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## The elusive liberal arts, then and now

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# AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

## Jason Schlude on “The Elusive Liberal Arts, Then and Now”

MARCH 1, 2021



We may have lost already if initially you ask whether we really need another impassioned defense of the liberal arts. Can't we just get over this time-honored intellectual model? Maybe disregard it entirely, acknowledge it is simply of less import, or fully redefine so that we can win over families with a predilection for professional skills?

One could be forgiven for the sentiment. For a decade, enrollments have been hurting, and budgets crunching, at liberal arts colleges across America. More students with financial need are seeking the right destination in the landscape of higher education. Institutions have responded with tuition discounts. They also have tried to maintain and strengthen their educational product by enhancement of facilities and expansion of staff to support incoming students, execute new educational priorities, and keep up with administrative trends. Meanwhile crises make things worse: a healthcare system straining college budgets, a recession draining endowments, and now

a pandemic producing new healthcare and economic woes, inextricably linked. Each element has driven the cost of higher education further north.

Faced with a bigger price tag, families are rethinking their investment in college and increasing their expectation for easily marketable professional skills. Some schools can weather the challenges better than others; those with major endowments can offset the costs, and for those with names recognized in every household, the names are sufficiently marketable on their own. The Harvard and Williams colleges are safe.

### *The liberal arts and the quest for skills*

The schools in danger largely depend on tuition to pay bills and families who want more than a name to ensure investments. For these schools, the liberal arts mission seems to ill fit the evolving landscape. The expansive enterprise of the liberal arts calls for discussion beyond skills—discussion of something less tangible. Perhaps less is more. Perhaps the best brand markets specific skills in business, nursing, analysis, communication, and the like, in the fewest words and with slickest packaging. Anything more is distraction. This deepening crisis is causing many schools to call into question the efficacy of their traditional mission.

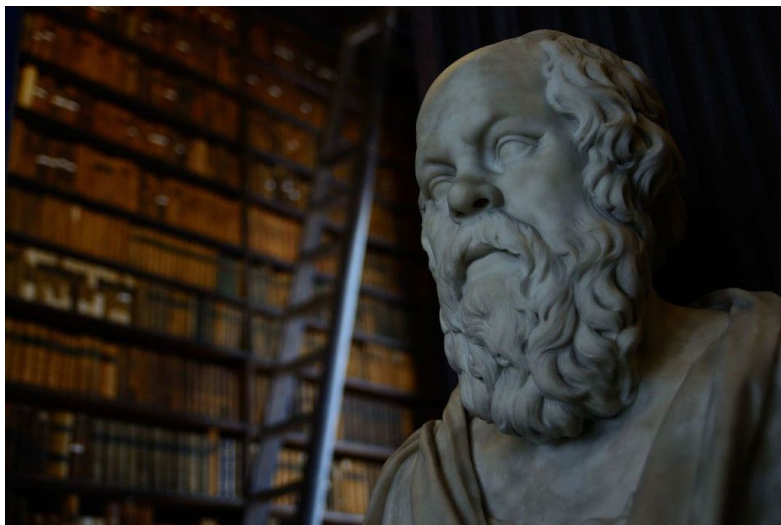
But this poses a question: what are the liberal arts anyway? Perhaps we have not thought carefully enough about them in the past. Perhaps, upon reflection, we can conclude they are purely skills—and we missed that detail years ago. Do not the roots of the liberal arts go back to the ancient Greeks who believed a citizen with influence in a city’s political assembly should have an education that prepared him for that responsibility—an education that gave him key skills in critical thinking and speaking, not to mention the physical conditioning and fighting skills he might need to protect his city? If so, then it would be in the spirit of the old liberal arts if the new liberal arts simply focused on skills.

Conveniently, not only might this strategy attract families interested in early professionalization, but in the face of tough budgets and a desire to make strategic investments in what are perceived of as market-driven programs, it also solves a staffing challenge. Aside from the skills specific to such programs (e.g., business and nursing skills mentioned above), if the faculty of a liberal arts college are valued only for their ability to teach a general set of critical thinking and communication skills, then cannot any faculty teach what is necessary for a liberal arts education? If that is the case, in lean times an administration can prioritize staffing professional programs, since their faculty can prepare students for specialized career paths and theoretically cover the

liberal arts, too.

