

# Why Democracies Need The Liberal Arts

By Jeffrey Scheuer



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## In Short

- The liberal arts tradition is under attack in the United States, even as it is spreading around the globe.
- That tradition was formalized in Latin Antiquity, but the essential questions and rational methodology that underpin it date to Ancient Greek philosophy.
- At the core of the tradition is the range of modalities of rational thinking, the main rubrics of which are formal logic, informal logic, and analysis.
- All learning is for citizenship, as citizenship includes civic, economic, and cultural dimensions. We need all three dimensions, and all forms of learning, including STEM, preprofessional, and vocational education. But only the liberal arts promote all three dimensions. Without liberal learning, there can be no democracy.

## THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL LEARNING

The war in Ukraine has brought new urgency to the long-standing global divide between democracy and authoritarianism. The conflict underscores the twin threats to free societies arising from foreign despotism and domestic populist/antidemocratic movements. Such threats need to be addressed militarily, politically, and judicially, to protect freedom and the rule of law.

But we also need to understand exactly what is at stake here. It's not just the right to vote but the whole ecosystem of democracy that is at risk. No single branch or function of government can do the job alone.

Basic human rights, codified in law and enforced by independent courts, are one part of that complex ecosystem. Another is a robust free press. A third crucial pillar of the democratic architecture, one that is often overlooked, is the learning tradition

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that (following the Romans) we quaintly refer to as the liberal arts.

In recent decades, European universities have placed renewed emphasis on liberal education. Dedicated liberal arts programs have emerged from Dublin and London to Berlin and Bratislava—and around the world, in places like China, Ghana, India, Japan, and Singapore. Meanwhile, however, Americans are questioning that tradition, amid economic and cultural pressures to focus on the STEM disciplines and vocational and preprofessional training. As the historian Bret C. Devereaux (2023) wrote in the *New York Times*, “America’s higher education system was founded on the liberal arts,” and yet, “for decades—and particularly since the 2008 recession—politicians in both parties have mounted a strident campaign against funding for the liberal arts.”

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It’s cold comfort to note that American scholars have been lamenting the decline of liberal learning for nearly a century. Jacques Barzun, a renowned educator at Columbia University, pronounced the liberal arts tradition “dead or dying” in 1963. And, as early as 1938, James L. McConaughy, a college president and later governor of Connecticut, wrote an essay asking, “Is the Liberal-Arts College Doomed?”

Three generations later, students and their parents continue to question whether studying Plato or Tolstoy will provide the education needed for jobs and careers. Those concerns are not entirely misguided—but they miss a lot. To understand why the liberal arts tradition must survive, why it’s crucial to democracies everywhere, we need to go back to its roots to remember what the term “liberal arts” means and why it emerged in the first place.

## **THE MEANING AND HISTORY OF THE “LIBERAL ARTS”**

The idea of the liberal arts dates back almost two millennia, to Latin writers of late antiquity; but the underlying questions about humankind, nature, and knowledge—and the core animating concepts of rationality and dialectical reasoning—go back to the Greeks. In Classical Rome, *artes liberales* identified the skills needed to be a free citizen and took shape pedagogically as the Trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic).

That idea survived the Dark Ages and theocracy, eventually expanding to include the Medieval quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. During the 12th-century renaissance, as universities emerged from the monastic and cathedral schools of Italy and France, philosophy, jurisprudence, theology, and medicine were added to the curriculum.

The liberal arts tradition contributed to the Enlightenment, with its emphases on classical study and popular education, a tradition that quickly took hold in the New World. The first American colleges were founded in New England to ensure a supply of Protestant ministers, but they became bastions of liberal learning, emphasizing the Greek and Roman classics. Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia, and the school founded by Benjamin Franklin that became the University of Pennsylvania, were established to generate thoughtful citizens, not just ministers, scientists, or businessmen. In other words, they were designed for democracy.

The liberal arts tradition in America has never been unopposed. Particularly in times of economic insecurity (like the present), there are calls for more “practical” and skill-oriented learning. Such calls often come from politicians who themselves had broader educations. And they ignore the fact that, over the past century and a half, the

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United States has emerged as a superpower while adhering to a predominantly liberal arts model of higher education.

### THE UNIVERSAL CORE OF LIBERAL LEARNING

Today, the term “liberal arts” means different, but overlapping and compatible, things. These include the idea of an integrated and balanced curriculum, encompassing math, science, the social sciences, and the humanities; the aim of achieving intellectual breadth in undergraduate education, with greater depth and specialization to follow in graduate study; and the prototypical American model of the small, typically small-town college.

