

A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

The philosophy of a university education

A university education is meant to accomplish many things. We attend a university to receive a general education, to study the liberal arts, and to prepare ourselves for entry into government, business, industry, or the professions. These preparations can also lead to postgraduate study at the university and to advanced degrees after the baccalaureate degree.

A general education gives us knowledge about the world and those who live in it, and the ability to continue pursuing knowledge both within the university and outside of it. The knowledge that we gain at the university both enables and requires us to learn throughout our lives, for what we come to know is that we only have knowledge as long as we continue to pursue it. Knowledge is not something that is acquired once and for all; rather it is what comes from the activity of a critical intelligence. When we gain this knowledge we are in the position to be effective in whatever life requires of us.

The liberal arts are the foundation of a university education. The idea of a liberal arts education has an ancient pedigree. The subjects that came to be known as “the Liberal Arts” in the Middle Ages were the subjects that citizens in classical Greece studied in order to participate in the democratic governance of their cities. Although there are differences between modern western societies and our intellectual ancestors, we continue to believe, as they did, that we must be educated if we are to govern ourselves well. The public university exists because of our commitment to the idea that a democratic society must educate its citizens, or risk losing the right and the ability to govern itself.

The education we receive at the university proceeds on the assumption that governing ourselves requires that we see ourselves as part of a global society, for we share the earth with other societies and other cultures. It is natural for humans to live in societies, to have a culture, and to speak a language. It is also natural for us to think about what it means to be human and about how we should live. But these societies, cultures, languages, and thoughts do not have to be the same, and we need to understand in what ways we are the same as the other inhabitants of the earth and in what ways we are different. A university education asks students to *think* about what it is to live in a society, to have a culture, and to speak a language. But we also learn these things by actually studying different societies, examining particular cultures, and speaking other languages. We hope that by doing we acquire some understanding, appreciation, and respect for our differences as well as our similarities.

Studying at the university enlarges both our understanding and our curiosity about what existed before us, what exists in the present with us, and what will exist in the future. We are given the means and the opportunity to ask how we are subject to the forces that govern other physical objects in the natural world, what needs we share with other

biological organisms, and in what ways we behave as other animals do. We examine how our history as physical, biological, and zoological entities is part of the history of the earth that we inhabit, and how the history of the earth is bound up with that of other stars, planets, solar systems and galaxies.

The knowledge we acquire at the university helps us to understand how things happening at one place on earth can profoundly change what happens elsewhere. We see that changes that begin as physical, or biological, or cultural, or economic, or technological almost always initiate changes in other areas as well. This complex system of physical, biological, cultural, economic, and technological factors constitutes the environment, and changes in the environment affect how we live and whether we will survive as a species. The study of the environment provides a good example of how and why a university education requires both a perspective that is interdisciplinary and the perspective of the specialist. The knowledge that comes from studying the physical and biological sciences, mathematics, the social and behavioral sciences, and the arts and humanities needs to be both integrated and embodied if we are to learn the importance of predicting and affecting what happens in and to the environment, and protecting it for those who live now as well as future generations.

A university education also enlarges our understanding and our curiosity about ourselves. We learn about ourselves as individuals and not just as citizens of the universe, as inhabitants of the earth, and as members of societies both global and local. By studying the history and varieties of human expression we enhance our sense of freedom and our sense of responsibility. We reflect on the texts and events and artifacts in which others express what they know, hope, and imagine a human life to be. This enables us as individuals to think about how to live a meaningful life, to choose the project that will be one's life, and to fashion a way of being in the world. One is thus able to assume responsibility for the kind of person he or she becomes.

Lastly, the university teaches us that learning requires not only that we be critical and analytical, but also that we be generous. We must be open to the people, ideas, stories, theories, and artifacts we encounter at the university, for this diversity of people, thoughts and things makes the university what it is. Being open to whatever we encounter at the university does *not* require agreement or acceptance. Rather, being educated requires that one challenge the truth of what is told, disagree when it lacks sufficient reason, and dissent whenever one is not persuaded by reason, evidence, and logic. In short, when we leave the university we should be rational and critical but also courageous and kind. The test of whether we have received a university education is whether we leave the university with not just an appreciation of what we have learned there, but with a love for ideas, conversation, and discovery. It is this love that persists even after the baccalaureate has been awarded, because the discovery of mind, once made, has an effect on all that comes after it.

The goals of a liberal arts education

1. Understanding symbolic action, interpretation, and communication

To govern ourselves we must understand ourselves and our world—and ourselves as part of the world. To survive in our environment and appreciate it, we learn from others who have lived before us, and from who share the world with us now.

Linguistic, artistic, and mathematical symbols enable us to formulate knowledge, to preserve it, and to pass it on from one generation to the next. Systems of symbols provide the opportunities and the means to understand our experience as we experience it. We communicate by seeing each other's actions and expressions as meaningful: we interpret the actions and expressions of others and they interpret ours. It is in the act of communicating with others that the world and our lives become intelligible and meaningful.

