

The Utility of Liberal Education: Concepts and Arguments for Use in Academic Advising

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Liberal education remains a mystery to many of the students enrolled in colleges and universities. Academic advisors, standing at the crossroads of the various curricular and cocurricular experiences that make up a student's liberal education, should be prepared to help students recognize the coherence of their education. This article provides advisors with conceptual knowledge and practical applications for guiding students toward an understanding and appreciation of liberal education. Specifically, I define liberal education and examine the goals associated with it, answer the critic who claims liberal education should not serve as a means to other ends, and provide five arguments for academic advisors to use in persuading students of the utility of liberal education.

KEY WORDS: advising approaches, educational planning, higher education, outcomes of education, philosophies of advising, philosophy of education

Liberal education, a traditional defining characteristic of institutions of higher learning, leaves college students unaware of and unimpressed with reasons to pursue it (Humphreys & Davenport, 2005). As a result, students question many aspects of their college experience, including the value of taking a particular course, joining a student organization, studying abroad, or pursuing any other endeavor outside of their major or focus area. In helping students work through these questions, academic advisors who grasp the concept of liberal education are uniquely poised to convince students of its utility (Knotts, 2002) and help students see not just the *logic of the curriculum* (Lowenstein, 2005/2009, p. 123), but all college experiences—curricular or otherwise—as part of a coherent, liberal education. Considering the blizzard of studies, reports, and defenses of liberal education in higher education, “one might well wonder whether anything else needs to be said on the topic” (Kimball, 1995, p. 261). While advocates have addressed the value of liberal education to those working in higher education, the academic advising literature has not expressly discussed the meaning of liberal education to academic advisors and their students in the 21st century. In this article, I define liberal

education around four broad goals, answer the critic who says liberal education need not offer utility because it is valuable in and of itself, and provide five arguments advisors can make to students about the personal and professional value of liberal education.

Defining Liberal Education

Distinctions

The definition of liberal education differs from other closely related concepts. Historically, the clearest distinction lay in the difference between liberal and vocational education. “Since the early 1900s... education for work (historically known as vocational education) and [liberal] education have frequently been viewed as disparate enterprises” (Dare, 2001, p. 81). Vocational education, traditionally the province of community colleges or technical schools, focuses on quickly preparing students for a specific segment of the workforce. “This training system has emphasized occupational preparation, often narrowly defined. Its programs are usually shorter, rarely lasting more than fifteen weeks” (Grubb, 2001, p. 28). Alternatively, liberal education—traditionally associated with 4-year colleges and universities—does not impose occupational or disciplinary limits on students (Peters, 1967).

Liberal education should also be distinguished from liberal arts majors and liberal arts colleges. The liberal arts major “historically consisted of Latin, Greek, philosophy, history, and science and now typically includes the arts and humanities, social sciences, math, and natural and physical sciences” (Goyette & Mullen, 2006, p. 498). Liberal arts majors differ from the vocational, professional, or applied fields such as engineering, business, education, and health (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). Liberal education, however, extends beyond these traditional disciplinary boundaries and remains available to students of all majors.

A series of focus groups of high school and college students illustrates the need to distinguish liberal education from liberal arts colleges. The study revealed that “to the extent that a few participants discerned some of the key values and principles of the concept [of liberal education], they associ-

ated it only with liberal arts colleges” (Humphreys & Davenport, 2005, p. 41). Liberal arts colleges offer arts and sciences majors almost exclusively, which is in sharp contrast to the many universities that stand accused of shifting their “curricula toward more immediately marketable technological or vocational subjects” (Breneman, 1994, p. 3). Though the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.) abandoned the *liberal arts* label in classifying institutions of higher education, many still commonly use the term to describe liberal arts-focused institutions characterized by the small size, residential feel, and close interaction between students and faculty members (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.). However, liberal education is not exclusive to liberal arts colleges; it also pervades larger universities and those with specialized foci (e.g., research, land grant, and minority serving institutions).

Liberal education is also distinct from liberal political ideology. Though few academic advisors would equate these two concepts, they must anticipate that some students assume a correlation. A recent survey found that many Americans perceive a liberal political bias in higher education with “68.2 percent agree[ing] that colleges and universities tend to favor professors who hold liberal social and political views” (Gross & Simmons, 2006, p. 19). Although liberal education predates and stands independent from the modern liberal political tradition (Fuller, 1999), advisors will need to clarify that the word *liberal* means to be free or unbounded and refers to an education that is general in scope not an end of the political spectrum.

