

## In Defense of Liberal Arts Education

Published in the Boulder Daily Camera June 2018

Say the Words *LIBERAL EDUCATION* and you'll get a wide variety of responses. Apparently, the phrase liberal arts education is causing consternation with the University of Colorado Board of Regents and a CU systems task force. So much so, there is a "notice of motion" as they call it, to delete the word liberal from the laws that govern and guide the entire University and its educational mission.

SEE: June 20, 2018 Daily Camera Article: [http://www.dailycamera.com/cu-news/ci\\_31957797/university-colorado-liberal-education](http://www.dailycamera.com/cu-news/ci_31957797/university-colorado-liberal-education)

Dropping the word liberal strikes at the heart of a free republic and the importance of education in a democracy. It's a false "set up" to paint this debate in a political context as a binary choice point... it's not! Does the University of Colorado want to lower its status and prestige as a place of "higher learning"? Do the Regents want to abandon the cultivation of wisdom and be caught in this trap of political posturing?

In this era of hyper specialization, industrialization, technological innovation, scientific experimentation and tribal culture wars, it's time to ask ourselves a fundamental question: *what is the basic purpose of education?* Let's explore what liberal arts education is and why it matters.

Our founding fathers were educated by classical liberalism. They were participating in a great conversation attempting to understand the historical and contemporary trajectory of Western Civilization. They read the great works of Lucretius and Plato in Latin and Greek, they were informed by poetry, philosophy and art. They studied Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Descartes and many other others. They explored history and science and culture, which gave them a broad view of the responsibility that comes with power and the importance of engaged citizenship in a participatory democracy.

The architects of this grand experiment we call the United States of America were living in a radical time of transformation: *The Age of Reason and Enlightenment*. Classical Liberalism inspired our revolution, as well as the French revolution. and served as a bridge to the modern era. The Constitution was written by those informed by their liberal arts education and ideals.

The constitution clearly represents a repudiation of authoritarian rule, autocracy, the feudal system along with European monarchies and ecclesiastic hierarchies. In it's essence our way of governance by law and consent by the governed empowers people to reject the oppressors.

In his 1784 essay "*What is Enlightenment*" Immanuel Kant put it this way:  
"DARE TO KNOW! HAVE COURAGE TO USE YOUR OWN REASON"

Our constitution is most definitely classical liberalism, implemented by laws and protected by our courts. It embraces and lays the groundwork for both conservative and libertarian ideologies to emerge.

The great conversation rages on. Civilization is a very thin veil. Our Universities need to strengthen liberal arts education, not abandon it. Professional specialization is safely contained *within* liberal education, not separate from it.

A University should strive to develop the whole person through critical inquiry above regurgitation and memorization. Discernment arises through the development of critical thinking skills. Liberal Arts Education encourages open inquiry to discover a deeper and wider context to evaluate and question our most fundamental beliefs. Without it, we are at risk of becoming a nation of automatons, capable of following orders, performing tasks skillfully, competently and systematically with little understanding of the context.

Technical skills are important to the efficient functioning and growth of a society, for sure, but they do not necessarily elevate our discernment, nor enhance our ability to think critically, challenge authority, question the power and legitimacy of the corporate, academic and political institutions we create. A liberal arts education contributes to becoming even better “specialists” and better humans devoted to the emancipation of humanity by questioning everything to seek a closer approximation to truth.

As Thomas Paine, an early American revolutionary writer/activist and champion of virtue and Enlightenment-era rhetoric put it:

“Such is the irresistible nature of truth that all it asks and all it wants is the liberty of appearing” and... “it is error only, and not truth, that shrinks from inquiry.”

With liberal arts education, we become true Patriots and gain the ability to discern right from wrong, fact from fiction, fake from real. We might even stumble upon Dr. Mortimer Adler’s six great ideas of a civilized society: **Truth, Goodness, Beauty, (ideas we judge by) Liberty, Equality, and Justice (ideas we act on)**. Liberal Education is the kind of learning the Greeks believed must be the possession of all human beings. As the birthplace of Democracy, they embraced the fullness of the Latin meaning of Humanitas (*kindness and humane learning*) in their pedagogy. In today’s world it is essential to protect and preserve Democracy.