

Presidents' Discussion Series
The Value of Liberal Arts Education
November 28, 2012

Gerry Cross, MRFA

Four panelists – Karim Dharamsi (General Education), Vance Gough (Entrepreneurship), Marnie Kramer-Kile (Nursing) and Mario Trono (English) – will each speak for 5 to 10 minutes on the value of a liberal arts education. After that, the panelists will have an opportunity to reply to the others' remarks and then we will open it up to questions from the audience and a general discussion. There is enormous depth and richness in the discussion we can have here about:

1. How, if at all, should Mount Royal University respond to criticisms regarding the value of a liberal arts education?
2. How well does our General Education program, and in particular the foundation courses, fulfill the aims of a liberal education? Does it need changing, and if so how?
3. What is the value of General Education in a professional program with a high level of prescribed content? Are the tradeoffs that this entails worth it and, if so, what are they?

Karim Dharamsi, General Education

Predictable arguments marshaled by the agents of Liberal Education take at least two dominant forms: the first, often defended by the students of Leo Strauss and his followers, can seem to follow a familiar imperious pattern. While the premise seems acceptable and congenial (ideas such as “the purpose of liberal education is--and always has been--to make those who undertake it radically mature, free and complete individuals”) the underlying idiom belongs to a canonical parochialism. As Daniel Choi, a graduate of Harvard's School of Government and a defender of liberal education cheerily puts the matter:

Democracy is epitomized by the bazaar or the mall, and this is what the university is becoming. It wants to be inclusive, indiscriminate and accommodating toward every predilection. The university thus admits students less and less according to rigorous standards of individual excellence, and more and more according to the diverse backgrounds and experiences they can import into the student body. In other facets of the university as well, variety is prevailing over quality. Witness the accelerating proliferation of concentrations, special concentrations and sub-concentrations, and the clamor for even more, such as ethnic studies.

The democratization of the university is not innocent or even progressive, but thoroughly political. Diversity is in vogue wherever the many rule or wherever power belongs to the mediocre. The mediocre many have an interest in denigrating wisdom, virtue and even merit--all severe, undemocratic notions--and in elevating sheer experience, which even the meanest can contribute to and appreciate. While wisdom, virtue and merit are hard to achieve and discern, experience is easy to assert and acquire. Yet because of the superficiality of plain experience, one needs it in great quantity and variety to appear impressive and interesting. So like everything else democratic, the democratic university is not focused and deep but expansively broad and various.¹

Choi's concerns are worth a discussion, but for now I only point out that his defense of liberal education amounts to a critique of democracy -- there's too much of it! And universities allow too many incapable minds through their doors in the name of inclusivity and diversity. One might be reminded here of Walter Lippmann's infamous idea of the “manufacture of consent” (something he discusses at length in his seminal 1922 book *Public Opinion*, and made famous by Noam Chomsky). Lippmann worries that the

¹ Daniel Choi (1996), <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1996/9/16/in-defense-of-liberal-education-pbwbhat/>

herd (perhaps you and me) are just not very smart and that those in power ought to massage our ideals into alignment with those who are wise and have read the right books and have been brought up in the right sort of way. In *Public Opinion* he coins another important idea, that of stereotypes. Allow me to quote again:

The systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society. They are an ordered more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world, people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members.

[...]

It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense or our own value, our own position, and our own rights. [...] They are the fortress of our traditions, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.²

Lippmann, much like Choi, was a defender of liberal education. By his lights, the stereotype is a kind of psychological security blanket for the mediocre or underdeveloped mind; the script helps one to locate herself, in the therapeutic wilderness of Chopra and leadership seminars, against the other bellwethers in the herd. The upshot, and part of Lippmann's defense of liberal education, depends on reducing our active participation in civil society and letting the best and brightest steer history. Well, now that we're at history's end, there's no need for anybody to take the helm.

The second view, sharing at least in form the Ideal expressed in Choi's conception of Liberal Education (namely, the purpose of liberal education is--and always has been--to make those who undertake it radically mature, free and complete individuals") comes by those who believe that equality and diversity are fundamental to liberal education. Some, like Martha Nussbaum, understand the liberal arts, in particular, as essential for a thriving democracy. Articles in the *New York Times* over the past year and the *Globe and Mail* just a few weeks ago echo not only Nussbaum's form of defense, but echo the ideals of participatory citizenship, the irreducibility of certain social goods, and the ideals of a broadly based education. As Michael Roth recently observed in response to Stanley Fish and David Brooks,