At many colleges, students sometimes confuse *liberal education* with *general education programs* or *core curricula*. Liberal education certainly encompasses the general education that requires students to sample from the traditional disciplines outside of their major course work, giving students “a multisided, cross-pollinated view of things” (Jensen, 2004, p. 6). However, liberal education also includes the major course work, which plays “a crucial role . . . fostering rich knowledge, strong intellectual and practical skills, an examined sense of personal and social responsibility, and the ability to integrate and apply knowledge from many different contexts” (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2007, pp. 27–28).

Liberal education includes the interactions and activities in which students participate outside of the classroom. It includes communicating with diverse others, analyzing and solving complex problems, and persuading teammates to achieve a

shared vision. Much of the richest learning around these goals occurs in the residence halls, within student organizations, and among peer support networks. That is, a liberal education is a shared responsibility among administrators who endorse a core curriculum, faculty members who teach courses in that curriculum and in the majors, student affairs educators who design the cocurricular learning environments, and students who take on formal and informal leadership roles throughout campus. Situated at the crossroads of all these contexts, the academic advisor has the responsibility of directing students to connect the varied courses and experiences that comprise a liberal education.

The Goals of Liberal Education

For advisors to be skilled at expounding the value of a liberal education, they must understand its historical and emerging definitions. Educational philosopher Bruce Kimball (1995) warned against defining liberal education through the unsystematic “basket” approach to which committees are prone (p. 4), an approach where one just throws into the definition all seemingly important educational goods. Heeding that warning, I focus only on four of the most prominent goals of liberal education as it has been viewed in the last few centuries: developing communication skills, enhancing critical thinking, enabling cross-disciplinary awareness, and preparing for citizenship.

In the 1800s, Cardinal John Henry Newman (for whom the Catholic ministries at nonsectarian universities are named) famously discussed liberal education in his work, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*:

It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. (Newman, J. H., 1852/1999, p. 160)

First, Newman described the ability to support one’s opinions with sound evidence and to “urge” them persuasively; that is, liberal education should develop strong communication skills. Second, he addressed the critical thinking component of liberal education, that ability to sift through the logical fallacies of others’ arguments and get to the point.

These two skills—communication and critical thinking—are what Kimball (1995) identified, respectively, as the oratorical and philosophical strands of liberal education, and they can be traced back historically to Roman and Greek notions of education.

Third, Newman (1852/1999) discussed the other longstanding tenet of liberal education: It prepares a person to fill any post. Seventy years after Newman proclaimed it, British philosopher of education R. S. Peters (1967) also articulated liberal education as being “‘of the whole man’ [which] bears witness not simply to a protest against too much specialized training, but also to the conceptual connection between ‘education’ and seeing what is being done in a perspective that is not too limited” (pp. 9–10). He suggested that through such an education a person

could be trained in one sphere, e.g. science, and yet be sufficiently cognizant of other ways of looking at the world, so that he can grasp the historical perspective, social significance, or aesthetic merit of his work and of much besides. (p. 19)

These two philosophers discussed a tradition of liberal education as consisting of three enduring aims: liberating a person from underdeveloped communication skills, liberating the mind of poor thinking so that one could pursue good thinking or “truth,” and liberating the individual from the occupational bounds of discipline-specific training.

More recently, Nussbaum (1997) advanced a fourth core aim of liberal education necessary in the 21st century. She argues that learning from diverse others has long been an important component of critical reflection and should now be an express goal of liberal education: “Like much of the ancient Greek tradition, beginning with Herodotus, Stoics suggest that the encounter with other cultures is an essential part of an examined life” (p. 83). Though the activity of encountering other cultures is old, the need for citizens who can imagine and work cross culturally is new, and liberal education can help prepare students to meet that need.

An education based on the idea of an inclusive global citizenship and on the possibilities of the compassionate imagination has the potential to transcend divisions created by distance, cultural difference, and mistrust.... This idea has become more important than ever for Americans, as we struggle to position ourselves in a world that is interdepen-

dent, in which only international cooperation will solve problems of hunger, disease, and environmental degradation and produce the possibility of a stable peace among nations. (Nussbaum, 2004, pp. 42, 44)

Global citizenship (i.e., liberating one from the bounds of a citizenship that is merely local or national), along with the more established goals of improving communication skills, enabling critical thinking, and providing a general rather than specific education, comprise the four aims of liberal education. Lofty as these goals may be, university leaders continue to see them as achievable goals, and advisors are uniquely poised to help students make these goals their own and thereby view their liberal education as having a “coherent and unifying purpose and structure ... that will serve [them] throughout their lives” (Kimball, 1995, p. 265).

