

**Making Your Voice Heard**  
**Strategies for Communicating the Importance of Liberal Education**  
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*These are examples of recent criticism about liberal education in the United States. I've tried to group them into categories. Work with others at your table and choose a few to respond to. Use the sheet at the end to craft your responses.*

**Political soundbites**

"Universities ought to have skin in the game. When a student shows up, they ought to say, 'Hey, that psych major deal, that philosophy major thing, that's great. It's important to have liberal arts ... but realize, you're going to be working at Chick-fil-A.'"

■ *Jeb Bush, former Florida governor*

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"There will be more incentives to electrical engineers than to French literature majors. All the people in the world that want to study French literature can do so. They are just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayer like engineers."

■ *Gov. Matthew Bevin of Kentucky*

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"So I'm going to adjust my education curriculum to what business and commerce needs to get our kids jobs as opposed to moving back in with their parents after they graduate with debt. What are we teaching these courses for if they're not going to help get a job?"

"If you want to take gender studies, that's fine, go to a private school and take it. But I don't want to subsidize that if that's not going to get someone a job."

■ *Gov. Pat McCrory of North Carolina*

**Liberal education is out of touch with the 'real world'**

"Today's educational and training institutions are a shambles. They take too long to teach impractical skills and knowledge not connected to the real world, and when they try to tackle critical thinking for a longer time scale, they mostly fail. The sprouts of the next generation of learning tools are already visible. Within the decade, the new shoots will overtake the wilting vines, and we will see all sorts of new initiatives, mostly outside these schooling, academic and training institutions, which are mostly beyond repair. People will shift to them because they work, because they are far less expensive and because they are always available."

■ *Jerry Michalski, founder of the corporate think tank REX*

**Study of the liberal arts has become an anachronism**

"Discussions about great works of literature can be held just as easily in coffee shops as in stadium-riser classrooms—perhaps more easily. Nor is there any reason to believe that there is some great advantage to concentrating the study of those works in the few years immediately after high school—or that our study of them must engage us full-time. The traditional association of liberal arts education and four-year colleges was already becoming an anachronism before the rise of the World Wide Web. It is now a crumbling fossil."

■ *Andrew J. Coulson, Cato Institute*

### **Liberal education isn't keeping up with a changing world**

"The core assumptions driving educational content are not adapting as fast as the world is changing. Traditional models train people to equate what they do with who they are (i.e., what do you want to *be* when you grow up) rather than to acquire critical thinking and flexible skills and attitudes that fit a rapidly changing world. We have traditional institutions invested in learning as a supply-side model rather [than] demand-side that would create proactive, self-directed learners. This bias impacts the entire process, from educators to employers. It is changing, but beliefs are sticky and institutions are cumbersome bureaucracies that are slow to adapt."

■ *Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center*

### **Liberal education has lost its meaning**

"Another problem I have with the B.A. in regards to its current use is it no longer means anything if it's not in a subject like engineering or biochemistry. You can be fairly confident that if someone has a B.A. or B.S. in engineering, they know a fair amount of engineering. Tell me what it means, if you are an employer and you want to have people come in as entry-level positions as white collar workers, and the applicant tells you she has a B.A. in sociology. You don't know anything – except that she has a certain degree of perseverance and a certain degree of intelligence. You know nothing about anything that she brings to the job that makes her a good employee. And yet what are you doing? You are requiring the B.A. as a minimum requirement for getting your foot in the door in the job interview when the piece of paper itself tells you nothing."

"Employers are realizing, increasingly, that the B.A. is a terrible source of information. It is such a noisy signal. There's so little content to it. They need good evidence of what the kids know. I think there's real potential out there – only potential, but I think in the natural course of events it will happen – that the B.A. is going to be undermined by evidence of what the kids know."

■ *Charles Murray, author of Real Education, Cato Institute podcast*

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“Still, it's not simply the high cost of higher education, or their supposed uselessness, that has buried today's liberal arts. More important, professors in the liberal arts have over-promised, or promised wrongly. We have these lovely phrases, like making our students "well-rounded," that are more or less just words. Are those who study medicine or nursing not "well-rounded"? Are those who major in film studies or contemporary "lit crit" more intellectually worthy than those who study economics and finance?”

