My college yearbook incorporated the quaint practice of noting where each graduating senior had attended high school. The phrase it used was “prepared at.” I’ve often thought about that phrase and what it means in juxtaposition to the word “educate.” Prepared. Prepared for what? Prepared for college? Well, yes, in my case. And for those of my high school classmates who didn’t go on to college? Prepared to hold down a job? Prepared for life? It’s the question that has driven the curriculum debate in this country for decades, and sets up one of the most important questions we as educators should ask ourselves—what should we teach?

Since the mid-nineteen fifties the Council for Basic Education (CBE) has made clear its belief that all students—the college bound as well as others—should receive the benefit of a liberal arts education. The Council was formed by a group of citizens concerned that our schools were emphasizing social development at the expense of intellectual development. In response, they set out to promote a comprehensive education in the liberal arts for all elementary and secondary students, college-bound or not. The fundamental question posed by the Council then as now is the same: For what purpose do we educate? The answer to that question should provide the guiding light for every decision of every state and local board of education member in the country. The question is worth grappling with at its most basic level, so that every board decision is grounded in a clear understanding of the role of K-12 public education in our society.

CBE has since its founding mounted salvo after salvo of argument as to why a liberal arts education offers the best preparation for life. We have not been alone in our advocacy, though most of the other advocates have represented one or other of the neglected disciplines of the liberal arts, and have shaped their arguments accordingly. This past year NASBE brought attention to this issue through a Study Group on what was termed “the Lost Curriculum,” of which I was fortunate to be a part. We examined the two disciplines most often left out of the high school curriculum: the arts and foreign language.

The fact is that few American students follow a rigorous course of study in all the subjects of the liberal arts. In 1998, the last year for which data were available, only 56 percent of American high school students pursued even the minimum curriculum recommended by A Nation at Risk: four years of English, three each in mathematics and science, three and a half in social studies, and two in the same foreign language. (There is no mention of the arts.)

Yet with such high-level agreement about and promotion of the value of a liberal arts course of study, why does the ideal of the liberal arts as the default curriculum for all 1 students remain a struggle? What will it take to create a critical mass of support to make such a curriculum de rigueur in the United States? Since we are a society that claims freedom for all, and since true freedom is, as Spinoza and others have argued, dependent on increased knowledge and understanding, then presumably everyone would support a curriculum that spans the basic domains of human experience and inquiry. But as we all know, that presumption is wrong. The amorphous yet persistent resistance to a complete liberal arts curriculum for all American children is worth probing at its most basic level. We must try to understand why local school board
member Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, sitting behind a dais some where in this country, faced with deciding what students in his district ought to know upon graduation, chooses typically not to support a liberal arts curriculum. (With his exclusive interest in practical facts, and his disdain for all other types of learning, Charles Dickens’ schoolmaster Gradgrind serves as the perfect model for this type of school board member.)

To begin at the beginning, let us all recognize that the framing conceit for so much in America is utility. That conceit likely grew out of our pioneer history, perhaps out of mundane arguments over what to take along to sustain life, whether aboard a sailing vessel or on a packhorse or in a Conestoga wagon. It doesn’t matter if it’s a trait uniquely ours; suffice it to say it exists. And suffice it to say it informs our curricular debates as well, reaching as far back as the days of packhorses.

Unfortunately, this American quality of grounding everything in the practical includes a troubling extreme whereby anything without utilitarian value is considered superfluous. At its worst this tendency manifests itself as an ignorant disdain of the “useless.” It can be found in that corollary American conceit, anti-intellectualism, that Richard Hofstadter so elegantly plumbed in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, Anti-intellectualism in American Life (1962). Tracing its foundation to our earliest religious history and the populist American penchant for emotive versus intellectually grounded religion, through our love affair with civilization-eschewing frontiersmen the likes of Daniel Boone and Jim Bridger, down to our modern worship of the businessman who succeeds by his wits and the view that the learned are elitists who challenge the egalitarianism ideal of America, Hofstadter helps us understand the motivation of those who see no practical application and hence no value in the likes of a liberal arts education.

Not surprisingly then, the penchant lately has been to justify inclusion of those liberal arts disciplines most usually left out of the K-12 curriculum solely by their utility, particularly the manner in which the y strengthen “learning and behavior in other academic and social contexts,” to quote Critical Links, a study released in early 2002 by the Arts Education Partnership. A compendium of recent studies, Critical Links lays out research assembled by experts at UCLA, Harvard’s Project Zero, and Boston College. Their account of the arts’ effect on learning in other disciplines is ultimately very powerful—and in today’s educational marketplace, you need such an account to hold your own in argument with Mr. Gradgrind. Critical Links should be required reading for every education policymaker in the United States—local and state board members, legislators and anyone else who cares about what students need to learn to succeed in any of life’s contexts. But the danger of dwelling exclusively on the practical value of the arts to promote learning in the other disciplines is that we may well effectively poison our capability to appreciate the arts for their true value. According to UCLA’s Jim Catterall, one of the key researchers for Critical Links, such utilitarian arguments shield “the intrinsic worth of the arts from the public eye.” Similar arguments citing the effects of foreign language learning on general cognitive development risk diminishing the greater cultural value of world languages.

