

Introduction

A 2008 research study conducted by the College Board revealed that more and more students are choosing to attend college expressly for the purpose of “receiving skills and training for a specific career.” Over fifty percent of students in the poll indicated they chose their particular college or university because “their graduates get good jobs” and nearly sixty-five percent chose their school because it offered specific internships or career-related opportunities.¹ The study highlights a trend across many colleges and universities—that modern higher education is increasingly seen merely as the means to a particular end—often one’s future career, vocation, or occupation.² It is also the latest salvo in one of the longest running arguments in the history of civilization—the purpose of higher education.

Since antiquity, philosophers and educators alike have debated the nature of education. One part of the debate involves determining the appropriate nature and breadth of one’s study: should one get a broad education and learn about many different subjects or should one specialize and receive focused training in a specific skill? A broad, or liberal, education was typified by the reading of philosophy and the study of the humanities, intended to aid the erudite in their discussion of weighty subjects such as the nature of God, ethics, and the purpose of life. Skills training and the learning of a trade were often conceptualized as being necessary only for laborers.

With the increase in costs of a college education, these debates are more significant than ever. University general studies curricula, often the core of one’s education, are currently receiving increased attention across academia. A 2009 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) found 56% of member institutions reported their general education programs becoming “more of a priority over the last five years” (“Trends,” p. 6) and 89% are either reviewing, proposing, implementing, or assessing recent changes made to their general education programs. Among the major trends in revising general education curricula is the focus on learning outcomes “that employers would like to see colleges and universities emphasizing more” (“Trends,” p. 5). The AACU study noted that business executives suggested higher

¹ “Research Dispels Millennial Theories.” (2008). *Student Poll* 6 (2). Available at: <http://www.artsci.com/studentpoll/v6n2/index.aspx>. Accessed February 15, 2012.

² See also “Why Students Attend College,” available at: <http://www.colorado.edu/pba/surveys/ug/99/college.htm>, and “Why do Students Go to College?” available at <http://washingtonexaminer.com/local/education/2011/04/why-do-students-go-college/113061>.

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education should put more emphasis on technology training, internships, critical thinking, and “global issues.” In other words, general education curricula in higher education, just like major programs, are becoming more career and job skill-focused.

The modern tendency to see the chief end of education as personal skills training echoes Hobbes’ *Leviathan* where he eschewed liberal education and reflecting upon the larger purpose of life in exchange for the endless pursuit of power. He wrote, “There is no such utmost aim or greatest good as is spoken of in the books of old moral philosophers...I put for a general inclination for all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power” (p. 52). If money is power and good jobs earn good money, then Hobbes most surely predicted our current state of education. In Hobbes’ view, since the purpose of life was survival of the most powerful, the purpose of one’s education should be to learn a trade, rather than to get educated.

Not everyone agrees with this perspective, of course. Humanities scholar Christopher Flannery calls Hobbes’ words “a decisive break” in the history of education, signaling a shift in educational philosophy where studying “the arts of freedom [began] to be replaced by the arts of necessity” (p. 12). The late Arthur F. Holmes, in his book *The Idea of a Christian College*, encouraged readers to re-think higher education and in particular, the potential role of the liberal arts within it. Holmes, a Professor of Philosophy at Wheaton College, argued we should see education as an occasion to do more than simply train workers for specific jobs. Instead, we should return to a more classical view of education and consider the role the liberal arts can play in how we develop as whole persons.

This idea perhaps conjures visions of education as detached intellectualism at the expense of gaining job skills. Yet, it need not be that way. In fact, Holmes argued that a good liberal arts education and career preparation are not mutually exclusive. A good liberal arts education can actually better prepare a student for the workplace, more so than earning a degree in a particular major. *USA Today* recently reported that students who had “mastered the ability to think critically, reason analytically and write effectively” were “three times less likely to be unemployed than those who hadn’t” (Marklein, p. 3A). It’s true that we may indeed become workers and employees at some point in our lives, but according to Holmes, we are human persons *first* and workers *second*. People change jobs and careers multiple times over their lives.³ Training in specific job skills frequently becomes obsolete in only a few short years. Specific skills training addresses only one element of our existence—the part spent at our vocation. Thus, there is a great need to train students broadly. Holmes saw the liberal arts as a

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that individuals between 18 and 44 have held up to eleven different jobs during that time span. See www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf.

means to teach students important life concepts, such as the meaning and value of work, cognitive and relational skills, and human values. He wrote, “Liberal arts education is the education of responsible agents for the vocation of life itself” (p. 38). Such ideals can only be developed with an expanded approach to one’s education.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to ruminate upon the liberal arts and the role they can potentially play at Arizona Christian University. Arizona Christian can be counted among the 89% of schools that are currently at some stage of reviewing/revising their general education curriculum. As we do, we find ourselves asking key questions: What are the liberal arts? Is there value in adopting a liberal arts approach to education? How does one balance the “life skills” of a liberal arts curriculum with the “practical skills” approach desired by employers? What principles should guide us as we review our curriculum?

