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Comp 126- Writing in College  
11/15/11

## The Liberal Arts Education: The Key to a Life of Happiness?

“We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist using technologies that haven’t been invented in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet... The amount of technical information is doubling every two years. For students starting a four-year technical degree this means that... half of what they learn their first year of study will be outdated by their third year of study.”

--Shift Happens 2010

In our ever-rapidly changing world, there are few constants. Skills mastered at vocational schools are soon antiquated; new jobs and industries require on-going training to keep up with their demands. The ability to problem-solve and think critically and be flexible in our perceptions, however, will help us navigate the dynamics of these times and for the future, and a liberal arts education helps to develop these broad-based skills by challenging our thoughts while developing our compassion and character. As a student at a liberal arts college, I have been required to take a wide variety of classes that have given me the opportunity to experience new ideas alongside diverse classmates and teachers of different philosophies, expertise, musical tastes, and political views—all of whom add to the rich experiences of my day-to-day learning. When I consider that we don’t yet know what kinds of problems we will need to be solving in our future, I am reminded how important it is to question what we know in our present in order to move forward.

Recently, I have been required to read and unpack numerous academic texts relating to happiness. Linda Wells in *The Things They Carried: Character, Narrative, and the Liberal Arts*, Oksana Grybovych and Rodney B. Dieser, authors of *Happiness and Leisure: An Ethnodrama Act 1*, and Mike Martin in *Paradoxes of Happiness*, argue that happiness comes from our sense of well-being and purpose. These readings have spurred me to consider my own happiness, and I realize that for me, the core of my liberal arts education—the deeper, difficult-to-quantify learning and experiences—are transforming my thinking and my own sense of purpose that will carry me into the future. And this makes me wonder: Is a liberal arts education the pathway to well-being and purpose, and therefore happiness—perhaps more so in hindsight—and if so, is this an important concept that is missing from the conversation on happiness?

My own college, Fort Lewis, states on its website the following:

“Liberal in liberal arts means ‘free,’ freedom from ignorance. A liberal arts education is intended to impart the capacities and values required for responsible citizenship and advancement in the professions and help students develop a commitment to life-long learning. These capacities include breadth of knowledge, the ability to analyze and weigh evidence, open-mindedness, understanding of different cultural perspectives, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and communication” (Fort Lewis College Liberal Arts Catalog).

So far in my liberal arts education I have taken a reading class that has expanded my view of modern issues in Africa, an anatomy class that has challenged me to try to learn the unknown by the unintelligible (at least to me), a Native American literature class that has helped frame my understanding of social injustice, a psychology class that has given names to behaviors I can now identify, and I have spent a year in Costa Rica, learning about its rich diversity and ecosystems and examining history from a different cultural lens. I have reconsidered and changed my major. I have worked with classmates from all different walks of life and viewpoints. I have struggled but persevered in classes that have forced me to rethink my

purpose in life. And for the most part, I have to admit that I have been happy. The research article *Long-Term Effects of Liberal Arts Colleges*, published by ASHE Higher Education Report in 2005, looked at the relationship between a liberal arts education and a purposeful life. The ASHE report interprets the data of a long-term study that seeks to measure the impact of a liberal arts education in terms of overall satisfaction, satisfaction with life and a sense of control over life events, as well as involvement in continuing education and charitable donations, among other factors. This study was significant in that it was the first time scientific measures were taken to quantify the effects of a liberal arts education over time, and I think this research can greatly add credibility to the conversation about whether or not a liberal arts education is a source of happiness.

Wells, the dean of the Boston University College of General Studies, has expertise when it comes to a liberal arts education. She also has much to say about happiness. She writes that happiness can be found by living a life that is rich in purpose:

“A consideration of the Aristotelian teleology of happiness yields a deeper understanding on the part of students the value they place on happiness in the ‘working life’— here taken to mean a life that works. Students say they want to be happy. They often mean by this in their initial analysis that they want a life filled with amusement. How then does work fit into this equation, for they also agree that productive, meaningful work produces happiness or fulfillment?” (Wells 52-53).

If this is so, then a liberal arts education can lead us to a deep understanding of our meaning of life, which will lead to happiness. Research projects, internships, and cultural studies in the form of study abroad are components of the liberal arts education. These meaningful study experiences provide a foundation upon which we might find happiness. In my own experiences, the interactions I have had with the students and teachers I have worked with have enriched

my life. My year in Costa Rica-- learning Latin American culture while living with a host family, going on field trips, studying with other students from around the world, job shadowing a physical therapist—have broadened my world view and created some of the happiest memories of my life.

