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As the academic year starts: praise for the liberal arts

Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

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Quad 136

Liberal Arts

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As the Academic Year Starts: Praise for the Liberal Arts



Photo: Amanda Baloun '17

While most of us in higher education have never really bought the public or the media's arguments that colleges are failing our students, (See [here](#) or [here](#) or [here](#)), it is appropriate on the first day of the 2015-16 academic year to remember why we are engaged in this important liberal arts enterprise.

In an environment that focuses relentlessly on the instrumental value of an education—"What can I do with that major?"—the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular have come in for **withering criticism**. President **Obama** himself cautioned students on the challenges of being an art history major, though he ultimately apologized for the comment.

However, a recent *Forbes* article, which was circulated widely among college faculty, makes a strong counterargument. The article, "**That 'Useless' Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech's Hottest Ticket**" notes that:

Throughout the major U.S. tech hubs, whether Silicon Valley or Seattle, Boston or Austin, Tex., software companies are discovering that liberal arts thinking makes them stronger. Engineers may still command the biggest salaries, but at disruptive juggernauts such as Facebook and Uber, the war for talent has moved to nontechnical jobs, particularly sales and marketing.

Tech CEO Stewart Butterfield describes how the humanities have benefitted him professionally:

"Studying philosophy taught me two things," says Butterfield, sitting in his office in San Francisco's South of Market district, a neighborhood almost entirely dedicated to the cult of coding. "I learned how to write really clearly. I learned how to follow an argument all the way down, which is invaluable in running meetings. And when I studied the history of science, I learned about the ways that everyone believes something is true—like the old notion of some kind of ether in the air propagating gravitational forces—until they realized that it wasn't true."

The article goes on to explain how tech companies have found that they need soft skills and the ability to think creatively at least as much as they need tech skills. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates of future job growth confirm this phenomenon.

In a recent *Washington Post* article Fareed Zakaria seems to go even farther in his defense of the liberal arts in an article entitled, “**Why America’s obsession with STEM education is dangerous.**” The headline seems to pit the arts against the sciences, but the term liberal arts is typically shorthand for the liberal arts and sciences. A liberally educated person has a breadth of knowledge that includes the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and math.

The body of Zakaria’s article acknowledges this as the author touts “broad-based learning” and a “a well-rounded education.” His point, consistent with the *Forbes* article, is that a narrow focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields is not what is needed for innovation and to improve the world for humanity. The countries and individuals that are the most technically proficient are rarely the most creative. As Zakaria writes:

Americans should be careful before they try to mimic Asian educational systems, which are oriented around memorization and test-taking. I went through that kind of system. It has its strengths, but it’s not conducive to thinking, problem solving or creativity. That’s why most Asian countries, from Singapore to South Korea to India, are trying to add features of a liberal education to their systems.

All of this simply suggests what defenders of the liberal arts have been saying all along. Breadth, the ability to synthesize knowledge from multiple fields and the skill to make connections between disparate areas, is what makes for a truly liberal education and for the kind of success – professionally and personally – we all want for our students.

Steve Jobs explained Apple’s ability to make products and experiences that please and delight people, saying, “it’s in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough — that it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our hearts sing.”

So as the school year begins around the country, let us remember that the liberal arts and sciences together have improved the lives of humanity, materially and spiritually, over the centuries while also making our hearts sing.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | August 31st, 2015 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

About the Author: **Michael**

Hemesath



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](#).