



DO THE LIBERAL ARTS STILL MATTER?

By Dr. David Crabtree

We live in a culture that more and more equates education with vocational training. The average American would scoff at the suggestion that the main goal of education, especially at the undergraduate level, should be anything other than this. So spelling out the reasons why a liberal arts education is valuable and a reasonable course of study has become a significant part of my job as the president of a great books college that only offers a B.A. degree in liberal arts.

Whenever I have talked about the benefits of a liberal arts education, I have always stressed how the liberal arts help the individual. Over the course of the last few years, however, I have spent more time thinking about the benefits of a liberal arts education for society as a whole.

Defining a Liberal Arts Education

First, let me explain what I mean by a liberal arts education. It is not just the next passing fad, like the latest weight loss diet. Liberal arts has an ancient pedigree. From the historical perspective, it has a far better claim to the label “traditional education” than does education today. The current notion of education, with its emphasis on training for the workplace, is the modern innovation.

I am using the term “liberal arts” in its broadest sense: not to designate a particular set of content nor a particular method of instruction but rather to designate a set of values with respect to what education is and what it should accomplish. I could use other terms to capture this concept. I could have talked about “liberal education,” but “liberal arts” is more widely recognized. I could have used the term “the humanities” because the humanities focus on the question “What does it mean to be human?” C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Abolition of Man* (1943), uses the Chinese term “the Tao.” But I have elected to use the term “liberal arts.” The liberal arts, in this broad sense, can best be described by its philosophical commitments and its attitude toward education. A liberal arts education, worthy of the name, has two critical features: (1) a broad based and general education emphasizing an understanding of the whole rather than the parts; and (2) an emphasis on how to live wisely rather than how to make a good living. In other words, a liberal arts education focuses on what it means to live life as a human being. Let me explain both of these features a little more fully.

The first critical feature of a liberal arts education is its emphasis on breadth of knowledge. The goal is to help students come to a well rounded understanding of reality, drawing on the contributions of various disciplines. Students need to have good acquaintance with philosophy,

literature, history, theology, art, and science. Each of these disciplines gives us unique insights about the human experience. To think that a student can gain a deep understanding of each of these disciplines is unrealistic, but students can be introduced to each discipline adequately to appreciate the contributions each makes to an understanding of reality. Students are then encouraged to put together the insights of the various disciplines into a coherent whole. In order to do this, students must develop a reliable understanding of the strengths and limitations of each discipline: what kinds of issues each discipline illuminates, what kinds of issues are out of its reach, and how reliable its conclusions are. Let me cite just one example in this regard. Some claim that science has a uniquely powerful method that assures us of the findings of this discipline. We must recognize, however, that this claim is merely an assertion that cannot be supported by science's own methodology. The claim of some practitioners of science that their findings are inherently more reliable is nothing more than a prejudice—it lacks demonstration. So the findings of science do not necessarily trump the conclusions of other disciplines, as some would have us believe. Liberal arts students, over the entire course of their study, learn what each discipline has to contribute to an understanding of reality—and what it cannot contribute.

This emphasis of liberal arts on breadth of learning has a couple of implications. First, since students have to study the whole array of disciplines, they cannot just choose that which is easiest for them. They are forced to learn skills and concepts that do not come easily. They are stretched, and they gain confidence that they can learn things they once thought they were unfit to learn. They are also exposed to a vast array of interesting information of which they were previously ignorant. As a result, their range of interests grows in ways that even the students themselves could not have predicted.

Second, in order to learn all of the major disciplines, students must learn basic learning skills. In order to study the natural sciences, students must have some math skills. In order to study philosophy, students must have language skills. In order to be able to process and communicate what they are learning in any field, students must have thinking and writing skills. Every student must learn to write, think, read, and calculate. A liberal arts education therefore places a heavy emphasis on the development of basic learning skills.

The second critical feature of the liberal arts education is its goal of teaching students how to live life well. In other times throughout the world, the goal of education was to pass on to the younger generation the accumulated wisdom of a society with respect to how to live a good life. Only in relatively modern times has that purpose been greatly downgraded, if not eliminated.