“Often enough over the years I've heard my humanities confreres say that a liberal education makes us finer people, more sensitive, more concerned, more humane, even more human. Pretentious shibboleths such as these, expressed in our egalitarian age, are an excellent way to lose one's audience. And that's exactly where the liberal arts are today.

“Liberal arts has not been killed by parental or student philistinism, or the cupidity of today's educational institutions whose excessive costs have made the liberal arts into an unattainable luxury. In too many ways the liberal arts have died not by murder but by suicide.

“But why would any student spend tens of thousands of dollars and, rather than see the world in all its aspects, instead spend his time being indoctrinated and immersed in the prejudices of the current culture and the opinions of his tendentious professors? The job of teachers is to liberate minds, not capture them.”

■ *John Agresto, former president of St. John's College in Santa Fe; Wall Street Journal, 8 August 2015*

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“Fifty years ago, a degree from almost any of America's liberal-arts colleges meant something. It was pretty good evidence that the student had fairly well honed communication skills and had developed an analytical cast of mind. The degree demonstrated trainability and the refinement needed for most work. Today, however, many of our liberal-arts colleges have fallen on hard time, both financially and academically. Lots of them are up to their ears in debt and offer a curriculum that's a hodge-podge of trendy courses. It's clear that many liberal-arts students can't write or speak worth a darn and have serious attitude problems. What has gone wrong?”

■ *George Leef, National Review, 2 November 2017*

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“American colleges and universities should be bastions of self-knowledge and self-criticism, simply because they exist to teach people how to think. But in recent years America's campuses seem to have abandoned this tradition. Worse, the meager course offerings on the topic of liberal education tend to reinforce misunderstandings about its character and content. ...

“Few of the liberal arts and sciences faculty at these schools offer courses that explore the origins, structure, substance and aims of the education that they supposedly deliver. Instead they provide a smattering of classes on hot-button topics in higher education such as multiculturalism, inequality, gender and immigration. This is no trivial oversight, as the quality of American freedom depends on the quality of Americans' education about freedom. ...

“Don't expect to find much guidance on liberal education in the mission statements of leading American colleges and universities. They contain inflated language about diversity, inclusion and building a better world through social transformation. Missing are instructive pronouncements about what constitutes an educated person or on the virtues of mind and character that underlie reasoned inquiry, the advance of understanding, and the pursuit of truth. Instruction on the ideas, norms and procedures that constitute communities of free men and women devoted to research and study are also scarce to nonexistent.”

- *Peter Berkowitz, senior fellow at Hoover Institution at Stanford, Wall Street Journal, 16 September 2017*

### **Identity consciousness has tainted liberal education**

“Identity politics on the left was at first about large classes of people — African-Americans, women, gays — seeking to redress major historical wrongs by mobilizing and then working through our political institutions to secure their rights. But by the 1980s it had given way to a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition that is now cultivated in our colleges and universities. The main result has been to turn young people back onto themselves, rather than turning them outward toward the wider world they share with others. It has left them unprepared to think about the common good in non-identity terms and what must be done practically to secure it — especially the hard and unglamorous task of persuading people very different from themselves to join a common effort. Every advance of liberal *identity* consciousness has marked a retreat of effective liberal *political* consciousness.

“The more obsessed with personal identity campus liberals become, the less willing they are to engage in reasoned political debate. Over the past decade a new, and very revealing, locution has drifted from our universities into the media mainstream: *Speaking as an X ...* This is not an anodyne phrase. It tells the listener that I am speaking from a privileged position on this matter. It sets up a wall against questions, which by definition come from a *non-X* perspective. And it turns the encounter into a power relation: The winner of the argument will be whoever has invoked the morally superior identity and expressed the most outrage at being questioned.

So classroom conversations that once might have begun, *I think A, and here is my argument*, now take the form, *Speaking as an X, I am offended that you claim B*. This makes perfect sense if you believe that identity determines everything. It means that

there is no impartial space for dialogue. White men have one "epistemology," black women have another."