Before presenting five arguments advisors can use to convince students of the utility of liberal education, I address the critics who suggest that liberal education should not be marketed based on utilities it can serve. The critical opinions are based on the belief that liberal education is worthy in and of itself.

Answering the Critic

The critic argues that liberal education “is not a technique or a set of skills—it is an education in imagination” (Fuller, 1999, p. 31). Liberal education, to the critic, should hold only “an appreciation of learning for its own sake rather than for utilitarian ends” (Goyette & Mullen, 2006, p. 498). The critic decries today’s universities as places where “liberal learning is being reduced to information access and vocationalism” (Fuller, p. 32) and where Americans’ minds are being closed off from the big, worthy questions of life purpose—questions better addressed by surveying the great books than by worrying about career skill building (Bloom, 1987).

The critic romanticizes college as a utopia where students simply revel in new ideas, concerned only about developing a love of learning. However, this ideal has never been a reality. Liberal education has always been a means to another end, not an end in itself. Indeed, the classic defense of liberal education revolved around the production of good citizens who could behave civilly and carry on the democracy in an informed manner. “In classical thought, ideas of liberal learning ... were inextricable from ideas of freedom, citizenship, and democracy. Liberal learning in antiquity

was inherently civic. An informed citizenry was essential to Athenian democracy and to the Roman Republic” (Fallis, 2007, p. 25).

While aware of the classic citizenry component of liberal education, many fail to see its utilitarian end because it is not vocational in nature. A utility, though, includes any good or happiness that can be served, including vocational and democratic ends. In fact, because “maximizing happiness [for the most people] is what utilitarianism is all about” (Fehige & Frank, 2010, p. 142), the classic citizenry goal, with its society-wide focus, is perhaps the most utilitarian goal ever proposed for liberal education.

The argument for preserving a purer form of liberal education (i.e., one completely distinct from vocational education) fails to address the needs of the interconnected community of modern society. The critic seems to deny that the university has any “obligation to... society’s pursuit of not only prosperity but also of dignity and happiness” (Hancock, 1999, p. 66). Taken to the extreme, the great-books approach leads to a “sterile tourism of the mind” (Jensen, 2004, p. 8) or to exclusive veneration of and deference to one culture’s books instead of preparation for independent thinking in a “messy, puzzling, and complicated” world (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 35).

In the past few decades, more people have attended college than ever before, and as a result, employers expect more skills from their employees than in the past (Baker, 2009). The idea that university education should be completely divorced from professional preparation is anachronistic and promotes the education-as-myth notion that formal education is “a grand rip-off... [which] does not impart useful skills as much as it is a rather expensive societal sorting machine telling employers which students have the ability and attitude to work” (Baker, 2009, p. 165). Far more optimistic and appropriate for today, the *human capital* view positions higher education as an enterprise that should develop students’ capacity for lifelong development of the most enduring transferable skills and prepare students to continually reinvent themselves to compete and advance in the rapidly evolving workplace (Shaffer, 1997/2009; Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011 [pp. 64–74]). In such a tumultuous environment, academic advisors must explicitly market the goals of a liberal education as safe, sound investments of students’ time, effort, and money. The following arguments will help them convince students that a liberal education retains value in the 21st century.

Arguments for Liberal Education

Traits of the Liberally Educated Person

This first argument for pursuit of liberal education is the least sophisticated (which might make it the most effective one to use with students). Using the quotes from the philosophers above, advisors can easily develop a list of respectable traits of a liberally educated person (i.e., the defining qualities of one who has achieved the four goals of liberal education). This list might include characteristics such as being persuasive, charismatic, rational, analytical, well-rounded, adaptable, worldly-wise, and cosmopolitan. Using this list, the advisor simply asks the student, “Is there any of these adjectives that you do not want to describe you when you graduate?” The student will likely respond that he or she aspires to be all of them upon graduation, thus opening the door for the advisor’s explanation that the four goals of liberal education develop each of those traits.