Every human society has speech, but writing is a more recent invention, and not one that all societies have or will possess. In order to understand ourselves as makers and users of symbols, as speakers and writers of languages such as English and Chinese, but also mathematics and logic and music, we must study how individuals and societies communicate and express ideas through language and other symbol systems, oral, written, and performed.

2. Interpreting and understanding the natural world, the social world, and the human world

We are part of the very world that we are trying to understand: we are at once natural animals, social animals, and human animals. By using languages and expression we find ways to understand ourselves as part of nature, society, and humanity. We classify objects, events, and actions that allow us to construct explanations of why things happen and people behave as they do. We imagine worlds and construct models that show us how things might be if we were to act differently. We produce artifacts and events that add value to the world that we inhabit. These explanations, models, and imaginative constructions help us not only to predict and to understand how the objects and people around us will behave, they also enable us to intervene in these actions and events in ways designed to improve the character of human life. Being able to predict, participate in and influence this behavior gives us some measure of control over what happens, or might happen, in the world and communities in which we live.

3. Understanding theories and methods of producing knowledge

One of the oldest models for producing knowledge is identified with Socrates of Athens, who asked his fellow citizens why they believed what they believed. Socrates provided the inspiration for the philosophers and scientists who came after him, who continue to ask whether and what logical arguments can be given for believing conventional wisdom

--“what everybody knows.” For philosophers and scientists, there is no subject that we ought not to question, including the systematic methods they themselves use to accumulate and analyze evidence in studying the world and our knowledge of it. The success of the scientific method in explaining and predicting events, and intervening in the world, is itself something we want to understand. We want to know what the scientific method is, why it is so successful, and whether it is different from ordinary critical reasoning. We want also to understand the nature of critical reasoning itself, how some statements about the world count as evidence for the truth of other statements, how deductive and inductive methods of reasoning lead to knowledge. We want to know why the languages of logic and mathematics work so well in studying the natural world that Galileo was led to proclaim that the Book of Nature is written in Mathematics.

We also want to know whether logic, mathematics, and scientific method are sufficient to explain all human experiences, for we want to understand our experience as we experience it. Humans are not simply animals who reproduce, live in groups, and search for ways to survive. We also sing, dance, and pray; we write tragedies and comedies and political utopias; we build temples and monuments and vehicles to explore space. We also do unspeakable things to each other; we destroy and lay waste the very world we inhabit, but we also ask about the nature of good and evil.

In wanting to know about knowledge and ourselves as knowing agents, we want to know whether and how knowledge is connected to a good life. Generating new ways of explaining and intervening in the world opens up the possibility that we can change the world and ourselves in positive ways, that we can reduce suffering to make a better world. But we need to consider what counts as a better world, and from whose perspective it is seen as better than the one we currently inhabit.

Interpreting and understanding ourselves: human nature, cultural diversity, and gender difference

We come to understand how humans behave, how we make and use symbols, how we interpret each other's behavior, how we are by nature, as Aristotle said, social-political animals. We acquire this knowledge by studying the symbol systems, languages, cultures, and societies that occur at specific times and places in human history. We begin by studying our own society, and the artifacts and records of our cultural ancestors, but we also study societies different from our own. We ask whether the experiences of the most powerful and privileged members of our society are representative of the experiences of others in our community with less power and fewer privileges, because it is the experiences of the powerful and privileged that are most likely to be reported, studied, and recorded, and least likely to be challenged by those who come from other groups in society.

We also ask why in so many societies the same rights and responsibilities are not assigned to male and female members, and whether the role one might assume in human reproduction should be a primary consideration, or relevant at all, to one's rights and responsibilities as a citizen, an agent, and an interpreter of the world and oneself.

We look at theories about natural and cultural differences to see whether and how such differences affect the way an individual, or a group of individuals, experience and interpret the world. By looking at theories that explore racial and ethnic identity, sexual and gender identity, socio-economic status and class identity, we learn something about the ways in which an individual's or a group's experience is and is not representative of human experience.

Finding and making a meaningful life; being responsible stewards of the earth and protecting its environment

We want to find out everything we can about human experience, because we seek not just to survive and to reduce pain and suffering, but also to live in a world in which we can experience joy, pleasure, and happiness. We think of ourselves as able to choose how and why we should live, as able to arrive at an idea of a meaningful life, and as able to pursue this form of life. We look at what others have said about living a meaningful life for as we learn about other worlds and other lives, we imagine a better life and a better world for ourselves and for those who come after us. Imagining alternative futures makes us hopeful that the conscious and deliberate choices we have to make will preserve rather than destroy the earth and its inhabitants.

A university arts education is part of the long process in which we form beliefs about the world and ourselves based on evidence, even as we engage in debates about what counts as evidence and what counts as knowledge. More than this, a university education begins the lifelong project of fashioning a way of being in the world that is one's own. For this reason, the ceremony at which one receives one's degree is called commencement.

Joanne Waugh, for the USF Committee on Liberal Arts and General Education