One of the strong features of the university and college sector in this country [U.S.A.] is the variety of paths for achieving a broadly based education. Learning through the liberal arts energizes capacities for innovation and for judgment. Those who can imagine how best to reconfigure existing resources and project future results will be the shapers of our economy and culture. Let's hope their education includes the ability to think reflexively so as to reexamine continually the direction they've chosen and the assumptions they've used. [...] Inquiry is never finished. Educators in the liberal arts aim to develop habits of mind that thrive on ambiguity and that foster combinations of focus and flexibility, criticism and courage.³

² Walter Lippmann (1922), <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/lippman/ch07.html>

³ Michael Roth (2010), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-roth/coming-to-the-defense-of_b_605899.html

Roth's remarks are consistent with defenses of Liberal Education coming from professional schools (business and nursing, for example, but also from medicine, engineering and others).⁴ And the matter could rest happily here.

A couple of years ago my wife and I dragged our two and a half year old to Tunisia. Tunisia has among its university aged population a literacy rate of over 92%.⁵ The literacy rate of the general population has been steadily increasing since Tunisia's independence from France in 1956. The students at the University of Tunis major, mainly, in economics, management and law. Engineering and the sciences are also popular. Under Ben-Ali (before the "Arab Spring") the students would graduate and enter an economy with over 25% youth unemployment. Today unemployment hovers at just over 23% for recent graduates. Literacy rates can be narrow indicators of success. Often graduates work in "regular wage jobs" and the rate of unemployment is very high for those with a university education. For these students and graduates, with the "spring" imminent, the nature of education was less an instrument of professional or individual achievement but a mechanism of social change. Education can be an entry into an historical contest. For some who have less possibility than the Canadian undergraduate, the better political life, inscribed particularly by the ideals of Jefferson and Paine, marks a desire to cultivate humanity when the day-to-day can be undignified, oppressive and dark. So Choi's mediocre student or Nussbaum's democratic ideal neglect to mention the historical and moral imperative fastened to the struggle for freedom and, indeed, the capacity to make one's life one's own.

Life can be, and often is, an undignified affair. We can't guarantee our students a job after their time at Mount Royal. We are not alone. Harvard's graduate rate of unemployment is between 5 and 5.5% (just below the unemployment rate in Massachusetts, which hovers around 7%).⁶ Over 3000 students take General Education at MRU in a given year. A fraction are from the professional schools and fraction still will have the grades or interest in graduate level education. Yet, they are all subjects of our fiduciary obligations, but also to our historical sense - that the Ideals by which we wish to live out our lives, sometimes in consonance with our professional aims, sometimes not, are going to be contested. Literature and the arts, science and mathematics, providing us with profound insights into our place in the universe, have both inspiring and sobering effects - but their histories are as material to where we are as their achievements. The advancements in science, in technology, in economics, business and health, conflicts of the first order when our values conflict on a global as well as on a local scale, and the complex of data injected into our cerebral cortex by the Internet and South Korean kitsch require responses. They infect any illusion of conceptual purity with the muck of human existence. And in the spirit of having a general education (not just a liberal arts education!) we are invited along with our students to the contest. It is intrinsic to our appreciable judgements about the ends we seek and why we seek them - no matter our professional aims, no matter our tax bracket, no matter our expertise.

Choi ends his essay on grim notional distinction. He reminds us that university comes from the Latin word for whole; and he reminds us further that diversity comes from the word 'divert' or "to turn aside from a course or direction." Choi recommends: "Diversity is as false, fragmentary and shallow as liberal education is true, whole and deep. Let us not be diverted from what is good by what is fashionable." General Education at MRU is, at its best, a disruption, an intervention, into the purified whole for which Choi is so nostalgic. There is nothing nostalgic about our Gen Ed; it's impure, imperfect and a defender of the whole.

⁴ See Peer Review, Spring 2012, oVI. 14, No.2, "The Liberally Educated Professional"

⁵ <http://www.nationmaster.com/red/country/ts-tunisia/edu-education&all=1>

⁶ <http://www.mass.gov/lwd/>

Vance Gough, Entrepreneurship

I have a BA in Political Science and went on to do an MBA in Entrepreneurship. I then did doctoral work on workplace and adult learning. I was, also, in the military since 1984 and filled roles from logistics to public affairs. With such various experience I have seen many different types of educational systems; from training soldiers and sailors to University students. I have been at MRU since 2000 teaching creative entrepreneurship and innovation courses.

Students entering undergraduate studies have had essentially 12 years of general education. Yet, when they get to university are they capable? Do they have that breadth of knowledge? They are not and do not. Most students who come squirm at concepts presented in unstructured environments. If they have been taking general information for all these years they should have the benefits of it. Why is it that they only want structured situations?