The modern approach to education emphasizes training for the workplace. The assumption seems to be that living well is easy and that the key to living well is having enough money. Education should therefore skip the fluff and get right down to business teaching students how to earn money. I hope you recognize how dominant this assumption has become in our culture. I am convinced that the vast majority of Americans would say that training for the workplace is the primary purpose for education at all levels.

There are many reasons for the movement in this direction that I cannot explore in this essay, but it is important to recognize that education has all but abandoned the task of passing on its wisdom with respect to living life well, at a time when the most likely alternative institutions to

perform the task, family and church, are particularly weak. As a result, our society is raising up young people who are more at sea with respect to how to live life wisely than any generation our culture has ever produced. As a result, we have an inordinate number of young adults who are clueless about how to deal with the various difficulties that life throws at them. This is a monumental tragedy that has yet to play out completely.

Historical Background

The liberal arts approach to education goes way back in our cultural tradition to Greek times and continued to reign supreme in Roman, medieval, and even up to modern times. Only in the past one and a half centuries has its dominance been challenged.

The word “liberal” in liberal arts derives from the fact that a liberal education was thought to be the kind of education that was appropriate for a “free man” in contrast to a slave. A slave had a relatively narrow field of action within which he governed his affairs, whereas a free man, who for much of this time period would have been called an “aristocrat,” had a wide range of decision-making activity. A free man, for instance, managed the economic affairs of an entire household, which often included a significant number of peasants, and both agricultural and industrial activities. A free man was also expected to play a role in the political and administrative affairs of his society. In the Middle Ages, an aristocrat was expected to be prepared to serve his king and his kingdom through military service, helping to draft laws, administrating local as well as national government, and providing advice and counsel to the king concerning a wide variety of political matters. Free men therefore had to be well educated with a very wide range of competencies. These duties and responsibilities were considered the cost of their freedom.

The history of the modern era is the story of the dismantling of this old order and its transformation into decentralized societies. The transformation was not easy nor rapid. Nor was it steadily in the same direction. Progress was by fits and starts, but in the long run the trend was clear: movement was away from the feudal order toward a democratic order.

The medieval order had reigned supreme in Europe for several centuries, from the fall of Roman power until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was a hierarchical social and political order; all social power was concentrated into the hands of the king and the aristocracy. This created a situation in which the upper classes would inevitably take advantage of the lower classes. The lower classes long endured this situation until finally, in some countries, they forcibly overthrew the old order. This happened first in England and then, with violent revolutions, in France and Russia. This same transformation happened elsewhere in Europe over a more protracted period of time.

By the nineteenth or early twentieth century, all of the major countries of Europe and the United States had some form of democracy. Some countries were more democratic than others, but the concept that political power needed to rest in the hands of the people became a commonly held European and American assumption. It became commonplace for people to embrace the notion that even those who had been serfs or descendants of serfs ought to have a share in political power. This value became endemic to Western Civilization and an integral part of the Western

worldview. According to this worldview, the average Frenchman walking down the streets of Paris, even if he were the descendant of a serf, was deemed worthy of sharing political power with all of his fellow countrymen.

Most of the European countries developed some form of representative democracy in which voters elect representatives to make decisions about government policy. Representative democracy was the result of a deliberate decision on the part of the founding fathers of the United States. As is clear from the *Federalist Papers*, the founding fathers had concerns about a pure democracy in which all citizens participate directly in all matters of state. At the local level in the United States, the form of government approximated pure democracy, but the founding fathers were afraid of pure democracy at the federal level. They did not trust the average person to have the wisdom, character, and knowledge that is necessary to make decisions of state outside the local area. Therefore they devised a system that allowed people to vote for those who would make decisions of state on their behalf but also give those representatives a certain amount of independence from their electorate.

