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Liberating the mind



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WHEN NEW STUDENTS ARRIVE AT BERRY, they are mostly 18. Year after year they are 18, so each year we emphasize again that the first year of college is not just grade 13.

College professors differ from most high school teachers in

how they think about their work and what they expect from students. Berry faculty are experts in their disciplines, not just in their depth of knowledge, but also in terms of how they define and think through problems. They are fluent in the languages of their disciplines, and these languages can be challenging to comprehend, even for faculty in other disciplines. When students choose their major field of study, they are asked to learn one of these languages – be it the language of a mathematician, musician, psychologist, economist or philosopher. And they begin the process of thinking and framing questions like a chemist, accountant or sociologist.

Beyond the major, however, we want all of our students to be educated broadly

in the liberal arts and sciences during their time at Berry. The idea of the liberal arts or a liberal education is unfamiliar to many students at first, so part of their education is to grasp its central role and significance. Because this concept also seems irrelevant to many thoughtful people today, it deserves a moment of consideration.

When we speak of Berry as a liberal arts college, we do not mean that the college specializes in the fine arts or that it adopts a political agenda. “Liberal” in this usage does not refer to political issues or candidates. A liberal arts education does not direct a student toward a political point of view – neither Democratic nor Republican nor even Libertarian. Indeed, prominent liberal arts advocates hold both progressive and conservative political viewpoints.

Instead, we might think of liberal in the sense of releasing or freeing. Study of the liberal arts develops skills through which we liberate our thinking from any number of constraints.

What constraints? There are different ways to answer this complex question, but let me offer one approach: ***A liberal arts education is one that frees or liberates us from what we take for granted.***

It is part of human nature to take things for granted. Often, it seems, we do

not truly realize what we take for granted until it is gone. We lose a good friend through a misunderstanding or a family member through death, and only then do we comprehend what we had. Sometimes we gain this insight from an illness or injury.

At age 30, my life was abruptly turned upside down by a disorder that interrupted the signals between my muscles and motor neurons. The condition made me gravely weak. I had to be cautious stepping over curbs, walking up the stairs, taking milk from the refrigerator, and even chewing and swallowing. I couldn't run or touch the top of my head. In short order, and for more than a year, I lost all confidence in my strength and agility, in movements that should have been easy and normal – things I had always taken for granted.

What is more, we take for granted our very ability to be aware of things. Here is an idea you can try to bend your mind around: We even take for granted our ability to take things for granted.

Although it is, perhaps, the most defining attribute of humans, our ability to be self-reflective and analytical about the world around us emerges slowly over time. It develops from infancy and childhood, on through adolescence, and into at least the first 20 years of life.



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All of us are born into a particular time and place, and we inherit a native language, relational patterns, customs, a sense of right and wrong, and a story about how things work and why the world is the way it is. We acquire all of this before our teenage years, before we really have the capacity to evaluate and scrutinize independently that which we have absorbed.

In college, the academic disciplines provide students with a way of gaining perspective on the world they live in – to think analytically and with detachment about what seems and feels natural. The various disciplines offer diverse viewpoints, different questions and distinct tools of inquiry.

The social sciences study the economic, political and legal systems we take for granted. How do we organize and regulate ourselves? How do we exchange goods and services? How do we coexist with one another? Cultural anthropologists study the social rules by which we manage daily relationships.

The sciences study the natural and physical systems that define our planet, including the ecosystems that sustain life and the biochemical foundation upon which life is built. They also help us understand how our own bodies and

brains function in all of their wondrous complexity – the flesh-and-blood systems as well as their molecular substrate.

Literature and the arts help us understand how we make meaning as we construct stories and symbols that both shape and critique human culture. History, philosophy and religion examine how humans understand and interpret human nature and the human condition. They probe enduring questions about what is just and fair and our purpose as self-reflective beings.

The sum of these various parts and perspectives is what is meant by the liberal arts. In this understanding, the study of the liberal arts refreshes our vision and makes us more piercingly mindful of the world we inhabit. This approach frees us to *choose* to live life well, and that makes this approach profoundly relevant and purposeful. At its best, a liberal arts education fills us with wonder. At the same time, new insights can rattle us to the bone as human beings.

In fact, many of the best learning moments, the most powerful ones, are the ones that disrupt and dislocate us. One of my daughters visited Kenya the summer after her junior year in high school. She spent seven weeks assisting a team

working in Kibera, one of the world's most wretched slums with an estimated quarter of a million people living in a place not much larger than the inhabited parts of Berry's campus. She spent time relating to people who lived in desperate circumstances. When she returned, several weeks passed before she could really talk about the experience. She said simply, "You had to be there to understand."

Kibera fractured her understanding of what is normal and why things are the way they are – in Africa but also at home. It upended her assumptions about what is fair and just. It reordered her priorities and the trajectory of her life, her path in college, and her sense of purpose. It pushed her to explore new perspectives, peoples and places.

At Berry, we urge students to seek out perspectives that are unfamiliar and unsettling, to walk alongside people who see the world differently. We challenge students to study abroad, and we encourage friendships that span social boundaries. When we say that the first year of college is not simply grade 13, it is because we want students to approach their studies differently.

The goal of our liberal arts education is not just that our students learn more. Our aim is also that they become aware of their assumptions and preconceptions and thus are liberated to think more incisively and act more wisely. That is the quality of mind they will need as adults if they are to become the ones who improve the communities where they live, work and serve. **B**