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Revaluing the Liberal Arts

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We were astonished to read in the *New York Times* last year that a course entitled "Introduction to Circus Arts" can satisfy the fine-arts requirement at Bloomfield College, a small liberal arts institution near Newark, New Jersey. Moreover, the *Times* article scarcely questioned the legitimacy of such an offering. Instead, readers were informed that the circus course is one of many "innovative approaches" that the college had developed to meet the needs of students from "tough" local neighborhoods—a principal goal being to build self-esteem through the acquisition of tangible skills. As for why a course focusing on non-intellectual skills such as juggling and tightrope-walking had been recognized for *fine-arts* credit toward a *liberal arts* degree, the article offered no explanation, other than noting that the course was originated by an associate professor of *performing arts*, whose expertise lay not in music, drama, or dance—as one might expect from that term—but in clowning: that is, the professor was half of a clown performance team and had organized the International Festival of Clown Theater in New York City.

We cite this article in some detail because it is indicative of the extent to which undergraduate education in the United States has been debased, going to the clowns, one might say, if not to the dogs. In these circumstances, the founding of the American Academy for Liberal Education in the nation's capital last year (Brief Notes, *Aristos* 12/93) is especially welcome. For the Academy aims to restore meaningful standards to general undergraduate education. Serving as an alternative accrediting agency for America's colleges and universities, it will identify those institutions that adhere to strict standards of curriculum, teaching, and learning in the liberal arts. By so doing, the Academy will effectively complement the efforts of the National Association of Scholars (based in Princeton, New Jersey)—which since 1982 has sought to promote rational discourse, and an informed understanding of the Western intellectual heritage, in higher education.

The Liberal Arts Tradition

What courses of study do the "liberal arts" properly encompass? And why is such a tradition worth preserving?

The tradition of liberal education has evolved slowly over time since its origins in a philosophers' curriculum in ancient Greece. The term "liberal arts" itself derives from the Latin *artes liberales*, literally meaning the "disciplines or branches of learning appropriate to freemen," for only freemen had the leisure to pursue studies considered removed from practical concerns. In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, the canonical seven liberal arts were grammar, dialectic (logic), rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, harmony (music), and astronomy. (Music was of particular philosophic interest, for it was thought to hold the key to understanding the physical as well as the spiritual relationships binding the universe.) Renaissance humanists added philosophy and history to the liberal curriculum, and eventually included vernacular languages and literature, in addition to the earlier Greek and Latin studies. Modern colleges and universities further expanded the curriculum to include the physical and social sciences and, in some cases, other disciplines such as art history.

Today, the liberal arts properly comprise a broad program of studies intended to provide a general cultural and intellectual education, as distinguished from specialized technical or professional training. As Winston Churchill once observed: "The first duty of a university is to teach wisdom, not a trade."

Several important principles have been implicit in the tradition of liberal education throughout its various transformations. Since many of today's would-be educators seem to have lost sight of these principles—the validity of which ought to be self-evident—it is worth noting them here. First, all higher learning requires both language skills and a command of rational argument and methodology. Second, knowledge is hierarchical, and one must master certain fundamentals in order to proceed to more complex or abstract levels of understanding. And third, a viable society is possible only within a context of shared language, knowledge, and values. With good reason, therefore, liberal education is held by its wisest proponents to be the best preparation for civilized life, notwithstanding a need for special training in many professions.

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economic, social, and political forces now tending to undermine it will not be easy. Since 1970, the number of students pursuing degrees in the liberal arts has declined sharply, while enrollment in career-oriented undergraduate programs has greatly expanded. The vast majority of the nation's liberal arts institutions, including the most prestigious, no longer establish a coherent set of academic priorities for their undergraduates. Instead, students are permitted to choose among a plethora of highly specialized and idiosyncratic courses. Even in colleges with so-called distribution requirements in the core disciplines, introductory survey courses in Western literature, history, or philosophy are rarely required. According to a recent University of Pennsylvania catalog, for instance, students might satisfy the "arts and letters" requirement for the B.A. degree with only two electives, chosen from among such courses as "Arabic Literary History" and "The 'Whodunit' from Oedipus to Columbo."

Like Bloomfield College's circus arts course, many purported liberal arts offerings are devised to attract "minority" or other "disadvantaged" students, or to satisfy the particular interests of individual faculty members, many of whom narrowly focus on issues of race, gender, and class, in keeping with current academic fashions. Worse than that, the established collegiate accrediting agencies now impose their own politically motivated criteria.