In more recent times, we have moved closer to a pure democracy than the founding fathers would have been comfortable with. First of all, we in America have expanded the vote to a wider range of citizens than was originally allowed. Secondly, we have developed an expectation that our representatives will vote as the electorate would direct. Our media provides us with information that makes such an expectation possible now in a way that was not possible two hundred years ago. The media provides us with frequent polls reporting the attitudes of voters on a wide range of issues, and the voters have many means by which they can follow the voting practices of each elected representative. As a result of these developments, the voting public has come to see their elected officials more as surrogates than as representatives. The result of these changes is an increase in the democratization of political power in the state and federal government.

The consequence of this march toward democracy is that political decisions have been taken out of the hands of the aristocracy, who were educated in preparation for this responsibility, and placed in the hands of the people at large. In a democracy, therefore, everyone needs to be educated in a way that prepares him to exercise this responsibility. To the extent that citizens are not well prepared to understand issues of state, the government will govern erratically and irrationally.

Earlier I made a distinction between the local government on the one hand and the state and federal government on the other hand. This distinction is significant and a distinction that Alexis de Tocqueville emphasizes in his book *Democracy in America* (1835; 1840). He points out that in early America the main locus of political activity was local politics. This enthusiasm for local politics was generated by the fact that local politics had the most impact on people's lives because the state and the federal governments were relatively weak. This was fortuitous in that the individual had a huge amount of direct knowledge and personal experience with the considerations involved in local issues. Now the situation is quite different. Power has shifted from the local to the state and federal governments. At this level, the average person has less direct experience and personal knowledge, and the consequences of political action are more

extensive and less predictable. This makes education even more critical than when decisions were primarily local.

This shift of political power from the aristocracy to the common man coincided with a similar shift in the economic sphere. Adam Smith wrote his book *Wealth of Nations* (1776) in recognition of this shift. As he described it, economic thought in Europe in the late eighteenth century was dominated by mercantilism. Mercantilism was not a fully-developed, coherent economic theory; rather it was a set of assumptions about economics. Mercantilism arose at a time when kings needed to keep track of their ability to wage war. Wealth was the key factor in being able to wage war, and therefore one of the assumptions of mercantilism gave a way of measuring the wealth of a society: the wealth of a nation could best be assessed by calculating the amount of wealth, and in particular gold, the king had at his disposal. It followed from this assumption that the policies of the state ought to focus on the collection of taxes and the control of industry for the benefit of the state and the enrichment of the king.

Smith took issue with this perspective. In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith reflected on the European experience and argued that the wealth of a nation cannot be accurately measured by counting the amount of gold in the king's bank account. It is more meaningful to gauge a nation's wealth by calculating the productive capacity of a nation. Smith could look at the experience of Spain and Portugal as countries that brought in huge quantities of gold and silver from the New World, and yet they were not particularly wealthy. In contrast, England and Holland had not benefitted from such an inflow of precious metals from the New World, but nevertheless they were becoming relatively wealthy because their industrial capacity was growing rapidly and much of what they produced was being purchased by people in Spain and Portugal. An important implication of this shift in the locus of a nation's wealth that Smith described was that wealth was no longer an entity limited to the amount of gold in the world, but rather wealth can grow because productivity can be increased.

The experience of England and Holland encouraged other countries to adopt liberal economic policies. Restrictions that had kept people from becoming more active in the economy were removed. As a result, more and more people became actors on the economic stage, and the governments learned to encourage this independent activity because it tended to increase productivity. As more and more people became active players in the economy, the economy became more and more decentralized. The average person was making far more significant economic decisions than had the average person in the previous centuries.

This shift to decentralization made educating more people essential. In the medieval period, when the aristocracy made all significant political and economic decisions—which could be very complex, requiring significant knowledge and foresight—the aristocracy were given an extensive education to prepare them to exercise these responsibilities wisely. The kind of education deemed appropriate was a general education that emphasized an understanding of the whole rather than specialization, basic learning skills rather than mere information transmission, and the spiritual and moral values befitting a human being living life before God rather than efficiency. In short, the aristocracy were given a liberal arts education. The common man, on the other hand, played an insignificant role in the economy and politics and was therefore rarely educated. In the eighteenth century, many thinkers, including Adam Smith and the American founding fathers,

understood that in order for decentralized order to function well, the average person needed to be well educated. Essentially, the training that the aristocracy received exclusively in the medieval period now needed to be given to everyone.

