Purpose Of Liberal Arts In The 21st Century

When questioning the purpose of Liberal Arts education one must take into account the benefits gained from this form of study and the criticism that Liberal Arts education has faced. This essay argues that Liberal Arts education is unique in its ability to prepare a student for life rather than a particular profession, that Liberal Arts education allows for fair analysis of real-life problems and avoids disciplinary bias allowing for an all rounded approach to problem solving and literary analysis. This essay recognises the criticism that Liberal Arts education has faced, its decline in popularity, and addresses concerns that Liberal Arts education leads to graduate underemployment. This essay argues that Liberal Arts education has a place in the 21st century's education system, and that overall, it is able to widen a student's perspectives, whilst remaining a relatively employable degree for postgraduates after they have finished their studies.

The purpose of Liberal Arts education can be explored when analysing the structure of this form of education. Liberal Arts education places great emphasis on interdisciplinarity and with this comes an array of skills that many students may be less likely to develop on a vocational degree. Namely, the ability to incorporate knowledge acquired from other disciplines when tackling a problem or a research question, an example of this may be an English literature student using knowledge from studying History to understand the context of a text thus aiding their understanding, and, getting a more accurate interpretation of the writer's intentions. The author of "In Defense of a Liberal Education", Fareed Zakaria, argues that rather than training a student for a job, Liberal Arts education provides training for multiple jobs through teaching "how to write clearly, how to express yourself convincingly, and how to think analytically" (Zakaria, 2015) which is practical today where, according to online sources, the average person is likely to have over ten jobs in their lifetime. This may be true as within Liberal Arts education students have the opportunity to explore multiple disciplines which may prepare them with skills for multiple different careers in their later life, and though one might argue that Liberal Arts education may leave a student less qualified in a certain discipline than a student who studies this discipline directly, in reality education can never fully prepare someone for what their future job may entail and the skills gained from interdisciplinary study may be more useful for a student in future life.

John P Bradley explains the purpose of Liberal Arts education in "Why Liberal Arts?" where he states "A liberal arts education, properly understood, embraces a wide range of subjects. It aims at teaching us to think effectively, harmonize our thinking about these various branches of knowledge, communicate our thoughts well, and make sound judgments" (Bradley, 1985) This statement highlights the use of interdisciplinary study in how a student thinks, with disciplines come disciplinary bias in the form of language used by that discipline. When failing to understand the lexis of another discipline, research can be limited as other disciplines may not be understood or even considered. Interdisciplinarity can serve to bridge the gap between two academic disciplines that study a similar topic where there is disciplinary overlap, and aid ones understanding of this topic as both approaches are different. For example, the way a Social Science student might investigate the issue of Feminism may greatly differ from the way an Arts student would, a student with a Liberal Arts education is less likely to hold one approach in higher esteem than the other and with this mindset is able to delve into understanding the topic

from both perspectives. Thus suggesting a purpose of Liberal Arts education is to improve depth of understanding research through tackling an issue from different perspective, and, to mould a student's mindset in how problems should be tackled.

When discussing the purpose of Liberal Arts education one must investigate its decline in popularity. Liberal Arts education has faced criticism and is accused of lacking depth in education due to a student's breadth of study that comes with a focus on interdisciplinarity. This has raised a negative stigma regarding the employability of such study and even a decline in popularity. Ferrall writes that "In 1900, the majority of undergraduates at higher education institutions, perhaps as many as 70 percent of them, were pursuing a liberal arts degree" … "by the end of the twentieth century the percentage of college students attending liberal arts colleges and universities had fallen below 5 percent" (Ferrall, 2011) Despite this decline in popularity, one may argue that Liberal Arts education is useful not only for its ability to craft a student's mindset and improve research, but is employable. Research by "Burning Glass Technologies" and the "Strada Institute for the Future of Work", show that after five years, eighteen thousand eight hundred and twenty-four graduates of "Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies, and Humanities" where underemployed. This is a smaller figure than the negative employment connotations held against Liberal Arts would expect, especially when compared with Psychology with ninety-nine thousand five hundred and ninety-seven unemployed graduates. (Burning Glass Technologies and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2018) Thus refuting the idea that Liberal Arts education is associated with under-employment.

However, if one uses employment as a basis of validity of education, one may argue that though Liberal Arts education does not have the highest rates of graduate unemployment, it lacks validity when compared to studying a discipline with higher employment rates. Research by "Burning Glass Technologies" and the "Strada Institute for the Future of Work" would suggest that admittedly the lowest rates of graduates facing underemployment are those who graduated with majors in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. (Burning Glass Technologies and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2018). However, this argument can be disputed when recognising that Liberal Arts Education is a good compromise with employability and the learning of skills that will aid students beyond finding their first job. Bradley poses the question "should a good education simply aim at training you to earn a good living? Or, should it have a much broader purpose?" (Bradley, 1985) and claims that Liberal Arts Education "aims at helping a person to become a good enlightened human being though proper cultivation of the mind" (Bradley, 1985). Though the question posed by Bradley is valid, one may argue the value of education is not economically or culturally defined but rather a mixture of both, and Liberal Arts education has proved itself a good compromise in expanding a student's thought through interdisciplinarity, without significantly reducing the employability of the student, thus remaining useful to a student in finding employment but also in later if called into a different profession. In the 21st century, vocational training is less accommodating as unpredictability is expected in one's career as technology advances and more professions are constantly growing extinct and being forged. Thus reinforcing the purpose of Liberal Arts education which utilises interdisciplinarity to allow for an adaptable education.

Ultimately, Liberal Arts education can be justified as a form of study that uses interdisciplinarity to aid a students understanding of research in allowing them to process information through the lens of multiple disciplines and with this, develop a skillset in the application of knowledge. Despite Liberal Arts education not having the highest initial employment for postgraduates, it is

arguably the most useful as the skillsets developed through Liberal Arts education can mould a student to be more well-rounded and adaptable to the ever-changing world of employment.

WORK CITED

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