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## Reflections on a Liberal Arts Education: Part I, Essentials of a Liberal Arts Education?



A thoughtful note from a friend and fellow alumnus spurred me to some New Year’s reflections on the liberal arts and how we endeavor to educate the young men\* who come to Saint John’s University.

While I have argued elsewhere that institutional communities made up of many diverse individuals can rarely be said to have a **single “opinion”** on political or

social matters, I certainly believe that institutions, like colleges and universities, do have missions. Faculty, staff and students all have a variety of choices in the matter of where they will work or study, and presumably the mission of the educational institution they choose is one of the most significant factors in that important decision.

One of the foundational elements of Saint John’s University’s mission is to provide a liberal arts education, and in this we are in exceptional company. Most of our finest academic peers in Minnesota—Carleton, Macalester, St. Olaf, Gustavus Adolphus and Concordia-Moorhead—are liberal arts colleges, and most of the finest institutions in the United States—the Ivies, University of Chicago, Stanford—provide their undergraduates with a liberal arts education. It is also true that many more comprehensive universities, especially the flagship public institutions, also provide a liberal arts education for many of their students.

While there is general agreement that a **liberal arts education** focuses on the arts and sciences,

rather than on professional or vocational training, educators and students have wide-ranging beliefs about the specific **purpose** of such an education.

In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, Hunter Rawlings III, former president of the University of Iowa and Cornell University, offered some stimulating reflections on what is important in a liberal education. He, not surprisingly for a classicist, eloquently uses poetry, art and literature to propose “five essentials of a liberal education.”

Briefly:

1. *Liberation: to liberate our students' minds from the constraints of their often unexamined upbringing and natural provincialism and to produce their own “complex meanings.”*
2. *Irreverence: to encourage students to be serious about learning but not to impose “a stultifying reverence” on knowledge and education.*
3. *Pleasure: to have students have joy and excitement while they learn, in school and throughout life.*
4. *Provocation: to challenge students, to stretch them, to make them uncomfortable.*
5. *Courage: to give students the courage to try new and hard ideas and endeavors.*

Rawlings acknowledges that his list is likely not exhaustive, writing, “Liberation, irreverence, pleasure, provocation, courage — those are, in my view, five essentials of liberal education. Many more could be proposed, of course.”

It is certainly hard to disagree with Rawlings' list. A student that graduates having meaningfully experienced these attributes of a liberal arts education will be well prepared for a lifetime of ongoing education and learning, with all the joys and successes that come with it.

Yet it seems to me there is something essential and even foundational missing from this list—something that distinguishes a liberal arts education at places



like Saint John's from those at Cornell or big public universities like the University of Iowa. There is no clear reference to the spiritual lives of students.

Rawlings does not mention a search for truth, the development of values and morals, or the exploration of ultimate questions about meaning. He does quote a physicist who suggests a liberal education should consider, "What is justice? What is a good life?" But Rawlings seems to consciously skirt those ultimate questions of meaning, existence and the timeless truths that invariably touch on students' spiritual lives.

This absence would be unthinkable at a Catholic and Benedictine institution—and likely also at any institution that continues to be grounded in its faith based origins. (Ironically, of course, the earliest United States universities were founded, in part, to educate clergy.)

None of Rawlings essentials would be missing from a liberal education at Saint John's but a quick look at our **mission, vision and values** clearly reminds students that there is another essential that is at least as important at those noted above:

### ***Mission of Saint John's University***

*Grounded in Catholic and Benedictine values and tradition, Saint John's University provides young men a distinctive residential liberal arts education, preparing them to reach their full potential and instilling in them the values and aspiration to lead lives of significance and principled achievement.*

### ***Vision for the College of Arts and Sciences***

*Saint John's University seeks to be one of the nation's great Catholic liberal arts colleges by providing the best holistic learning experience for men in the country.*

*We will inspire undergraduate men to new heights of intellectual, spiritual, physical and social development that is informed by ethical reflection and grounded in our Catholic and Benedictine tradition.*

## **Values**

*Dedicated to the pursuit of understanding, wisdom, and the common good, Saint John's University is committed to the following values:*

*Community built upon relationships of hospitality, respect, cooperation, and challenge.*

*Openness to learning, inquiry, beauty, truth, and difference.*

*Respect for persons, tradition, creativity, experience, faith, reason, and religious practice.*

*Depth in understanding, relationships, faith, and spirituality.*

*Sacredness of God, being, truth, place, nature, and knowledge.*

*Passion for excellence, truth, learning, beauty, love, and personal growth.*

This essential part of a Saint John's liberal education is certainly not to suggest that the goal is to preach, proselytize or convert. Students are not told what to think or believe, but encouraged to explore the spiritual side of their humanity, something that is a natural part of their growth into adulthood. A student's answers to the questions of what he believes or does not believe is often foundational to the person he becomes and the life he chooses to lead.

There is nothing wrong with the five essentials that Rawlings proposes, but at Saint John's (among other institutions with ongoing commitments to religious traditions) to think about a liberal education without immediately considering the ultimate questions of meaning, purpose and spiritual concerns misses an important, maybe *the* important, purpose of the liberal arts. Most of the finest liberal arts institutions were founded around these questions, but a much small number of those institutions continue to make these questions central to the education of their students. At Saint John's University, we still do.

\*With our single academic program, the women who are educated at the College of Saint Benedict have an experience very much like that of the men at Saint John's, but, given my role, it is appropriate that I limit my claims to what happens in Collegeville.

About the Author: **Michael**  
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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).