- *Mark Lilla, professor of humanities, Columbia University, Chronicle of Higher Education, 20 August 2017*

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"The original rationale for the liberal-arts college has been displaced by the ideological impulses that fly under the banner of diversity, inclusion and equality. Colleges like Middlebury now wish to be 'relevant' and on the cutting edge of social change, with the goal of redeeming American society from its exclusionary heritage. Many liberal-arts professors succumbed to this temptation in the 1960s.

"Today, ideological conformity has been institutionalized on the nation's campuses. Students are encouraged to look upon American society from a perspective of righteous indignation. Anyone challenging the assumptions underlying this perspective risks provoking the kinds of confrontations seen at Middlebury, Berkeley and elsewhere.

"Because students at these schools operate in a bubble, they have little understanding of American society – and little sympathy for most Americans struggling to make a living. For a host of reasons, they are poorly equipped to engage in redemptive crusades of any kind. A genuine liberal-arts education would help them realize this. Without it, though, the "charmed years" will continue to look much less charming – both for the students and the society they will inherit."

- *James Piereson, president of the William E. Simon Foundation*
- *Naomi Schaefer Riley, senior fellow at the Independent Women's Forum  
Wall Street Journal, 11 March 2017*

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"Demonizing people because they have ideas different from your own has always been a temptation, and in recent years it has become a national contagion. College campuses are not at all immune from it, but this malady is fatal for liberal education. Many people are so accustomed to curated information – be it from social media feeds or just from one's choice of cable news – that they have lost the ability to respond thoughtfully to points of view different from their own. Instead of seeing disagreement as an occasion for learning, many today have become so unaccustomed to robust exchanges of ideas that they feel threatened when confronted with information and arguments with which they may disagree or with which they are simply unfamiliar.

"This is anathema to pragmatic liberal education, a broad, contextual form of learning that has been the hallmark of American higher education at its best."

- *Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University in The Hechinger Report*

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“As I tell prospective students and their parents when they come to visit Hillsdale College, where I teach, although most colleges and universities describe themselves as liberal-arts institutions, only a very small fraction of them offer anything close to the real thing. What they offer should really be called ‘liberalist education.’ Liberalist education is characterized by three features: First, a suspicion of all authority, including the authority of truth; second, the celebration of autonomy and individual choice; third, a commitment to social justice. Whatever the merits of these things, none of them has anything to do with a real liberal-arts education. The real educational problem we face today is not the value of a liberal-arts education per se, but the large number of liberalist education programs — most of them heavily subsidized by taxpayer money — that masquerade as liberal-arts programs while depriving students of the specific excellences that can only come from the real thing. Liberalist humanities professors prepare students to fight hegemonic power structures through various kinds of victimization studies organized around race, class, gender, etc. In response, conservatives are often all too ready to throw liberal education overboard and to replace it with an education focused on technical training for productive employment. Both groups can miss what is singular and valuable about a liberal-arts education. ...

“A liberal-arts education is not principally concerned with what you do, but with what you are. Therefore defenders of the humanities are right to insist that the value of a liberal-arts education cannot be measured simply by productive employment. To defend liberal education in this way is like defending religion in terms of morality, or friendship in terms of personal utility. But then one can also say that just as real religion does in fact reinforce morality, and just as real friendship is in fact useful, so a real liberal-arts education does in fact prepare students for productive employment and for democratic citizenship. Imagine what the American Founding would have looked like had Washington, Madison, Jefferson, and Hamilton only been trained in gender studies, or accounting. But the fact that liberal education is ordered to non-useful ends should not be a cover for fraudulent humanities programs to insulate themselves from the criticism they have received and deserve. The real scandal is not that graduates in the humanities cannot find jobs, but that they have spent four years and thousands of dollars on a random hodgepodge of trendy courses. Jobless, they don’t even have the comfort of a rich intellectual life to compensate them for their poverty.”

- *Nathan Schlueter, associate professor of philosophy, Hillsdale College; National Review, Oct. 6-14, 2014*