In the two centuries since Adam Smith and the founding fathers talked about the importance of education for democracy and liberal economics, the need has not diminished. If anything, it has become ever more critical. The government has expanded its range of activity and has become involved in ever more complex issues, including difficult issues of ethics in medicine, intellectual rights to genetically engineered organisms, and strategic arms treaties. The world's economy has also become far more complex. Globalization has created an extremely complex economy, and the use of macroeconomic tools is taking the economy into completely uncharted territory. Participating in this political and economic world makes the need for a liberal arts education ever greater.

What is at Stake

Economic and political activity is largely problem solving, and the most critical part of problem solving is correctly and precisely identifying the problem. A book by Edward Tenner, *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* (1996), has had a huge impact on my thinking. The book consists of a long list of so-called technological advances that in one way or another backfired. I will give just one example, which, for me, was the most memorable.

In the late 1800s, boxing matches became a popular spectator sport attracting large crowds. The matches were brutal and bloody; before the end of most matches both of the combatants were covered with blood. In an effort to make the matches more humane and civil, boxing gloves were invented. With these padded gloves the two fighters could pound on each other for fifteen rounds without causing blood to flow. By all appearances the problem had been solved—boxing had been made civilized. Years later, however, it became apparent that those who did a lot of boxing were far more likely to develop signs of brain damage than their earlier counterparts. When boxing was conducted with bare knuckles, fighters knew they had to pull their punches when they hit certain parts of the body, such as the head, because if they did not, then they risked breaking bones in their hand, which would probably result in a defeat. So the blows often caused bleeding, but they were not full force. Once boxers put on gloves, they could hit their opponent as hard as possible and still not break any bones in their hands. This caused less apparent injury, but it did irreparable damage to the brain. So the technological advance designed to make boxing less brutal actually resulted in making it more brutal.

A study of the history of intellectual thought in the Western world shows us a similar phenomenon. Every generation does a pretty good job of identifying social, political, or economic problems made by the generation before. The record for solving those problems is abysmal, however, because the true nature of the problem is not correctly identified. Let me give some examples.

Karl Marx was a brilliant man. His study of the economic development of the European countries in the mid 1800s led him to conclude that the misery workers in large urban factories

experienced was an inevitable consequence of the social and political struggle between the entrepreneurial class and the workers. As a cure for the problem, Marx advocated a violent revolution. This diagnosis and prescribed treatment resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of people in a series of communist revolutions in more than a dozen countries—and solved nothing.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn illustrated this point in his book *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973). He relates the fact that the tsar had established prison camps in Siberia where he sent political prisoners for their revolutionary activity on behalf of the working class and in opposition to tsarist rule. Then came the revolution that was supposed to do away with all this oppression. But within ten years after the revolution, the very same prison camps existed, guarded by the very same guards, guarding the very same political prisoners who had been sent there for their revolutionary activity on behalf of the working class and in opposition to the ruling regime—only this time the ruling regime was the Soviet government. This is an ironic reality. Solzhenitsyn's point was that the revolution had not brought about any substantive change of the situation; it had only replaced one set of oppressors with another. This was not what Marx had intended.

Another example of misdiagnosing the essence of a problem is the social welfare programs of the mid-1900s. Both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations launched programs to address the problem of poverty. At first blush, the problem presented by poverty seemed obvious: not enough money. If that is the problem, then the solution is easy: give the poor money. So that is what the welfare programs were set up to do. After a couple of decades of experience, however, it became clear that these welfare programs were not achieving their goals. Instead of helping the poor overcome their poverty, the programs resulted in keeping them in a state of poverty and inculcating a dependence on the money and the services of the state. So instead of eradicating poverty, the programs perpetuated and even encouraged the spread of poverty.

During the Regan administration, welfare programs were cut back, and under the Clinton administration welfare was thoroughly restructured. Since then, some welfare programs have been restored with significant changes designed to safeguard against the problems that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. But the question still stands: Can the problem of poverty be meaningfully addressed in this way?