According to John Agresto, chairman of the American Academy for Liberal Education (and president of St. John's College in Santa Fe, which pursues a rigorous "Great Books" curriculum), fewer than three percent of America's 3,500 institutions of higher learning can now meet the Academy's stringent requirements, which include the following: at least a third of a student's degree credits must be in the "general education" area, providing basic knowledge of the liberal arts; prerequisites must be defined and enforced to ensure "orderly progression from elementary to advanced levels"; and substantial work in written English must be an on-going part of the undergraduate curriculum. (As documented in the spring 1994 issue of *Academic Questions*, published by the National Association of Scholars, even the teaching of expository writing is being reduced to absurdity by extremists, who claim that clarity and conciseness have no objective value and are merely part of a socially imposed "ideology of literacy.") Of course, the worth of a liberal education ultimately depends not only on what subjects are taught but on *how* they are taught and on how *well* they are learned. The Academy will therefore require member institutions to maintain rigorous entrance requirements, pursue high standards of teaching (in particular, senior faculty must both instruct and advise undergraduates), and ensure meaningful evaluation of student achievement. Not least, institutions must demonstrate a commitment to liberty of thought and freedom of expression—an especially urgent requirement in the face of recent attempts on college campuses to suppress, outside as well as within the classroom, all language and viewpoints deemed politically incorrect.

What is at stake in the battle for liberal education is nothing less than the perpetuation of the best of our civilization, of its hard-won knowledge and its sustaining core values.

The Academy's founding directors are a distinguished and diverse group, including cultural historian Jacques Barzun (Honorary Chairman), Harvard's Pulitzer Prize-winning professor of science Edward O. Wilson, and Shelby Steele, professor of English at San José State University, who has written widely on issues of race from a solidly individualist perspective. The president of the Academy is Jeffrey D. Wallin, a historian who formerly served as Director of the Division of General Programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Academy's Council of Scholars, which includes the noted historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, will formulate academic standards and, in conjunction with the Board of Directors, will implement those standards through a multiphased process of evaluation and accreditation.

To date, four institutions with exemplary programs have been accepted as charter members of the Academy: the University of Dallas, Rhodes College (Memphis, Tennessee), James Madison College at Michigan State, and Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California.

The Place of the Fine Arts

From our perspective, one conspicuous omission mars the Academy's otherwise commendable program, however. Courses in the history and appreciation of music and the visual arts are not included in the prescribed curriculum. Literature is the only major art form mentioned among the courses intended to provide undergraduate students with an "introduction to the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic architecture of civilization." Yet surely Bach and Michelangelo, for example, must be counted, along with the world's great poets, novelists, and dramatists, among the supreme architects of civilization, and they deserve no less attention.

Unfortunately, the Academy's focus on literature to the neglect of the other arts reflects a long-standing bias evident throughout the American educational system. Indeed, some colleges with otherwise admirable liberal arts programs would have difficulty meeting a music or visual art requirement at present. Although the Academy is considering the issue, music, painting, and sculpture are not likely to be accorded either full status or adequate instruction (and that will be the most challenging criterion) in the standard curriculum until the nature of art itself—and, with it, the relationship of each of the arts to human cognition—is understood. (These matters are explored in "Ayn Rand's Philosophy of Art: A Critical Introduction," esp. Part V, *Aristos* 1/92.)

Most important, the Academy would do well to require that every liberal arts program include a basic course in logic and critical thinking. Such a requirement might help to counter the rampant disregard for definitions and for rational discourse in general that is wreaking havoc in intellectual life today, especially with respect to the arts and humanities. For evidence, we need look no further than the *New York Times* article on Bloomfield College, in which important distinctions between key concepts such as "fine arts," "performing arts," and "liberal arts" are ignored. (For other examples, see "Today's 'Public Art': Rarely Public, Rarely Art," *Aristos* 5/88; and "Blurring the Boundaries at the NEA," *Aristos* 1/91.)

Anyone who has studied history knows that the survival of culture is not automatic. It hangs on a tenuous thread of transmission, which can be frayed and sundered in just a few generations. What is at stake in the battle for genuine liberal education is nothing less than the perpetuation of the best of our civilization, of its hard-won knowledge and its sustaining core values. The efforts of the nascent American Academy for Liberal Education and of its member institutions offer renewed hope that this inestimable legacy will not be lost to the future. A