But, above all, liberal education remains centered on a common core of intellectual techniques and best practices that fall under the umbrella of rationality, thinking according to rules and reasons. That core—a spectrum of modes of rational thinking that includes formal logic, the various subtypes of informal logic, and analytic thinking—is what unifies all the academic disciplines, including newly emerging ones. Its aim is to promote rational discourse as an intellectual *lingua franca*, emphasizing flexibility, rigor, and openness to diverse perspectives.

Learning traditions from around the globe have enriched the liberal arts, and a liberal education does not need to be Eurocentric. We do not all have to read Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Wittgenstein—or Confucius, al-Kindi, or the Upanishads. It's not about particular great thinkers, but great thinking. One can become a more critical thinker while exploring sociology, Japanese literature, or queer studies. And science is a crucial part of the mix—because science affects all of our lives; because we

need science-literate citizens; and because no comprehensive approach to learning can leave nature out of the equation.

### THE LIBERAL ARTS AND CITIZENSHIP

Reason, truth, evidence-based argument, clarity, dialogue, tolerance: these intellectual commitments stand or fall together. They remain the foundational values of liberal learning—and of democracy generally. Indeed, as 20th-century thinkers such as John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins understood, promoting citizenship, in the broadest sense of that term, is the sole ultimate objective of a liberal education.

To better understand this point, we need to go a step further and deconstruct the idea of citizenship. Like the liberal arts, it is not a monolithic concept. But while citizenship assumes many forms, all of them involve individual participation in wider communities. And citizenship can be broadly divided into three basic dimensions, which interact as a system.

One is the traditional civic or political dimension, which embraces a range of activities, including voting and jury service, advocacy, volunteering, dialogue, and other forms of participation in public conversations.

The second dimension is economic citizenship, which means being a productive member of a community: doing something useful for oneself and for others, whether in a factory, farm, home, office, laboratory, or boardroom. It is also about being a critical consumer and seeing the connections between the political and economic spheres.

The third dimension is cultural citizenship, through participation in the web of public conversations that constitute a culture. The arts are prominent here, but religion and sports are also potential venues for cultural conversations. It is no accident

that many American liberal arts colleges were founded by religious sects, or that they host cultural events, campus organizations, and sports teams. All are important forms of community.

These three dimensions of citizenship—civic, economic, cultural—interrelate in subtle as well as obvious ways. In fact, they are only the most visible bands on a spectrum of ways we engage with larger communities. One could argue for other forms of public engagement alongside them, or subsumed within them: for example, environmental, informational, moral, and global citizenship; leadership, mentoring, teaching, military, and other public service; and acting to promote public health. But, however we map these forms of participation, the larger goal is to foster vibrant and prosperous communities through public conversations that are marked by fairness, inclusion, and (where critical thinking comes in) intellectual rigor.

## WHY THE LIBERAL ARTS ARE ESSENTIAL

Societies clearly need the entire spectrum of learning, including vocational training, STEM, and the liberal arts. We need pilots, farmers, and hairdressers as well as managers, artists, doctors, and engineers. It's equally clear that people with different educations—or with no education—can be good citizens.

So why are the liberal arts special? Because citizenship, as a multidimensional civic, economic, and cultural system, is essential to democracy, and liberal learning uniquely prepares students for citizenship *in all three dimensions*. It is not the only important mode of higher learning, but it's the only one that directly affects our ability to sustain democratic communities. The liberal arts teach what is the very essence of citizenship: what the world is about, and that you are in the world.


Consider George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, perhaps the most influential book of the 20th century in the English language. It remains relevant today as a witness to humanity's darkest possibilities. You would not read it in a course on business or computer science, where you would have other important things to learn. But the larger point is that, without books like Orwell's, and without the liberal arts, we would be living in an Orwellian nightmare.

Critical thinking, moral thinking, free expression, and the tradition of liberal learning that interweaves them: these are what stand between us and the dark side of human nature, including the cruelty and mischief of tyrants and the worst predations of technology. A world in which people were not taught how to reason, argue, judge, communicate, cooperate, empathize, and tolerate—and also to create, and to feel what it means to be human through the arts—would be an authoritarian dystopia.

That is why liberal learning is not a luxury, a frill, or a sideshow. It's why nations around the world are embracing the liberal arts idea. And it's why businesses are looking for liberal arts graduates and specialized schools such as culinary institutes and military academies are integrating the liberal arts into their curricula.

We need skilled thinkers, problem solvers, team workers, and communicators, not just within the business, scientific, and technology sectors, but across society. The liberal arts embody precisely the skills that a democracy must cultivate if it is to survive. It was true in the classical world, and it's true today.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). 

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