Poverty is not a unitary phenomenon. There are as many different poverties as there are poor people because every poor person has a unique set of circumstances. What is common to poor people is that they need charity, charity in the old sense of the term—they need love. They need the love, respect, and concern of others. They need for some person to take a personal interest in their plight and to take whatever actions seem prudent under the given circumstances. Sometimes a gift of money is appropriate. Other times work is what is needed. Still other times medical help is the most helpful. What is most important is that a *person* is taking an interest in and making sacrifices on behalf of another person. The help is being provided in the context of a personal relationship. The sense of dignity and worth that is communicated through this relationship is critical to a genuine solution. I am arguing that poverty is not essentially a problem of resource distribution; it is, at heart, a spiritual problem. It is a symptom of a society in which individuals do not take seriously their individual responsibility to love their neighbor.

If my diagnosis is correct, no government program can truly address the problem. The government is an institution—an impersonal institution. The government can redistribute money, but it cannot love. The government cannot take a personal interest in someone, nor can it make sacrifices on behalf of another. This problem can only be addressed by a person acting voluntarily. Only when an individual or a group of individuals is moved by love to address the problems of the poor in a personal manner can poverty be affectively addressed. I would not deny that the government might be able to play some small role in this respect, but anything that the government does to try to solve the problem of poverty is like putting a band-aid on a boil. The real problem runs much deeper.

If the real problem with respect to poverty is a lack of charity, then government programs created to address the problem actually reduce the motivation of the average person to take action on his own to do what he can to help those in need. People develop the attitude that dealing with social need is the government's job, and they stop looking for opportunities where they could help personally. Furthermore, in order for the government to provide aid to the poor, the government must tax more to pay for it. This, in turn, means that individuals have less disposable income that they can use to help those in need. By this analysis, government attempts to solve the problem of poverty are not only doomed to failure, but they make matters worse. The poor are trapped in poverty, and those who ought to respond to this problem are discouraged from doing so and made less able to do so. This is not what the proponents of welfare programs intended, and the problem they were trying to address was actually compounded.

I will cite yet another example, this time in the realm of economics. In the recent economic downturn, there has been much talk about Keynesian economics. Keynes, writing in the midst of the Great Depression, advocated the use of huge amounts of government spending to stimulate a slow economy, even if the government had to borrow money to make this possible. A less frequently mentioned part of his proposal was to increase the rate of taxation when the economy overheats. Since then, various tools have been used at this macroeconomic level to manage the economy and keep it running at the optimal rate. The goal is to completely eliminate the ups and downs in the economy.

According to classical liberal economics, however, an economic downturn causes distress for some individuals, but it serves a beneficial purpose. It causes businesses to become more lean and efficient, and it weeds out the businesses that are weakest. Downturns and the threat of downturns are what discipline business owners to operate efficiently and prudently.

In the latest recession, I have noticed an interesting phenomenon: weak businesses have gone under, as expected, but a number of other businesses have also been caught in the tidal wave. Some very good, well run local businesses went under. In normal times, good businesses could rely on being able to use credit to deal with short-term cash-flow issues; but the credit freeze in this recession was atypical and unforeseeable, and it hit the good businesses at a time when they needed credit and could not pay their debts without it. In other words, this recession took out both good and bad businesses because it created circumstances so out of the ordinary that no one, no matter how prudent, could have reasonably expected them.

It seems to me that the government, under both democrats and republicans, has been too free in its use of macroeconomic tools to keep the economy artificially stable. Doing so has left our economy vulnerable to particularly violent ups and downs.