A Liberal Arts Education should generate analytical and evaluative thinking skills. Do they really learn critical thinking? They don't seem to. Do they learn creative thinking? They still seem to struggle. They do learn effective written communication skills but do they learn effective oral communication? Are they able to pitch ideas or bring creative thoughts forward and convince others? This is what it would mean to create leaders, which GenEd should be doing, but is it successful? Can they go beyond the patterns they are taught and develop new patterns?

It seems, at the undergrad level we give a depth of experience but do we give them enough breadth of knowledge and experience to go outside of their comfortable models/silos?

- Numerical skills are improved
- Synthesis skills in a given topic are improved but across the board they are not.
- When asking students about daily interest topics in the news, it is evident that they are not reading the news or going online: they are staying in their silos.
 - We are not benefiting them by not pushing them beyond their silos.
- They are learning how to learn.
- Liberal Arts should teach ethical judgment and decision making, but students raise ethical topics as stereotypes as "this or that." If we are teaching ethics properly you can think around the ethical dilemmas and still make choices and this ability is not being demonstrated by our students. They see things as good or bad do not realize life is about the grey areas.

Liberal Education should develop T shaped individuals: the long part being their depth and top part being their breadth of knowledge. We want every student to have breadth and depth in their field and GenEd is to give breadth across fields. Are the GenEd courses giving this breadth? Are they learning to think beyond themselves and be critical?

Marnie Kramer-Kile, Nursing

I have been at MRU since 2010. I am a nurse researcher and I do a lot of work in social theory and philosophy and will be discussing the role of General Education in Professional Programs.

The current Bachelor of Nursing has a lot of prescribed content as we are required to meet benchmarks in the program and we need to meet national licensing standards and we need to ensure that students meet all standards, and pass their exams, so they can practice. MRU's Nursing program has excellent reputation among the professional associations and regulatory bodies. Part of the cause for this is likely that the MRU program has a focused BN not a BSci in Nursing; this difference allows the nursing students to take more liberal arts courses rather than additional science sources.

There is lack of integration of the liberal arts in the foundational level nursing courses: General Education is doing very well at bridging this gap and places nursing practice in wider interdisciplinary context. Students are focused on their skills development to become a nurse,

and it is the role of institution to show the scope of the roles they could have.

RNs are given access to peoples' most intimate and challenging times and aspire to have them feel cared for despite the structured and hierarchical organization in which they work. Moreover, there are moral and ethical implications of daily practice. There are often situations with no easy answers. A liberal arts education helps nurses deal with these more difficult situations. This also helps us to perceive nursing as the bridge between science and human living. While students may not see the utility of these courses early on they do understand later on. It is the institution's role to reinforce their understanding through liberal arts. For instance, nurses are currently ill equipped to assist patients going through trans gender operations. There are courses they could take to help them understand gender issues but they may not choose to take those courses; so, it is the role of the nursing instructor, supported by the institution, to teach some of these things.

Nurse educators and academics need to turn the study inwards to more critically engage within the practice. As there is a place for Liberal Arts in Nursing education, there is a place for nursing in the liberal arts. Fostering interdisciplinary relationships and research is essential and General Education can continue to foster this advancement.

Mario Trono, English

At a pop culture conference in the late 1990s, among the papers presented on the Simpsons and the Bond series, a paper was presented by a nurse on how technology was making her job harder as she was spending more time with the computer than with the patients. She talked about the problem and received no questions from the audience: her topic did not fit in with the others at the conference. People did not see any meaningful connection, and I asked the conference organizer why the paper was added. He said that they sometimes just put things in like that. I kept thinking of her in this situation as technology was getting beyond my grasp and as it started to waste my time. And, I continued to think of this nurse in relation to how the movies represent professions. Later, I gave a talk at a couple of nursing conferences about the representation of nurses in film and it has been fascinating. This is why the nurse's paper was just put into the pop culture conference: you don't know where it can go.

There is no proof of how you influence students or where things may go. To speak with certainty for or against any kind of overlaps between science, liberal arts or GenEd is a waste.

- Fear insecurity and lack of worth can be motivators for students.
- Some students may want to stay outside of their comfort zone.
- Making your, the instructor's, enthusiasm, conviction and belief evident to students, along with listening to them and reflecting on what they say, will make them comfortable to follow you into areas they are uncertain as well.

We need to take what we know and expound upon the value of liberal arts education: we need a clear and passionate outburst to have people follow us. If MRU is to respond at all then we should want to: our legitimacy is being challenged and we should respond more fiercely. We need to turn the debate around and go on the offensive: simply stating the value of liberal arts, as Harvard University has is not enough.

