

# IDEAS & VOICES

## OUR PROMISE TO YOU

- To provide an open forum of community voices.
- To present balanced views.
- To seek solutions to important regional problems.

## As was the past, the future is rooted in the liberal arts



**Christian M. Brady**

Everyone agrees. These are difficult times for small colleges and universities. Even the very concept of the “liberal arts” is challenged. In response to these challenges, Wittenberg University – the Board and the community – recently recommitted itself to be and remain a “liberal arts university.” Yet what does that mean, and what is its relevance for today?

Historically, Ancient Greek philosophers commended the liberal arts, as they enabled one to become a “free person,” possessing both the knowledge and wisdom required to take an active part in

civic life. (The term has nothing to do with any political or social connotation of liberal versus conservative.) This ancient notion was articulated in the medieval period as the “seven liberal arts,” made up of the trivium (rhetoric, grammar, and logic) and the quadrivium (astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music).

This summary is sufficient for us to see that these seven pillars provide the foundation for all contemporary study and society. We don’t have marketing and business without understanding rhetoric and mathematics; we don’t have engineering and medicine without understanding mathematics, geometry, and logic. And we don’t have a civil society – a community of thoughtful, engaged people – with-

out the skills and knowledge of logic, rhetoric, and history.

Sadly, those of us in the humanities have done a grave disservice by allowing a distinction between what we call “professional” degrees and “academic” degrees. The distinction to be made is not by subject matter, business as opposed to, say, biblical studies, but by how one learns. Is education learning or training, sophia or techne, wisdom or practical knowledge? I argue that one can best develop practical knowledge from a foundation of wisdom and learning. After all, as the Bible says, only “fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

In the liberal arts, as at Wittenberg, students are prepared for productive, successful careers pre-

cisely because they are formed by this fundamental principle of the liberal arts: learning – the present, continuous tense of “to learn.” We have not learned; we are learning, always. Education is the process of gaining knowledge, not only the rote repetition, which brings skill, but also the understanding of why, not simply how.

But what of the “practical arts” or “workforce readiness”?

Consider artificial intelligence. There is no question that the emergence of AI in our everyday lives is having a significant impact, and there will be, for many, the opportunity to build and develop these systems and their applications. Yet, it is already becoming clear that the jobs that are most threatened by AI are precisely the ones that have

been put forward over the last 25 years as the ideal careers for our students: computer programming, finance, accounting. These are all already being supplanted by AI. What AI cannot supplant is humanity; being human.

The liberal arts are the human arts. The knowledge and wisdom gained through the liberal arts prepare students to engage with people, to listen and understand their needs, concerns, and goals. They develop the ability to think critically, to answer not one problem, but to understand the process by which they can address any problem. Liberal arts students learn how to become leaders. They ask the proper questions and consider the moral and ethical ramifications of their answers.

The Wittenberg Way of

education is the “both-and” of learning and life. It is the opening of the mind that enables self-reflection and personal growth, and the deepening of faith in partnership with reason. The Wittenberg Way of learning engages students holistically, through academics, athletics, community leadership, and spiritual formation. The Wittenberg Way of learning equips our students to discern their calling, develop the knowledge and skills needed for successful careers, and prepare for purposeful and fulfilling lives.

This is why a liberal arts education is as relevant today as it has ever been and why it is needed now more than ever.

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