Advisors who worry this approach sounds rudimentary or idealistic should consider the greater simplicity of Socrates’s sales pitch for education through self-examination. With his life on the line at trial he famously justified his educational philosophy by stating: “It is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day... for the unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, trans. 1997, p. 33). While his approach to marketing education smacks of idealism, it proved so revolutionary that the Athenian leaders sentenced him to death for it. If by arguing for the goodness of living an examined life, Socrates established an educational philosophy that founded academies and survives to this day, surely academic advisors can convince at least one student of the value of liberal education by discussing the virtue in developing the traits of a liberally educated person.

The Liberation Argument

The liberation argument may be the most sophisticated argument I present here; however, it is worth the investment of time when advising students who seem to be making an uninformed decision about a major field of study to pursue. The following quote from civil rights advocate and scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois (1949), poignantly captures the underlying beliefs of the liberation argument: “Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for five thousand years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental” (pp. 205–206).

One can argue that near-universal access to education has been achieved in America; indeed, “to

a greater degree than all other nations, we have tried to extend the benefits of this [liberal] education to all citizens, whatever their class, race, sex, ethnicity, or religion" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 294). Nevertheless, vestiges of the discrimination, which traditionally kept so many groups of people out of higher education, remain.

Premise one. The first premise of the liberation argument concerns the traditional view of higher education as reserved for the elite. Kimball (1995) noted that

[an] elemental fact about the history of the term "liberal education" is that in Roman antiquity *liberalis* denoted "of or relating to free men." Quite significantly, this denotation implied both the status of social and political freedom, as opposed to slavery, and the possession of wealth, affording free time for leisure. (p. 13)

That is, liberal education was only for those who were free to pursue it. Even today, liberal—as opposed to vocational education—is believed to be strongest at elite colleges that "have the luxury of avoiding explicitly vocationalized undergraduate curriculums since for many of their students, a vocational curriculum awaits them in graduate school" (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 10).

Premise two. The second premise is that vestiges of this old system remain, as evidenced in the continued underrepresentation of certain populations within particular majors. Goyette and Mullen (2006) found trends in choice of college major related to such demographics as gender, race, and socioeconomic status (SES). "Compared to their peers with parents who have lower levels of educational attainment, students from highly educated families were much more likely to select an arts and science field [as opposed to a more vocational major]" (p. 508). The study also revealed that nearly all arts and sciences majors came from a higher SES; men were more likely to choose math and science majors in the arts and sciences, but women were more likely to choose humanities. "Asian Americans were the most likely to be found in A&S [arts and sciences] fields, followed by non-Hispanic Whites, while African Americans and Hispanics preferred vocational fields" (p. 512). Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire (1981) would likely refer to these continued trends as shadows of oppression and call their place in a liberating education a "contradiction in terms" (p. 39).

Premise three. The third premise of the lib-

eration argument holds that it is inequitable for entire populations of students to be admitted to the university but underrepresented in certain majors (especially if that underrepresentation is due to a mere lack of familiarity with the full spectrum of majors available). In his 1949 essay, Du Bois argued that the right to an education is no good if it is limited by uninformed prejudice. He was arguing for reason in the face of the McCarthyism then spreading across America and leading to the banning of Communist books:

If...the United States fears the doctrines of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels...then what this nation needs most of all is the free and open curriculum of a school where people may study and read Marx, know what Communism is or proposes to be, and learn actual facts and accomplishments. (Du Bois, p. 206)

Premise four. Liberal education forcibly exposes students to a wide range of disciplines. To paraphrase Du Bois (1949): If a college student fears or is ignorant of the study of philosophy or of mathematics, then what he needs most is a curriculum designed to expose him to those and other disciplines at the college level (p. 206). This way, she or he makes an informed final choice of major based on personal interests and skills as well as on accurate information about the course work and material covered in the university's majors.

Conclusion. In concluding the liberation argument, the advisor points out that liberal education—with its varied course requirements, encounters with diverse people, and engagement with challenging, new experiences—serves the utility of liberating one from social constructs. Without such an opportunity, students might find their course of study and future professional opportunities limited.

Through the liberation argument, advisors can help raise an underrepresented student's "consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class" (Freire, 1981, p. 30), hopefully motivating the individual to question whether sociocultural pressures impacted the choice of major. In generating student awareness, however, the advisor carefully avoids prescription, which Freire defines as the "imposition of one man's choice upon another" (p. 31). The advisor needs only to offer these trends as "objects of reflection by the oppressed [underrepresented]" (p. 33). When considering sharing these statistics and the liberation argument with students, advisors feel overwhelmed, especially when faced with limited appointment time. However, their efforts will

effectively challenge students who are choosing a major solely because most of their family members studied it as well as for those who have failed to consider a major because they have not known anyone in that field.