A phenomenon analogous to the heavy reliance on macroeconomic tools exists in the Pacific Northwest. Here we have vast tracts of forestland, and for many years now forest fire crews have acted very quickly to put out forest fires as soon as possible after they break out. While this practice minimizes the number of trees burned, it has a downside that has only become apparent in recent years. By putting out fires immediately, the forest floor began to develop an unusually large amount of debris, and the forests harbored an inordinate number of sick and diseased trees. In a healthy forest, the sick and dead trees and the debris on the forest floors are periodically removed by naturally occurring fires that stay low and do not harm the trunks of the mature healthy trees or reach high enough to burn their upper branches; generally these fires do not harm many healthy trees. The mature healthy trees then become the seed stock from which the forest is fairly quickly reseeded. After many years of suppressing forest fires, however, now fires burn much hotter and spread much faster. As a result, the fires affect the forest differently. The fires get so hot that they burn up tall, healthy trees, and then the fire begins to jump from the top of one tree to the next. One of these hot fires then burns everything, sick or healthy. In the aftermath of one of these conflagrations, very few trees are left standing. This means that the reforestation process is much slower. We assumed that we could do better than nature. We thought that we had all the know-how to manage the forest well, so we felt free to supersede the natural processes and optimize the production of the forest through our artificial management. But experience has shown that our assumption was arrogant, and we are now paying for our hubris.

Similarly, our economic experts have been managing our economy, confident that they can improve upon the natural dynamics. They know far more than I do, but I think we have seen enough to question their confidence. By analogy with the forest fire management, it seems to me that we have set ourselves up for a series of economic conflagrations that will take out the healthy along with the sick.

I have listed the examples above to illustrate a relatively simple point: to solve problems one needs to be able to identify the problem correctly and precisely. This task is rarely easy because, in many cases, the apparent problem is not the real problem at all. And yet the stakes can be extremely high because to try to solve a problem without accurately understanding it often produces a worse situation than before. For any society, it is critical that economic and political decision-makers be capable of accurately diagnosing problems. In a democracy and a free market economy, those decision-makers are ultimately the people as a whole.

How is it possible for a society to avoid misdiagnoses of problems and unintended negative consequences? It isn't. These challenges are ultimately the result of the sinfulness of man and play a redemptive role in our lives. But we can do some things to try to minimize these problems, and liberal arts education is one of those things.

One significant cause of problem misdiagnosis stems from specialization and expertise. Expertise *per se* is not bad, but it must be married with a picture of the whole and a sound

understanding of the nature of man. In the absence of these two things, expertise becomes narrow. By focusing on the area of specialization, it is easy to lose track of the broader context. To understand a field of knowledge divorced from its context is to misunderstand the field of knowledge. The problem is not seeing the forest for the trees.

In addition to narrowness, another problem that often arises in a culture of expertise is arrogance. A society's constant and unquestioning turning to experts for their wisdom in their areas tends to promote a sense that experts are so knowledgeable that their judgments, within their fields, are beyond dispute. This can encourage arrogance. But a healthy dose of exposure to how vast and complex this universe is and a sober look at the history of man can help take the edge off that arrogance. History is littered with the casualties of hubris. Therefore a liberal arts education can help temper the narrowness and the arrogance of expertise.

So far I have been giving examples of how our neglect of the liberal arts has left us vulnerable to the misdiagnoses of problems and the ensuing unintended consequences. But another element of education that has fallen by the wayside in this era of training for the workplace is moral education. As a society, we have allowed ourselves to lose sight of the fact that we live our lives before a righteous God who will one day judge us. This used to be a cornerstone of our culture's worldview, but it has been slowly melting away for many decades now, largely because reflection on the fact that we are created moral beings answerable to the One who created us is not part of our modern, vocationalized education. This has huge implications for society. I will cite just one example, in the realm of economics.

As an undergraduate, I had the privilege of studying in what was then the Soviet Union. I became acquainted with a very interesting man there who was working hard to make sense of life. He had recently become a Christian as a result of observing the degeneration of morality all around him. He reasoned that communism, as a worldview, had no place for morality; and yet, as he saw Russia become a moral wasteland, he became convinced that morality is an integral part of human existence. This conviction was the beginning of a road that eventually led him to become a Christian. We had many long and interesting conversations about philosophy and theology over the few months that I was in the Soviet Union.

Also while I was there, I remember thinking what a great place Russia would be if it were not for the oppressive Soviet rule. So when Soviet power fell, I was delighted to have the opportunity to return to Russia on a research trip. I was shocked and depressed by what I saw when I arrived. I saw a society in collapse, and I realized, for the first time, how much we take our civil order for granted.