A Harvard education is a liberal education — that is, an education conducted in a spirit of free inquiry undertaken without concern for topical relevance or vocational utility. This kind of learning is not only one of the enrichments of existence; it is one of the achievements of civilization. It heightens students' awareness of the human and natural worlds they inhabit. It makes them more reflective about their beliefs and choices, more self-conscious and critical of their presuppositions and motivations, more creative in their problem-solving, more perceptive of the world around them, and more able to inform themselves about the issues that arise in their lives, personally, professionally, and socially. College is an opportunity to learn and reflect in an

environment free from most of the constraints on time and energy that operate in the rest of life. (Harvard)

This is not an effective recruitment tool for liberal arts. You have to have a completed liberal arts degree to understand the value of it. We need to consider the rhetoric but not let it lull us nor only speak it to one another. We need to figure out how to get the rhetoric out there. For decades the other side won by putting free arts degrees in bathroom stalls and there are no *easy* dismissals of their arguments.

Could we not have students go and defend their choices to family and friends? Could we not demonstrate the importance of a liberal arts education by showing all that is unknown to people who have not benefited from it? Could we not make it again, as it once was, a social responsibility to be an intelligent person? We could make YouTube videos branded with the MRU logo on debates around the liberal arts.

- Ask people why they want to be narrow, provincial and dogmatic
- Why do you want yourself and everyone around you to be ill equipped to make an intelligent decision.
- When is someone criminally responsible?
- Why can't we stop going to war?
- What do you think of organized conflict?
- What is in the treaties? have you seen a treaty?
- Why are police afraid of entering houses?

This is not lowering ourselves to ask these questions of detractors and it is not shaming them. This process, the questions and lack of answers, would demonstrate the value of liberal arts education in a way that no other method could.

Discussion:

- A man who wrote a book on how to graduate debt free. His conclusion was close to social engineering as his answer was to tell your daughter to go to a professional degree so the student can get a job and pay the debt back.
 - People listening then see the University as training for professions.
 - GenEd needs interpenetration in all courses. We need to make it so embedded that it cannot be made vulnerable.
 - The idea of GenEd is that if you are in the professions you need to think beyond that profession.
 - Really, students should be encouraged to get a trade or a job. We should not discourage the profession but we need the profession to think in broad terms.
 - The book argued that we should “stop wasting money” on the liberal arts and GenEd and to remove GenEd courses from professional programs.
- It is important to take a historical view of MRU's move to GenEd and why it was picked over competing concepts. The fear from the professions is that if we went with a liberal arts focus it would exclude the sciences. But, GenEd is not about a body of knowledge it is about an attitude. It is about cultivating a way of looking at things. GenEd is an attitude not a thing: it cannot be combined with other faculties. It has to be neutral; that is, it cannot advantage the professions or the arts or sciences. The arts can tend to have a homogeneous attitude does have its cannons and it is good to disrupt these, but to do this we need outside voices.
- Regarding the idea that we have noticed 'lesser' students coming in. Every level critiques the level before it: high school critiques junior high and college critiques high school. We do this, rightly so, but the ministries are not connected. In GenEd we have been trying to work with the education board and offer a transitional program to bring students in with more confidence and a smoother transition.
 - It is not about the content it is the way it is taught. They are taught that there is only one right way and not multiple right ways, they see things this way. How do

- we get new theories and new ideas unless we allow students to address this and allow their merits to be recognized?
- One of the things we have noticed is that math is a struggle for high school math teachers. Students are taught to the tests. They are teaching math and they are assessed on how their students do. Then, our mathematicians are challenged to teach math to students who did well on departmental exams but cannot understand what an algorithm is. Some nurses cannot do basic calculations in first year classes. GenEd is a specialized curriculum that speaks to a provincial and parochial understanding of education, and we need to create opportunities for students to cultivate the skills and capacities as they come here not fully prepared.
 - We have other responsibilities than getting them a career
 - We need to get rid of the binary of education/career.
 - It would be better to carry a bigger debt load so that you can understand things better. We can do better at explaining that students explore professional options within the liberal arts degree. Students need to professionalize within their degrees.
 - Students and parents' aversion to school debt is rather silly. They are willing to be in debt for a house because it is an investment but they do not see education as an investment. We need to talk about education as an investment. As an investment it is more than an education or a job it is your future. This turns things around and gets us to the conversations we want to have.
 - As long as we are not guaranteeing a job we are not doing a disservice: we are preparing you for a vast array of challenges you will face.
 - Students look at the percentages of hires from their programs: we can do this in arts more innovatively.
 - Liberal arts prepare for a life not for a specific career.
 - We want our graduates to have an edge we want them to be critics of society in which they live and not just maintain the status quo. We are trying to disrupt their narrative. Though we cannot guarantee that they will do something, we can hope they will become citizens of society. We can change the complacency through the GenEd system and liberal arts which force students to consider seriously the world they are going to occupy when they leave this place.
 - Students should learn how to be critical and should be problem solvers as well.
 - Students can critique, but they are not good at acting on things.
 - A problem here is being able to identify the appropriate problem.
 - Our students are either affluent or they struggle in an affluent society.
 - Students in liberal arts are anxious about not being in business or professional programs.
 - This feeling of anxiety is a problem
 - Education gives students the tools to operate in a complex world.
 - Need to look at different uses of a liberal arts degrees.
 - Media Relations seems to reflect these positions back to the community: can we not have them foster this other vision? Could we not have some high power business people speak to the value of liberal education in their careers?
 - We do need to take the fight out to the community.
 - GenEd needs to be marketed better to the community.
 - GenEd may look odd in its positioning, naming and function. The principle of it was to distinguish MRU from other universities: we did not want to end up like UofC. Need to bring this into an impassioned defense of liberal arts through GenEd.
 - Avoiding 'siloeing:'
 - We have tried to get faculty to give up their commitments to their discipline and teach in GenEd. We have Nurses teaching globalization. There is no interference with the class. Faculty can destabilize in their own terms in cluster 2.

