

Why Am I Here?

(That is, on the board of The Evergreen State College)

The desirability of securing a liberal arts degree was imparted to me by my mother. That may seem hardly worthy of remark, except for the fact she was an immigrant who came to the United States in steerage, and herself never went to school beyond the ninth grade, quitting to go to work in industry to help support her family.

I never reflected on this circumstance until very late in my life, that is, until I was well into my career as an historian and museum administrator and had received several honors whose humbling effect precipitated a healthy dose of introspection. My mother, it must be said, was not unfamiliar with higher education by the time I came to that great crossroads of life—high school graduation. She and my father had sent my older brother and sister off to college but unlike my siblings, I was a C+ student, and not really sure if I was “college material.” Given the uncertainty of my life prospects, it was the vehemence of her position, now that I think back upon the moment that is most vivid in my memory: “David—Go off to college, get a liberal arts degree, and then decide what you want to do.” Her insistent posture was all the more remarkable considering her origins and station; not overly educated herself she knew the value of liberal arts degree. Today, all too many well-educated people don’t see the point of sending their children off to study the arts, humanities, or the social studies.

From that decision point—heading off to the State University of New York at Plattsburgh—I can state unqualifiedly, my life has taken its trajectory. As an undergraduate I came into contact with critical minded professors who were inspiring, demanding, and encouraging. With that grounding I went on to secure an M. A. in history from the University of Idaho, which itself set the stage for a life long career in history. About my principal discipline, if I had to give an “elevator speech” about what I learned in college it would be this: I received training in how to see the patterns of history and how they influence the lives of individuals, groups, or nations. It’s often averred that history repeats itself. Anyone who has studied a lot of history knows this is nonsense. But history does rhyme, and there is great meaning to be gleaned from discerning the corresponding moments of varying epochs, ages, and eras.

Today, STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) degrees is all the rage in higher education, or at least, external policy guidance to those in higher education. These are noble disciplines, and they and the liberal arts are not fated to be in opposition to each other. From a liberal arts perspective, the concern about STEM policy directives and preferences is the instrumentalist outlook that impels them; a worldview typical generated by some, but by no means all, business interests. To wit: it’s only STEM degrees that serve and build our economy,

our community, our nation. A liberal arts degree may or may not lead to a job in the discipline studied, but it is indisputably valuable in preparing oneself for a life in the civic arena.

Nor, really, is this a new debate. Two millennia ago Cicero observed: “Certain persons, and not those without some pretension to letters, disapprove of the study of philosophy altogether.” Closer to our own time and country, Thomas Jefferson was the first to see this nexus—the ideal curriculum for higher education and its value—holistically. (He also addressed the need for balance between the student’s and society’s responsibilities for the financing of higher education, but that’s another topic.) Writing in 1818, on the occasion of the founding of the University of Virginia, Jefferson stipulated “public prosperity and individual happiness” depend on higher education. Among “the objects of that higher grade of education,” Jefferson wrote, were the development of “reasoning faculties” that would “enlarge minds,” concurrent with the “mathematical and physical sciences, which . . . administer to the health, the subsistence, and comforts of human life.”

Curiously, from a TESC perspective, Jefferson’s ideal system of higher education was innovative, if not radical. Publicly funded in its support and inter-disciplinary in its outlook, Jefferson’s vision was student-centric. Students were advised to draw their own conclusions from reading books, hearing lectures, observing nature, and conducting scientific experiments. Of paramount importance to Jefferson was the need to constantly re-fresh education by avoiding fixed curricula. In his time, electives were instituted as the antidote to one-size fits all. Today, TESC’s curricular strategy is a logical extension of the UVA model.