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An admissions challenge: the liberal what?!

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Quad 136

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An Admissions Challenge: The Liberal What?!



At Saint John's and Saint Ben's we rightly spend most of our energy focused on the educational needs of our students on campus, both in and out of the classroom. But, of course, there is also considerable time spent thinking about and working on admissions – “the funnel” that takes students through the process from awareness of CSB and SJU, to becoming applicants, to ultimately matriculating as new first-year students.

I recently had the chance to work directly in this process and was reminded of the challenges our incredible admissions staff face in the market for college students. Through the intervention of an alumnus who works for the government in Da Nang, Vietnam, I was invited to meet with government officials there who are interested in investing in higher education abroad for their students. They are particularly interested in sending students to CSB and SJU because of the fine work and character of this young alum. They hope to have many more like him helping develop their young and vibrant country. Not surprisingly, these conversations, while exciting, are also fraught with logistical obstacles and great financial challenges, but what I found most complicated to explain was the American model of higher education to leaders, parents and students who are steeped in what I would call the British/European model.

For those of us who take the liberal arts model as not only normal but even as the gold standard for undergraduate education, it is important to be able to articulate clearly and simply why this is so.

In Europe and most of the rest of the world, students study a single subject as undergraduates, and when they apply to a university they also apply to a specific department. They must know prior to matriculation (and often even a year or two before so they can focus their high school studies) what subject they want to study. The closest equivalent in the American system would be to ask our applicants to choose their major when they apply. So 16 or 17 year-olds are asked to make a decision that often has an important impact on their life path which, given the maturity and experiences of most teenagers, represents a significant drawback in this educational model.

However, the European model does have its benefits. It allows for more depth in a single area of study as undergraduates focus their energies on a single discipline. I have had some European friends argue that a bachelor's degree earned in this system is the equivalent of a master's degree in the US system. I am not entirely persuaded by this argument but certainly do not disagree that the British/European model does provide a deeper immersion in the student's field of study.

The other alleged benefit is that it moves students along a career path more quickly. While the model is not purely vocational, as students can study many of the traditional arts and sciences under this system, it certainly encourages students to think early about their career options and choices. When choosing their field of study, students are not encouraged to explore or experiment. The model simply does not allow for that option. Students are expected to think about what they want to be doing 10 or 20 years hence and, ideally, choose accordingly. Professional fields like medicine and law are chosen when students are still in high school.

Our educational model may be a case of American Exceptionalism, as I know of no other country that uses the liberal arts curriculum. (As an aside, I would note an important distinction between the liberal arts college and the liberal arts curriculum. The former refers to places like CSB and SJU that emphasize the study of arts and sciences, as opposed to vocational or professional training, in a residential setting often with small classes and personalized attention to students. The latter is a curricular model used by virtually all US baccalaureate institutions that includes breadth in addition to depth, when students have distribution requirements for disciplines outside their academic major.) This curricular choice emphasizes breadth over depth, believing that having all students graduate with some knowledge of other disciplines and ways of thinking beyond their major field of study is important. Support for the liberal arts curriculum can be as simple as believing that doctors ultimately benefit from knowing a little about economics or accountants are better prepared for their work having studied some literature. But the philosophy can be more expansive and even profound—that every well-educated citizen and person should know more than their single area of professional expertise and such knowledge can make for a more meaningful and examined life.

Our alumni report both things to be true.

We see many of our liberal arts trained alumni advancing into leadership positions in their professional lives because of their ability to think broadly and creatively beyond their disciplinary boundaries. Many of our accounting students move into top management positions because they know more than just accounting principles, which has led accounting firms to recruit at CSB and SJU in search of the next generation of leaders for their firms and their clients. An alum who runs one of the world's largest construction and engineering companies notes that his leadership team is made up entirely of liberal arts students, which he strongly believes is no accident.

In addition, our alumni report that their undergraduate experience has allowed them to lead fuller and richer lives as they experience the pleasures of culture and the arts that they were introduced to by Mr. Humphrey, Br. Louis or Axel Theimer. They find that they think differently about their professional and personal lives because of the expansive education they received at CSB and SJU.

All of this is not to make a case for the liberal arts, as I assume anyone reading this is largely in that choir. But it is simply to remind the choir that we cannot take the support for the liberal arts for granted. There are many students (and parents)—especially, though not exclusively, international and first-generation domestic students—that do not automatically view education as a process that should provide both breadth and depth. Education for many is instrumental: a means to a professional end. Anything that distracts from that objective can be considered superfluous.

To continue to attract future generations of Johnnies and Bennies, we on campus, our alumni and parents need to be more intentional about articulating the benefits of a liberal arts education, ideally in a residential setting.

In my own recent efforts with Vietnamese students and teachers, I would judge the results as decidedly mixed. I got more than a few perplexed looks as I explained how American higher education differed from Vietnamese (and Australian and British) post-secondary options. Surely some of this was the language barrier, but it was also a philosophical issue.

In the end, however, there were two overriding issues that still made the possibility of studying at Saint John's and Saint Ben's exciting to these students. First, there was the allure of studying in America. Even as the rest of the world catches up

economically, the United States is still a powerful draw for many young people as a land of opportunity and promise. Second, it helps when you can mention alumni like Eugene McCarthy, Dave Durenburger, Canning Fok and Denis McDonough whose lives provide emphatic support for the notion that a liberal arts education is great preparation for professional success.

In the end, we should not worry too much about whether we can make a perfect case for a liberal arts education to international students. If we can overcome the logistical and financial barriers, we will attract plenty of strong and hard-working students. Once we get them on campus, our faculty, staff and students will win over any skeptics.

As the young alum who hosted me on the visit to Vietnam said, “I didn’t know anything about the liberal arts before I arrived at Saint John’s.” But now, he so strongly believes that it is the best preparation for the future leaders of his country, he is committing his time, energy and professional status to help send more young Vietnamese to St. Joseph and Collegeville.

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