I was particularly struck by the signs of a new economic order coming into being. People were hawking and selling everything, everywhere. They were attempting to institute free enterprise, but it was ugly! One day I bought a bag of apples from a man sitting at a makeshift stand. He had prepackaged the apples in small paper bags and was selling them by the bag. When I got home and began to take apples out of the bag, I discovered that all of the apples under the top layer were rotten.

This incident caused me to reflect on the form of free enterprise that was coming into being in Russia and how it was different from free enterprise as my culture had taught me to understand it—namely, that free enterprise is based on exchanges in which the two parties to an exchange both come away better off than they were before the exchange. This kind of win-win exchange is a “fair exchange.” What I saw developing in Russia was “opportunism”; the goal of each exchange was to come away from the transaction with as much gain as possible. It occurred to me that opportunism is the inevitable outcome when free enterprise is applied in a moral wasteland.

I realized then that free enterprise without a moral base becomes ugly and predatory. Our free enterprise system, though far from perfect, is far more humane than it would be if we were living in a culture that had not inherited a strong moral base. Our culture has historically placed a heavy emphasis on living life rightly. Recently, however, we have been squandering this moral capital, and we will continue to reap the consequences of this irresponsibility.

Trust and goodwill are essential if an economy is going to work well, and trust and goodwill can only be developed in a society with a strong moral base. The link between morality and economics is therefore very important. We need to understand that if people do not act as moral agents in the economy, then the economy, in the long run, will become ever weaker.

Why the Liberal Arts Still Matter

In our time of decentralized political and economic power, the common citizen makes significant decisions regarding solutions to social problems. Therefore it is critical that citizens be prepared to wield this power wisely. Unfortunately, at the same time as economic and political power has become more decentralized, our approach to education has been to adopt a much narrower mission that focuses more and more on vocational training. Adam Smith warned against this trend, but his warning has been forgotten. After all, his book is old.

The kind of education that prepared aristocrats to exercise their economic and political power is the kind of education that we need today. Our citizens need sound learning skills that allow them to make sense, if only at an elementary level, of the complex problems that modern society presents. They need a good understanding of the big picture that allows them to see problems in their broader context. They also need to learn what it means to be human with its associated values and moral strictures. Without the perspective that this background provides, it is too easy to fall into thinking economics is about money or science is about technology.

Liberal arts education is not a replacement for specialized training or education. There is clearly a need for the development of expertise, but expertise needs to be built on a foundation of a broad base of knowledge. Without this broad base of knowledge to temper their thinking, experts will consistently misdiagnose the problems they are trying to solve.

I am under no delusions. Liberal Arts education is no panacea. In fact, I always remind myself that most of the leading figures in the French Revolution were the products of a liberal arts education, and they unleashed a horrendous blood bath. Earlier I suggested that the liberal arts

can be an antidote to the arrogance of expertise, but I also recognize the liberal arts do not cure arrogance.

The root problem of man is his rebelliousness against God. No education can cure this. Only an act of God and a decision in the soul of each individual can cure this; education cannot. But a liberal arts education, if it is worthy of the name, prepares a person to understand the human problem and the solution that the gospel presents. In this sense, liberal arts education is, or at least should be, evangelistic.

I admit to being an idealist. Anyone who works to found a great books college in our time has to have a measure of idealism. But I have not totally lost track of reality. I am not advocating that everyone institute liberal arts education. Our society would not accept such a move. But this is thoroughly do-able: I urge everyone involved in education to pursue his or her vocation more “liberal artistically.” This means encourage students to develop good reading, reasoning, and writing skills; encourage students to work to build a sound, comprehensive, and coherent worldview; and encourage students to understand what it means to be a human being who lives his life before a righteous God. Anyone who teaches students in any capacity can do these things, and the benefits would be huge. If we do not soon rediscover that education is about learning how to live wisely, we will have spent all of our culture’s moral capital and find ourselves in our own wasteland.