Liberal Education Builds Marketable Skills

These next two arguments focus squarely on preparation for the world of work. That is, they illustrate the vocational utility of liberal education. In making these arguments, the advisor invites the student into authentic reflection on liberal education (Freire, 1981), viewing it not in the abstract isolation of the ivory tower, but in the context of being a liberally educated professional in the world of work.

Argument three is that liberal education builds marketable skills. Advisors efficiently make this argument by showing students the overlap found in two websites: the one that features their own institution's philosophy of general education and the one reporting employer surveys from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2010) regarding in-demand job skills.

Among employers taking part in NACE's Job Outlook 2011 survey, verbal communication skills topped the list of "soft" skills they seek in new college graduates looking to join their organizations.... Following verbal communication skills in terms of importance were a strong work ethic, teamwork skills, analytical skills, and initiative. (National Association of College Employers, 2010, para. 2-5)

Not one of the five skills identified in the NACE survey falls under the sole province of a single major. The advisor can explain to students how three skills in particular (communication, analysis, and teamwork) are developed throughout a liberal education. Communication skills are honed in freshman composition courses, which focus on written communication; in small seminar-style classes (regardless of discipline), which encourage oral communication; and in mathematical or statistical science courses, which develop skill in communicating quantitative information. For further proof, the advisor could show their institution's statement of general education, which likely makes explicit the goals of the institution's education. Miami University, for example, explains to students that

Liberal education complements specialized studies in your major and provides a broad-

ened context for exploring social, academic, political, and professional choices. It is designed to help students understand and creatively transform human culture and society by giving students the tools to ask questions, examine assumptions, exchange views with others, and become a better global citizen. (Miami University, n.d., para. 1)

Through a website, the Miami University student sees that the university endeavors to equip undergraduates with communication skills for asking questions and exchanging views with others and analytical skills for examining assumptions.

Knotts (2002) published a chart of these and related marketable skills, matching them up to the courses throughout a university's disciplines that develop each skill. Sharing this chart, advisors can challenge students to map their own scheduled courses to the transferable skills developed in each class. Such advising coaches students through the process of learning the logic of the curriculum (Lowenstein, 2005/2009), the connective tissue between courses in the major and those taken to fulfill general education requirements. Taking Lowenstein's process one step further, the advisor should help the student recognize in-demand skills gained and expanded through the liberal education found outside of class. For members of student organizations, the advisor can point out marketable communication skills attained by facilitating meetings and teamwork practiced by holding peers accountable in projects or events they plan and facilitate. By pointing out the ways internships and other on-the-job experiences further expand in-demand skills, the advisor illustrates the evolution from university student to working professional.

Liberal Education Prepares Students for a Variety of Careers

A fourth argument focuses on the many career opportunities available through a liberal education, which stand in contradistinction to the specific jobs for which a vocational education prepares students. In making this argument, the advisor can once again rely on web-based media—videos in this instance—to highlight the fundamental differences between institutions offering liberal education and those concentrated on vocational education.

A quick search on youtube.com yields 2-year technical college and 4-year university recruitment commercials. These 30- to 60-second spots quickly communicate the values forming the foundation of the institution. Inevitably, the student will see the

overarching philosophy of education (liberal or vocational) presented.

For example, Pulaski Technical College (PTC) (2006) and Trident Technical College (TTC) (2007) posted commercials demonstrating a preference for vocational education. The PTC (2006) ad illustrates the earnings potential of a person with a 2-year degree, and although no subjects of study or career fields are mentioned, it clearly promises that a PTC education will lead to an income-generating job.

The TTC (2007) commercial also focuses on vocational preparation but through a different lens than that of the PTC campaign. It consists mostly of images of professionals at work with labels describing their jobs (e.g., early child care and education, occupational therapy assistant, emergency medical technician, automotive technology, etc.). The narrator says at the end that TTC “gives you the knowledge and skills you need to launch a great career.”

Four-year university commercials reveal a preference for liberal education. A Niagara University (2006) commercial consists entirely of a student roaming through an art gallery, examining the various exhibits and flipping through a book. The narrator explains that to make a difference, one must “look at things differently, take a different approach to challenges, experience a new way to develop your mind and spirit. You need a community where diversity is celebrated and service to the community is a lifelong value.” The narrator makes no promise of a job after graduation, but refers to abstract goals of people making a difference.