- The hard part of GenEd is getting faculty to come in and teach in this way. It is difficult because you would need some kind of content specialization outside of the discipline. So we need to identify the people who do and they can then integrate the content.
 - We wanted GenEd to be more than for students. We wanted faculty to step outside of their comfort zones: to experience what the student is experiencing. You can give students a trajectory and they will follow you to whatever area they are interested in.
 - Cluster 1 has goals for numeracy and scientific literacy requirements.
- Speaking to graduates 5-10 years from now they will give it much better grades than they do while students as they use it every day in their lives.
 - It does take students 2-5 years too appreciate what they learned
 - We have been running an assessment seminar in Teaching and Learning in which we have been interviewing students at different points in their academic careers. The 1st year students were not sure and had mixed views of GenEd. By the time we interviewed the same group of students in the 3rd year of their programs they were talking in more positive terms. The value was beginning to reveal itself in terms of their writing speaking and overall communication skills. The value does reveal itself over time.
 - This is a helpful way of thinking about the benefits of GenEd
- People need to stay intellectually engaged, and GenEd has a role in this. Students are able to get involved in so many different models and areas. What we need is an existential and pragmatic defense of liberal arts and GenEd.
 - Such a defense can become a watered down mantra of inspiration and is not enough when being used in response to the hostile and antagonistic voices against the liberal arts.
 - We need to tell people how our degrees are qualitatively different from degrees at other institutions by improving the marketing of GenEd.
 - Holding up success stories is good as a counter example.
 - It is very easy to say we will do these things but we need to actually do them.
 - There is a time and place for shaming: there are other methods than being positive and inspirational.
 - It is not about shaming. If there really are two sides in this then one has its pithy slogans and we respond with the rhetoric we like. This is a losing battle. We need to think this through.
 - Students need to hear these conversations.
 - They need to understand the importance.
 - They should want to take the GenEd courses.
 - Part of this has to do with advertising and faculty can do better at this.
 - GenEd does not have a banner, pamphlet or an Open House booth
 - Students should be informed that GenEd is a supporting mechanism for degrees that it is not an obstacle for them to overcome but part of what they are doing.
- The message is that GenEd is part of every program so every other area should be able to represent GenEd. But, faculty members do not know how to answer some of the questions as it has become more complex over the years.
- Role of math in GenEd and how to teach it? How can you teach math to a group of students with such a diverse range of math literacy?
 - This is a good question and we do think about it a lot. This is something we struggle with: you have students coming in who have opted out of the math

requirement to get into MRU. You also have students with all of the sciences or math. This is why we do not teach the mechanics or the scientific disciplines: we are teaching a way of thinking about math. We are getting them to understand that what they are doing is substantial. This is more important than knowing how to do a formula.

- Cluster 1 is numeracy not math. Math has been listed in science but it is really a humanities subject and really a cluster 2 program. Numeracy, mathematical reasoning, is cluster one and the purpose at this level is to show that math/numeracy is rational and interesting. Then there is Math in Humanities for the second course which focuses on understanding the intrinsic value and beauty of math. We want to show that math is far bigger than an instrumental or technical area.
- A lot has been happening in GenEd and a lot of it is not thought of as it is now but as it was 4 years ago. This will all be communicated in the program review.

David Docherty, President

Thank you all for coming. These dialogues are very useful.