### *Not so fast—the Greeks and the liberal arts*

But this approach deserves greater scrutiny. It is worth noting that education in the golden age of Greece was not so problem-free. There would have been agreement in many communities on the proper learning activities for what we call elementary education: learning your alphabet, how to write, the importance of great Greek literature, Homer above all, the traditions of your city, etc.



Socrates in the Trinity College Library. Dublin, Ireland. Courtesy of Bar Harel.

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue\\_of\\_Socrates.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Socrates.jpg))

However, at advanced levels of education, fierce debate developed about the best interests of students and state. This controversy surfaced with the appearance of “sophists” in Greek society. Sophists were paid teachers who offered pupils a special rhetorical training. The goal was to develop nimble minds and capable orators and debaters. In this educational process, they were given various positions to argue, however they contrasted with norms. The result, in the eyes of conservative citizens, was an education focused on communication skills that demonstrated a disregard for the time-honored traditions of a community.

One sees the debate in its most famous and comic form in the play *The Clouds* by Aristophanes, the great Athenian comedy writer of the fifth century BCE. In this hilarious and occasionally disturbing play, a certain Strepsiades suffers mounting bills due to his son Pheidippides, who has a taste for things aristocratic, including horses and their races. To solve his problem, he ultimately compels Pheidippides to enroll in the local school of sophistry, whose headmaster was none other Socrates, here presented as both a natural philosopher and a sophist. The goal was not virtuous; he wished for Pheidippides to learn the tricks of the rhetorical trade. In this way, he would know how to make the weaker argument the stronger—and thereby, how to help the family weasel its

way out of its debts.

Once enrolled, the youth experiences firsthand a debate between two figures, Just Argument (Δίκαιος Λόγος) and Unjust Argument (Άδικος Λόγος), who personify traditional education (focused on justice and piety) and new education (in pursuit of an easy life and armed with sophistry), respectively. In the duel, Unjust Argument’s victory over Just Argument becomes decisive, winning Pheidippides over to his way of thinking. In the end, however, the father got more than he bargained for: a son primarily interested in proving the merits of a different shameful act—elder abuse. Strepsiades, enraged that his son’s education would be turned violently against himself, leads a charge to burn the school.

As we read this work, we see clearly the intellectual currents shifting in Athens. The proper form of education was controversial enough to secure its stage presence in 423 BCE during Athens’ Dionysia festival, which celebrated the god Dionysos through competitive performances of several tragedies and comedies. As Aristophanes reveals in the pages of *The Clouds*, his play was one of the losers that year, and the version we now read was a subsequent revision. Why it lost is hard for us now to gauge—and makes any attempt to identify the sentiments of the Athenian people a difficult prospect (as if teasing convictions from comedy was not difficult enough since the principal goal was laughter).

What we can say is that Aristophanes saw traditionalists and sophists as worthy targets. He criticized the latter for their reckless disregard of established values, ideas, and customs. But Aristophanes refused to let the former off the hook; he placed on grand display their inability to outsmart a new generation of practitioners and their gross intolerance of fresh ideas. It is likely that this multi-directional humor indicates a populace sharply divided in its views and with at least a portion of citizens willing to criticize both old and new. At a bare minimum, we can conclude that this was a time of change in Athenian higher education.

There is irony of note here, too. Socrates proved the greatest victim of the play. He was neither a natural philosopher nor teacher of sophistry. Aristophanes, for a good laugh, not only included him among the ranks of these intellectuals, but also made him their spokesman. Socrates in fact was quite different—if we are to trust Plato, his most famous student. Plato was the pen behind the *Apology of Socrates*, in which he recorded his version of Socrates’ trial in 399 BCE. Indeed, Socrates was viewed as a subversive by many Athenians and was brought up on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth two decades after *The Clouds*.

In his defense, Socrates claimed no one had witnessed him take part in the sky lore of natural philosophy. Furthermore, he denied cultivating a formal group of paying students like the typical sophist. Instead, Socrates spent his time testing the truth of the oracle of Delphi who asserted he was the wisest man of Athens. To that end, he circulated the city gauging the wisdom of its citizens by interviewing poets, politicians, and craftsmen. As he did so, many young men followed him, taking delight in how Socrates publicly showed that their claims to knowledge went too far (much to their irritation). While these groups knew and produced valuable things, there were limits to their insight—a limitation Socrates recognized as universally human. Even he himself was subject to it. The difference was that Socrates understood and acknowledged his ignorance. What made Socrates the wisest was his admission that he did not have a monopoly on wisdom; he was comfortable with not knowing—and put that on display.