Defining the Liberal Arts

The “Liberal Arts” in higher education have been understood in many ways. In classic antiquity, the liberal arts were those broad academic subjects that were studied “as an end to themselves by those who did not need to engage in a trade” (Hoeckley, p. 1). They were originally studied out of the love of learning, not out of the need for training in an occupation. In time, these areas of study were defined as *logic, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy*. These fields form the basis for the Trivium (the study of the literary arts, linguistics, critical thinking and persuasion), and the Quadrivium (the mathematical arts, concentrating on quantification, symbolic representation and abstractions). More recently, Glycer and Weeks (1998) described a liberal education as that which raises great questions about human existence, including, “Who am I? Why am I here? What is my relationship and responsibility to God? What is beauty? What is good?” (p. xiv).

Glycer and Weeks’ definition inevitably raises questions about the utility of liberal education, ala, “What good is it to simply know ‘what is good’?” Glycer and Weeks defend the approach writing, “Liberal education, in this form, turns out to be quite useful for further learning, for oneself, for serving others, and for professional practice” (p. xxiv). They quote Newman’s *Uses of the University*, saying “‘a cultivated intellect brings with it a power and grace to every work and occupation which...enables us to be more useful,’ as well as better friends, companions, and citizens” (p. 119, xxiv). Mannoia furthered this sentiment, writing that “the education most suited to long-term advancement in most professions is not the narrowly specialized one but

the one that provides the transferable skills crucial to a variety of jobs”—i.e., one based in the liberal arts (p. 24).

Holmes likened the Christian’s study of liberal arts to that of being a steward of one of God’s great gifts to us—our humanness. He writes, “Liberal education provides an opportunity to steward life more effectively by becoming more fully a human person in the image of God” (p. 36). Stan Gaede, President of the Christian College Consortium, was more pressing in his advocacy of liberal arts education for Christians, writing that the liberal arts are “about the holistic pursuit of that which is good and right and true; a pursuit which is not only consistent with the Christian faith, but required by it” (p. 1). Holmes’ conception of Christian liberal arts, then, consisted of the study of what it means to be fully human—human values, human history, reading and writing, as well as investigating human physical, emotional, and social development.

It is with this desire to educate the whole person and transform culture with truth, as well as mission to provide a biblically integrated education that prepares its graduates to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, that Arizona Christian University approaches its liberal arts curriculum. The University does recognize that vocational training and skill development is important and can and does take place within its academic offerings, but the University’s liberal arts core is dedicated to faithfully developing the whole Christian person for a life of service to others, not simply to a potential job, career, or employer. To that end, Arizona Christian University’s liberal arts curriculum is grounded in the following principles:

- a) A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *theologically*, guiding their understanding of God.
- b) A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *spiritually*, cultivating a personal relationship with Christ, giving them a greater sense of purpose.
- c) A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *personally*, developing their understanding of their humanness.
- d) A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *socially*, revealing the importance of faith for society at large.
- e) A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *intellectually*, exposing them to a wider palate of educational experiences.

A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *theologically*, guiding their understanding of God.

At Arizona Christian University, we believe that God created the universe and that He is reflected in that creation (Genesis 1; Romans 1:18-23; Psalm 104). By studying the liberal arts—the natural and the social sciences, humanities, the creative arts, literature and philosophy—we gain a better understanding of the world in which we live, and thus, a better understanding of God the creator.

A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *spiritually*, cultivating a personal relationship with Christ, giving them a greater sense of purpose.

At Arizona Christian University, we believe that all persons are created by God, that sin separates humanity from God, and a restored relationship between humanity and God through Christ is not only possible, but an essential element in individuals discovering their purpose for being (Genesis 2-3; John 14: 1-14; John 6:35-40). Existence is not governed by chaos, but by God’s profound sense of order. All persons need to articulate their relationship with Christ to discover their place in God’s created order.