Another 4-year institution, North Carolina State University (2008), offers a commercial filmed entirely outdoors on the university’s campus. The ad shows students as blurs darting across the background. The narrator, seen throughout the vignette, gives exciting metaphors for the institution, calling it the “autobahn of innovation” and a “think tank the size of a small ocean.” Though the narrator quips about the university being a place “where higher learning becomes H-I-R-E learning,” the reference to the working world is vague. The viewer receives no promise of job preparation; the spot centers around students solving big problems through bigger, better thinking.

Showing these videos to a student, an advisor can demonstrate the pros and cons of liberal and vocational educations as highlighted by the divergent promises made by the sponsoring institutions. Students who mistakenly believed that a university would directly prepare them for a specific job will likely feel ill at ease. Shaffer (1997/2009) encour-

aged advisors to reassure such students that in the rapidly changing Information Age, where technical skills are quickly rendered obsolete, developing the enduring skills fostered by a liberal education proves the safest investment for guaranteed future employment and advancement among a variety of professions.

Liberal and Vocational Educations Are Not Mutually Exclusive

After clearly defining the differences between liberal and vocational arguments, the advisor also needs to point out that the line between liberal and vocational education is blurring. That is, students pursuing a liberal education will not exclude themselves from vocational preparation.

At many 4-year institutions, even the purest arts and sciences majors offer academic credit for internships (a vocational endeavor), and though this example consists of a simple combination of liberal and vocational goals, “the integration of academic and vocational education... can also occur on a very high level, such as interdisciplinary, team-taught courses or project-based learning” (Dare, 2001, p. 84). Advisors can help students identify these project-based courses, including service-learning enhanced classes that allow them to apply their knowledge to real world problems and study-abroad course work that immerses students in new cultures and challenges them to develop their skills in communication, adaptability, and global awareness. Advisors can also promote upper-level, practicum-style courses that serve clients and offer students the opportunity—preferably in interdisciplinary teams that mimic the diversity of perspectives in the working world—to manage a project from beginning to end.

As with their university counterparts, the blurred line between liberal and vocation education characterizes 2-year institutions, where students struggle to find a purely vocational degree. As Knight Abowitz (2006) argued, “Vocational education cannot ignore larger questions of context, culture, ethics, and politics, nor should it evade students’ existential questions.” At Delta Technical College (n.d.), where the motto is “Learn today. Earn tomorrow,” students training to be hair stylists take course work on the laws that govern the cosmetology industry; they study anatomy and physiology as those fields relate to hair care and explore existential questions while learning “the importance of a healthy body and mind... and the psychology of human relations” (Delta Technical College, n.d.).

This confounding distinction between liberal and vocational education will grow more pronounced and is endorsed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007), a long-time advocate of liberal education, which “recommends... a challenging and liberating education that develops essential capacities, engages significant questions—both contemporary and enduring—in science and society, and connects analytical skills with practical experience in putting knowledge to use” (pp. 17-18). Because of the need to develop students’ analytical and practical skills simultaneously, the association foretells that 21st-century liberal education will no longer be solely within the purview of 4-year colleges and universities; it will be prominent in 2-year community colleges, technical colleges, and integrated throughout K-12 schooling. Therefore, academic advisors at any type of institution can and should offer the appropriate arguments to help students see how the combination of liberal education and vocational preparation will ready them for the global workforce of the 21st century.

Conclusion

Liberal education remains at the forefront of higher education. Helping students to communicate effectively, think critically, and cross disciplinary and cultural boundaries should be shared goals among college administrators, faculty members, staff, and students. Although each stakeholder has an important part to play in this process, the academic advisor uniquely engages with students as they question and confirm each aspect of their liberal education (i.e., the academic course work, campus involvement, career preparation, community engagement, and peer encounters that comprise the college experience). Therefore, they must be prepared to answer all students who question the utility of the liberal education they have chosen to pursue.

The five arguments I offer are certainly not an exhaustive list of how academic advisors can apply the concepts of liberal education in the practice of academic advising. They are, however, effective and accessible approaches for advisors at any type of institution who endeavor to help students better connect liberal education with personal and professional goals.

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Author's Note

This article is based on a presentation made at the NACADA Annual Conference in Orlando, Florida, October, 2010. Thanks to those who attended and participated in that presentation; thanks also to Leigh Shaffer for his editorial guidance in developing this article.

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