Rather than selling his rhetorical skills as a teacher, Socrates was an intellectual and citizen who grappled with the substance of ideas and sought truth. He employed rhetoric to powerful effect, but such a skill was subordinate to transformative insight. In this way, Socrates’ career may have been in part a reaction against sophists, and Aristophanes’ characterization of him as a sophist was a misrepresentation of this watershed philosopher.

The consequences may have been significant. The jury for Socrates’ trial found him guilty and sentenced him to death by hemlock. He died by this method not long after in 399 BCE. What is striking is that Plato has Socrates claim in the *Apology* that his unpopularity stemmed from Aristophanes’ presentation of him as a wacky natural philosopher and sophist with bankrupt principles. This may have led some to dislike and condemn him.

For others, different factors may have come into play. Some followers of Socrates, such as Critias, were members of the Thirty Tyrants, an oligarchic government imposed by Sparta upon Athens following the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE. Already in 403 BCE, Athenians tired of the tyrants’ politically driven purges and overthrew them to reinstitute democracy. In the process, Critias was killed, and those associated with figures like him became vulnerable objects of revenge. This was likely a motivation for the prosecution of Socrates. Surely another factor behind the prosecution’s success was Socrates’ unbending, brash self-defense that underscored his wisdom compared to others. In his quest for truth, Socrates refused to back down from his discovery: there is a limit to human knowledge. This came at a cost.

*Choosing the right liberal arts quest*

To return to our own quest for the essence of the liberal arts, we must conclude, based on these events, that the liberal arts education of ancient Greece was not a simple skill-driven enterprise. While some advocated a focus on skills in their embrace of sophistry, others questioned this approach. Aristophanes viewed it as a dangerous concept. Socrates happily used his rhetorical skills but subordinated them to something fundamentally more important: a serious examination of ideas and desire for wisdom that alters the way we see ourselves and how we operate in the world. And in this process, while he identified the limits of different areas of inquiry and profession (poetry, politics, and trades), it is central that he acknowledged their wisdom and value. So, then, when it comes to the character of a true liberal arts education, one cannot but conclude that different models were available in ancient Greece.

Educators and administrators of today must choose. A world often falling short in ethics, justice, and vision needs colleges to do more than teach immediately recognizable professional skills. They also must engage students in a search for what ethics and justice look like, sound like, feel like, and truly are, in a search for ideas that transform how we see our material, intellectual, spiritual, and human landscape. In the process, we must engage them with teachers who are highly trained in different disciplines, so that students can circulate amongst them, learning different ways of seeing the world and the benefits (and limitations) that define each. We need philosophy, economics, biology, music, languages, anthropology, mathematics, art, history, English, theology, political science, psychology, communications, chemistry, theater, and more. Just as important, if our interests go beyond skills, we need professors with more than a passing acquaintance with such fields. They need the training and experience to open the complex world of ideas in each to students. While the parallel is not perfect, those in this camp count Socrates as company.

Perhaps in the landscape of higher education today, one may be reluctant to bet on Socrates. His end was tragic, after all. He did not give the people of Athens what they wanted—at that moment anyway. Will an apology and embrace of these liberal arts lead to a modern form of higher-ed hemlock?

Not necessarily. Many students continue to attend liberal arts colleges for their more expansive mission. For vulnerable colleges looking to win more professionally minded students by focusing only on a skills-based education, the abandonment of their previous mission likely will alienate those students who want both skills and transformative ideas. Meanwhile, their continued identification as liberal arts colleges (despite modified priorities) may not resonate with this newly sought-after pool of applicants who still see them in the traditional mold. In other words, the shift may bring a net loss rather than gain of students.

In this way, the Socrates analogy may cut in the other direction. Will a liberal arts college, despite its attempt to distinguish itself from traditional liberal arts schools, still be lumped with them by students seeking professionalization, much as Socrates was identified with natural philosophers and sophists? Facing this dilemma, such a school takes a major risk. While these colleges need to rethink how they articulate themselves and make real attempts to address the needs of students especially interested in skills, it is better to do so genuinely guided by an expansive liberal arts mission. We need to believe in our product, in the value of skills and ideas, and we need to reinvest in the diverse disciplines and faculty who can provide them.

Jason Schlude

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