For its part, the Council for Basic Education argues that each discipline strengthens the others. Mathematics is applied in science. Scientific discoveries are placed in historical context. The study of history includes understanding gained through the arts. The study of a foreign language provides not only the opportunity to compare and contrast other cultures with our own, but also the similarities and differences in how we communicate ideas. And on and on and on. Call the value of these disciplines what you will, no discipline should be left out, because each contributes to a greater educational whole, thereby increasing understanding.

Still, it seems the only argument that will successfully position the liberal arts as the ideal education for all children is to offer irrefutable proof of their applicability—either a meta-analysis of thousands of people who took a liberal arts curriculum in K-12 compared to thousands who didn’t, measured against a set of yet-to-be-determined valuations of success, or a study of their value in cognitive development shown by careful magnetic resonance imaging during...
Eureka! moments of cross-disciplinary understanding. As it stands right now, however, we cannot produce such research to prove our point of view—only the wisdom of millennia.

Yet we cannot allow the apparent lack of scientific proof to trump common sense. The liberal arts curriculum spans the domains of human experience. It is a course of study that focuses on the broader realms of knowledge and understanding that all humans have in common. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we all feel the pull of natural, historical, geopolitical, economic, social, and cultural forces. Without an understanding of science, history, geography, government, world languages, mathematics, English, and the arts, we risk becoming passive subjects of these forces. We risk becoming victims. A true liberal arts education aims by contrast to make us active participants in the world around us, capable of exercising sound judgement. It helps us make sense of that world. In short—it prepares us. And if our vision in this democracy is that every child should be given an opportunity to succeed, then it follows that every child—and not just the children of privilege—must be given the benefit of a liberal arts curriculum.

There is a final stroke of irony. Those who believe in the liberal arts as the ideal curriculum may ultimately win even the utility argument, because the world of work for which we are now preparing our students has become so fast moving and unpredictable that only a broad education can serve our students well. We are well into the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. Most of us know the statistics, but their import for education is such that they bear repeating. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), we are now primarily a service and technology economy, with manufacturing having shrunk to approximately 20 percent of employment and farming to about 10 percent. Service and technology make up the rest. Job skill levels have changed as well. The BLS reports that as recently as 1991, skilled labor accounted for 45 percent of the labor force, professional for 20 percent, and unskilled for 35 percent. By 2000 skilled labor had shot up to 65 percent of the workforce, taking all of its gains from unskilled.

To quote economist and writer Lester Thurow, we are in an economy driven by “man-made brainpower industries.” They move at a lightning-fast pace, and only a diverse education, one that teaches us how to grapple with change and traffic in ideas, will suffice. A narrowly defined utilitarian education will consign our students to obsolescence. Where before advocates of the liberal arts like CBE argued against a merely utilitarian role for K-12 education, now the most effective utilitarian education is one founded on the core disciplines of the liberal arts. Recently I learned of a software company that had begun hiring music majors as programmers. One presumes they found in these individuals discipline, logic, and creativity. Who could have predicted such a hiring practice? And if Mr. Gradgrind still won’t budge, then remind him of this one last comment from Thurow, that “plotting a good lifetime career has become a major mystery.” From which it would be safe to conclude that the best education is one that prepares us for anything.

Even without detailed scientific research, we can draw conclusions about the current utility of particular liberal arts disciplines. Here’s a sampling: The perspective afforded by geography, history, government, and foreign languages has become absolutely crucial in the global arena, especially if we are to act responsibly as citizens of a global power; English and the arts prepare us to deal with the unprecedented glut of verbal, visual, and auditory information that reaches us through our multi-media technologies; and the need for math and science extends well beyond their obvious importance to the labor market, for we need to find our way through our technologically driven world. The very diversity of life’s potential challenges renders a

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complete list of such justifications endless.

Insofar as a liberal arts education provides a basis for the greatest range of personal and professional choices, universal access to such an education is a prerequisite to equal opportunity. All further learning builds on the academic foundation established by English, math, science, history, government, geography, languages, and the arts. Boundaries between these subjects might not always remain hard and fast. As soon as we sacrifice one or more of these subjects to budgetary constraints, or simple apathy, we limit students’ opportunities after graduation. In a society that prides itself on equality, such sacrifices are unconscionable. Students who never take the arts or foreign languages in elementary and secondary school will almost certainly never make up for this deficiency later in life. These students will, as a result, have less control over their educational and professional futures. Unless we mandate and provide universal participation in the liberal arts, we essentially leave the prospects of our high school graduates to chance—or worse, to blind socio-economic forces. Those who characterize particular subjects such as reading or algebra as “the new civil right” understand the crucial relationship between education and equal opportunity. Yet if we limit our attention to a few key subjects, we risk selling a large segment of students short. It is the liberal arts as a whole that have become the new civil right, because they increasingly serve as the gatekeepers of success in higher education and in life. And it is our responsibility to ensure that our students receive such an education.

Over the last few years I have heard a number of stories about the role of a quality education in the lives of young people. Because it is so damning, I hesitate to tell this one, and will disguise its location. A professional acquaintance of mine was speaking to a community leader about the importance of a quality education in the leader’s remote, rural town—a place, unfortunately, that the economy had passed by. The assumption was that the leader would respond to the challenge and commit to an education for the town’s young people that would help them succeed in life. On the contrary, however, this leader, a prototypical Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, responded by saying that he wasn’t sure the folks in his town wanted their children to be well educated, lest yet another generation leave to find their fortune elsewhere. Perversely, this Gradgrind offered the greatest acknowledgement of a quality education’s power...preparing our youth to succeed in work and in life.

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