the student at the time...but they are necessary for becoming a master in the craft.

My question for educators, especially at the tertiary level, is this: Why is the same not true about higher-level thinking, critical reading, effective writing, persuasive speaking, innovative problem solving and sound decision-making? These skills and dispositions are often crucial for the everyday workplace, but tertiary education in Australia does not require that students master them before moving on to vocational work. Instead, it has pushed to the margins those disciplines that are not considered to be *directly* relevant to a particular career field. That is, if a certain career is not seen to *directly* involve geometry or music or literature, then those subjects are likely excluded from the curriculum.

Educational institutions don’t seem to appreciate the way that these disciplines train certain ways of thinking—and even wire the brain in certain ways—that are extremely valuable and practical in most career fields.

IBM certainly wanted students prepared in a more *indirect* way. It knew that its employees would not sit around IBM headquarters playing chess or speaking Latin to each other, but it wanted students who were shaped *through* engaging those subjects. It did not just want students who were trained in computer technology.

Nevertheless, in today’s impatient culture, we want the critical reasoning and the big picture thinking and the problem solving skills and the effective communication, but we push students quickly on to vocational education without requiring classes in logic, rhetoric, or philosophy. To quote C.S. Lewis, “We remove the organ, yet demand the function. ... We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

I believe that one reason the liberal arts is able to produce the kind of people that employers want is because it takes the indirect approach—it takes the time and the patience to engage subjects that train valuable skills and ways of knowing, even if the content of those subjects might not be replicated directly in a career.

Liberal Arts Makes Connections

A second reason the liberal arts is able to produce these kinds of people is because it trains students to make connections and to see associations that others don't.

[Example of Steve Jobs in his early days at Apple.]

Sadly, many universities today do not train students to make connections between fields or teach them the unity of God's creation, or how all things hold together as one. Often, the only thing shared by the various university schools and their faculties is a parking lot.

In contrast, we are designing the Millis Institute curriculum so that it helps students understand the connections between disciplines—the way different facts and fields and objects of knowledge relate to one other. Unlike vocationally specific degrees, our focus will not just be on the leaf at the far end of one particular branch; instead, we desire to foster understanding of the common trunk—and even the root system—and how it grounds the various particular limbs.

As one educator notes: “Perhaps the most important contributions schools can make to the education of our youth is to give them a sense of coherence in their studies, a sense of purpose, meaning and interconnectedness in what they learn.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, as leaders of Christian schools, we need to help our students, their parents, and our staffs think deeply about the purpose or *telos* of education. We need to encourage them to view education as more than just a passport to personal privilege, and their academic degree as more than just a hunting license for a job. Rather, we need to exhibit an approach to education that attends to the whole person, cultivating intellectual, moral and theological virtues.

We need to answer the biblical call to liberate the captives...and we have the chance to do that in the context of 21st century Christian schooling. Our task is to help set students free from the traps of a watered down, solely utilitarian education.

- Whereas many are trapped in a single career track, we need to prepare them to enter any field and be able to learn what's necessary for success.
- Whereas many are trapped in ignorance, we need to train them in how to think.
- Whereas many are trapped by the trends and fashions of the day, we need to help them understand and evaluate the influence of their context and community.
- Whereas many are enslaved by their own disordered passions and urges, we need to help them to order their desires toward the good, the true and the beautiful.

This is what's liberating about the liberal arts, and why we're so excited about the new initiative being launched at Christian Heritage College. Our students, made in the image of

God, deserve schools that take the time and patience to help set them free to flourish. We hope to work with all of you in accomplishing that vision.