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Alive and Well

by Mary B. Marcy

The liberal arts are higher education's answer to Broadway, that "fabulous invalid" whose demise is predicted with both certainty and regularity. Claims that the liberal arts are in jeopardy have taken on increased urgency in the current economic climate. As students swell the ranks of community colleges, the presumption is that readily identifiable and employable skills rather than broad and deep learning are the primary focus of their educational ambitions.

But in the case of the liberal arts, conventional wisdom is at odds with what experience and current data suggest. For example, the benchmark freshmen surveys conducted each year by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute show an increasing appetite for the kind of educational experience typically associated with the liberal arts. In 2008, for the first time since 1982, more than 50 percent of first year students identified "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" as an important or very important goal of their college experience.

Similarly, the venerable pollster John Zogby has found that a growing segment -- including but not limited to the traditional college age population -- of United States citizens believes living a "meaningful life" is central to the realization of the American dream. And despite dire predictions, enrollment at most liberal arts colleges, including my own, has risen during this difficult economic year.

There are likely two reasons for this gap between conventional wisdom and student decision making. The first is that the separation of liberal arts education from employment is simply unfounded. Employers consistently say that they want to hire graduates who can write and speak clearly, who are innovative and critical thinkers, and who are sophisticated and comfortable with diversity. While not exclusively the domain of liberal education, these traits are certainly cultivated in a liberal arts environment.

The second probable reason for the persistence of the liberal arts is the focus of students themselves. Today's traditional college age population is more globally-minded, less interested in work as a means only to material success, more willing to find middle ground on issues that typically lead to bi-modal responses (such as abortion), and entirely comfortable with differences in race, gender, and sexual orientation.

In short, today's young people are balm to the liberal educator's soul. Ideally, liberal education should literally do just that – it should be education that liberates, that frees the mind from the vagaries and prejudices of received opinion and limited life experiences.

Of course, a reinvigorated focus on liberal education in this light suggests that some of the country club amenities of recent college life may not be particularly essential. Yet material gain is not eschewed in recent findings; it is simply not sufficient. Student expectations for material comfort and the search for meaning are not incompatible, but they may not be attainable in institutions whose resources are strained.

When in doubt, we should follow the example of Bobby Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis: ignore unreasonable demands and respond to the best of their aspirations. In this case, the liberal arts should provide a model of education that offers both a path to employment and faith in learning for its own sake; a set of useful skills along with the ability to reflect and find value in something beyond oneself. And a campus with older residence halls housing two and three students to a room is not only defensible, it is quite probably a sign of an institution focused on -- well, on education.

To add to the economic anxiety, there is also frequent hand wringing over the fate of the liberal arts due to the growth and proliferation of technology. It was not so long ago that technology was seen as a threat to educational engagement, whether it was through online learning or in society at large as we all "bowled alone." Yet much of this anxiety evolved from a false dichotomy -- the notion that high tech and high touch are incompatible.

Students see no contradiction between technological sophistication and a personally connected learning community, and they expect both to be a part of their education. The reflection and personal engagement implied by the search for a meaningful life is fully compatible with the Internet age. Students are increasingly sophisticated in online work, while simultaneously they thrive, as much as ever, from strong relationships with faculty. Students expect fully contemporary technological resources, even as they seek the depth and meaning promised by a liberal arts education. The practical and financial challenge is to secure the necessary technological resources and fully integrate them into a sophisticated liberal arts education.

The threat to the liberal arts, if there is one, is not from the recession -- although our resources in higher education are limited. And it is not from a failure to offer marketable skills, for liberal education prepares students for

both life and employment. The threat is the enduring challenge of education: to engage eternal truths even as we respond to contemporary issues. It is to ensure that liberal education evolves, that meaningful reflection can employ contemporary technological tools, that cultural exchange should extend beyond the boundaries of western democracies, that understanding identity does not inevitably lead to a chasm of difference. It is to create a liberal education that is both contemporary and enduring, evolving and profound. This is, simply and as always, the promise and the challenge of liberal education.

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