A liberal arts education draws from expertise across disciplines as well as generations. Grybovych is associated with the University of Northern Iowa, and her academic interests have to do with theories of leisure, models of participatory planning, and decision making. She authored an ethnodrama along with Rodney B. Dieser in the form of a dinner conversation and makes a case for the importance of living a meaning-driven life in relationship to happiness. In her ethnodrama, she imagines what might have been said to Jane Addams. She writes,

“Absolutely, Jane! I also think that true service and engagement with others is a requirement for what I call a ‘good’ life; yet it is not enough for what I call the ‘meaningful’ life. While the ‘good’ life is something beyond the pleasant life, ‘meaningful’ life is beyond the ‘good’ life, I argue in my book *Authentic Happiness* that the ‘meaningful’ life lies in devoting your skills and knowledge to something larger than yourself (Seligman, 2002), I am sure everybody in this room will agree with me that your life, Jane, is exemplary in this sense, (*Looking around the table, and noticing everyone nodding in agreement*) it is what I call the ‘meaningful’ life” (Seligman, Grybovych and Dieser 34).

This shows how we celebrate the good work ethics of others, who give selflessly to others, that result in making our collective lives better and contributes to the culture of happiness. Is it any wonder that most liberal arts programs contain some kind of service-learning component?

Martin writes that happiness is something we desire but we don’t actually know what causes it. He reviews several different paradoxes of happiness to see how each one connects to finding happiness or if it really *does* lead to happiness. He writes, “...together they reveal some of the complexity in pursuing good lives, that is, lives which are happy as well as morally decent, meaningful, and fulfilling” (Martin 171). It makes sense, then, that in my liberal arts

studies we examine the lives of people and learn the lessons from history and science and contemporary problems. Our studies stretch across many disciplines and we are asked to connect our learning to personal experiences, to other text, and to the greater expanded world.

Wells, Gyrbovych, and Martin would like us to believe that purpose and meaning in our lives are keys to our happiness. And aren't purpose and meaning the goals of a liberal arts education? How might this relate to happiness as a result of a liberal arts education? The ASHE report looked at the relationship between a liberal arts education and a purposeful life:

"...alumni of baccalaureate liberal arts colleges reported that their undergraduate experience had a significantly stronger positive impact on their learning and intellectual development, the development of leadership and self-efficacy skills, personal and spiritual development, and the development of responsible citizenship than did similar graduates of public universities. Baccalaureate liberal arts college alumni also indicated significantly greater satisfaction with their undergraduate education than did public regional university graduates. These significant effects persisted even when additional controls were introduced for college grades, loan debt accumulated during college, and level of current educational degree attained" (Higher Education Report 74).

Considering this, we are led to see that by attending a liberal arts college significantly impacts our "development of leadership and self-efficacy skills, personal and spiritual development, and the development of responsible citizenship." Their findings support the idea that graduates of liberal arts colleges contribute greatly to the community as leaders and problem-solvers, with critical thinking skills that help them keep up with modern issues. Most importantly, however, is the fact that former liberal arts students reported "significantly greater satisfaction with their undergraduate education" despite the difficulty in earning grades or paying for college. This satisfaction might be interpreted as a high measure of happiness.

If Wells, Gyrbovych, and Martin say that happiness results in a purposeful, meaning-driven life, and the goal of the liberal arts education is to teach the skills and attitudes to create a meaning-driven life, then a liberal arts education is an avenue for happiness and belongs in the conversation on happiness. It seems to me that experts agree that a liberal arts education is key to developing the essential mindset that will be needed to embrace the complexities and problems of a future we can only imagine: of new inventions with technical information that doubles every two years, of a diverse global community that will need to more carefully share the world's resources, of a universal humanity that will need to learn to help each other with greater compassion and understanding. Unlike a technical or vocational college with their narrow focus of study, liberal arts education will help us learn to adapt with our changing times, supporting us in developing problem-solving strategies learned from our examination of history, from our "conversations" with philosophers and social scientists, from our study abroad experiences, and from the imaginations of our great writers. As the latest research is showing, a liberal arts education gives meaning and purpose to our individual and collective lives. And as Wells, Gyrbovych, and Martin have argued, meaning and purpose are the keys to a happy life.

## Works Cited

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