Holmes described “persons” as “reflective, thinking beings” (p. 29) meaning we are not satisfied merely with what we can see. Rather, we desire to know beyond our finiteness. We seek connection between ideas and theorize about our own existence. We believe that a liberal arts curriculum can and should “fan the spark of human inquiry” and imagination (p. 30) particularly about spiritual things. By fearlessly raising serious questions and entertaining the deepest mysteries, we believe the student will encounter the truth of Christ, find purpose to their life and unity to their understanding (p. 31).

A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *personally*, developing their understanding of their humanness.

At Arizona Christian University, we believe that all persons are made in the image of God (Genesis 1). If we are made in the image of God, then education becomes the pursuit of understanding God’s highest creation—humanity. Therefore, a liberal arts education grounded in the Christian faith can help the student understand themselves better.

Holmes writes, “Education has to do with the making of persons; Christian education, the making of Christian persons. Since this is what God’s creative and redemptive work is about—the making of persons in his own image—it follows that an education that helps make us more fully persons is especially important to Christians” (p. 25).

A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *socially*, revealing the importance of community for individuals and of faith for society at large.

At Arizona Christian University, we believe humans are social beings, having been created to exist with others. God recognized that it was not good for Adam to be alone (Genesis 2); God also ordained that there be governments to manage society (Romans 13). We believe that a liberal arts education can show the student how God and faith can positively influence both our relationships with others and with larger social institutions.

Richard Slimbach, in the article “Re-Imagining a Distinctly Christian Liberal Arts Education,” writes that the “life of faith is not a solitary one”; it is lived within a community of believers for the purpose of “equipping women and men with the requisite competence to reform individual lives and redirect social institutions” (p. 69). By emphasizing common faith and common learning communities, a liberal arts curriculum can develop students with strong faith values capable of restoring Christian values to all spheres of life—interpersonal relationships, cultural outlets, as well as civic and educational institutions.

A liberal arts curriculum grounded in the Christian faith will help the student *intellectually*, exposing them to a wider palate of educational experiences and perspectives.

At Arizona Christian University, we believe the pursuit of knowledge is a worthwhile human endeavor and a natural application of our God-given intellectual capabilities. Knowledge is derived not only by faith or authority, but rather through multiple means, including rationality—and the use of logic—and empirical observation.

Likewise, we also believe in academic freedom—the responsible exploration of ideas and the truth that surrounds them (Holmes, p. 69). We believe it is the Christian’s responsibility to separate truth from error and doing so requires faithful, objective scrutiny of various viewpoints, including those that may run counter to Christian ideals. (1 Thess. 5: 20-22; Romans 1; 1 John 4:1; James 3: 13-18; Eph. 5: 6-17) While we adhere to the tenants and truths of Christianity and a biblical worldview as expressed in the University Statement of Faith, we desire to integrate that faith with student learning, cultivating in students a desire to be life-long learners and agents of cultural change.

With mainstream educational institutions increasingly eliminating discussions of faith from the classroom, students are receiving an ever-limited exposure to ideas. Likewise, a religious approach to education that eliminates secular concepts from the curriculum leaves Christian students incapable of dialoging with those outside religious circles or influencing others. A

liberal arts education that integrates the Christian faith restores breadth to one’s educational experience and will help the University achieve its mission.

Slimbach called this aspect of Christian liberal arts education “interdisciplinary” and “prophetic.” A well-rounded, intellectually grounded, interdisciplinary liberal arts education can train the Christian to engage with and critique cultural trends and, like the Old Testament prophets, call for change. Slimbach writes, “While this calls upon Christ followers to take risks in interacting with those persons and ideas which oftentimes belittle religious assumptions and satirize believers, it is essential to the task of expounding upon a Christian vision of life. This engagement aims to lead students into an understanding of contemporary thought systems at the level of their core assumptions” (p. 74).

Summary

At Arizona Christian University, we desire to create a liberal arts core program that educates the whole student—one that helps them grow theologically, spiritually, personally, socially, and intellectually. We desire to create a liberal arts core that is fully integrated with the truth of Christianity and a biblical worldview. Richard Slimbach, writing in *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education: Challenging Assumptions, Exploring Possibilities* said, “A distinctly Christian education will give less consideration to what students will come into school with than to the dispositions, knowledges, values, virtues, sympathies, skills, and commitments that will characterize them when they go out” (p. 69). At Arizona Christian University, we desire that as students graduate and leave the university community, they have an understanding of God, Christ, themselves, others, and their world.

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