Probably everybody’s telling you to go to college.
Let’s suppose you’re convinced.
What are you hoping to get for your four years, lots of money, and tons of work?

Most likely, when you think about college, you think about job opportunities.
And for good reason, a college education can and should open new opportunities.
It’s an awful big investment if it doesn’t.
So let’s agree that a college education is a great path to better job opportunities. There are still a couple of questions we should ask:

• First, if college is about job opportunities, what kind of education should you get?
• And second, is college just about job opportunities?

First off, if job opportunities are what you want out of college, what kind of education should you get? You’re probably thinking you want an education that will give you the specific knowledge and skills for the specific job you want.

A physical therapist, for example, needs to know how tendons attach to bones and how to help a patient strengthen damaged muscles.
But there are real dangers in pursuing an education that is too narrowly focused on a specific job.

First, nobody wants to stay at the entry level for their entire working life. That gets pretty boring and that entry-level job doesn’t pay that well.

You want to advance in your career, and for that you need more than the specific knowledge and skills for a specific job.

You don’t want an education that keeps you stuck at the first level of your profession.

You need an education that prepares you to move up.

Leaders of 30 of Canada’s top high-tech firms recently stated: “...it is impossible to operate an effective corporation in our new economy by employing technology graduates alone.... To prosper we need creative thinkers at all levels of the enterprise who are comfortable dealing with decisions in the bigger context. They must be able to communicate—to reason, create, write and speak...”

Second, almost nobody stays in the same career for their entire working life. In fact, you can expect to change careers at least three times over the course of your life.

Companies come and go, professions grow and shrink. You need to be ready not just to move up in your profession, but to change careers altogether, and for that you need a whole lot more than the specific knowledge and skills needed for the job you may have in mind.

You don’t want an education that prepares you for only one career—one that might not be there when you graduate. You need an education that prepares you not just to move up, but to move around.

“Labor economists assert that 70% of the jobs that will occupy the workplace of the 21st century are yet to be described. So how can we as colleges and universities prepare students for jobs that don’t yet exist? The unequivocal answer is to provide them with the ability to think and read critically, to write and communicate effectively, to ask intelligent questions.”

James W. Perry, CEO/Dean, UW-Fox Valley
Third, almost nobody ends up doing what they think they’re going to do when they start college. And that’s probably a good thing—eighteen might just be too young for many people to have really figured out their **skills and interests**.

You don’t want an education that **locks you into a career** you may not want when you’re done.

You need an education that gives you the opportunity to **explore** your skills and interests.
Okay, our first question was: If education is about job opportunities, what kind of education do you want? And our answer so far is:

- One that equips you to advance
- One that prepares you for change
- One that allows you to explore

Top 10 Qualities Employers Seek in Job Candidates

1. Communication Skills
2. Motivation/Initiative
3. Teamwork
4. Leadership
5. Academic Achievement/GPA
6. Interpersonal Skills
7. Flexibility/Adaptability
8. Technical Skills
9. Honesty & Integrity
10. Analytical/Problem Solving Skills

Our second question was: Is an education just about job opportunities?

Having job opportunities gives you financial security and interesting work. And these are both very **good things**.

But we all know there are **other good things to life**, although often young people are so bombarded with the value of material goods that these other goods are **easily overlooked**.
What are some other good things in life?

- The good of having **relationships**
- The good of being a part of a **community**
- The good of **thinking for yourself**—of making up your own mind
- The good of **freedom** and the right to choose our leaders
- The good of **making a difference** for the better in your **society**
- The good of exploration and **discovery**
- The good of physical **health** and emotional well-being
- And for members of faith communities, there are goods that overshadow all of these: the good of being in a relationship with God, of being a part of **something greater** than yourself

“The aim [of education] must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals who, however, can see in the service to the community their highest life problem.”

Albert Einstein

Everybody recognizes that these things are good when they stop to think about it—maybe even better than a good job. But for all the stress we put on college we almost never ask how it can help us achieve these other good things.

Can your education serve not just your career interests, but all aspects of your life? Can it serve not just what you do, but who you are?

The answer is: Yes it can—if you have the right kind of education. You want an education that gives you opportunities for leadership, that helps you learn to live in a diverse community, and that brings together your learning with the rest of your living.

“We should challenge our students to aspire to something more than making a living, that is, to make a life worth living.”

Christopher B. Nelson, President of St. John’s College
What kind of education is this?

What kind of education equips you for professional advancement and career change, frees you to explore your interests, and prepares you for all of your life, not just your job?

The name for it is a liberal arts education.

“The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you.”

B.B. King
Maybe you’ve heard of liberal arts before and maybe you haven’t. In any case, there are some confusions to clear up.

First of all, liberal arts doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with art. The arts in liberal arts are not painting and sculpture. Liberal arts are certain kinds of skills and a liberal arts education builds those skills.

And liberal arts has nothing to do with being a liberal. Liberal in liberal arts actually means free.

Often liberal arts refers to a kind of college. Sometimes it means certain subjects that you take in college, things like history and literature. We’ll talk about both of those things in a minute.
What liberal arts really means is a kind of education.

You may never have thought about **kinds of college educations**. You’ve probably thought more about kinds of schools: two-year/four-year, big/small, public/private.

But just as there are very **different kinds of schools**, there are also very **different kinds of education**.
A research education, for example, gives you advanced knowledge in a specific academic field, like chemistry or economics.

A professional education gives you the knowledge and skills for a specific profession, like nursing or engineering.

A liberal arts education is different from either of these.

“The research function in our universities is one of the things that makes our system great, [it] has fueled the American economy. But it has led to an emphasis on research among faculty at the expense of the importance of teaching.”

Lara K. Couturier, Director of Research, The Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World

A liberal arts education has five basic features:

It’s **broad**—you’ll learn about many different fields. That gives you the chance to explore your interests like we were saying earlier.

It’s **connected**—you’ll make connections between the different things you’re studying. Real world problems don’t come in neat packages; you need to be able to see how very different areas matter to the issues you’ll face at work or outside of work.

It’s **holistic**—it treats you as a whole person, relating your learning to all of your life.

It’s **communal**—you live with the people you’re learning with, learning how to get along with people different from you, learning how to work as a team, and developing close relationships with professors.
“General Motors recently stated: ‘We have been impressed with a growing body of research that concludes that college students who experience the most racial and ethnic diversity in classrooms and during interactions on campus become better learners and more effective citizens. Those are exactly the types of persons we want running our global business—better learners and more effective citizens.’”

Paul N. Courant, University of Michigan  

“We get a lot of students from fine schools, yet many of them fail here as associates. ‘Do you know why? It’s not…because they don’t know the law. It’s because they can’t write.’”

Founding partner of a major Portland law firm  

“The question I struggled with for many years goes something like this: How can I keep my life and work properly separated? It was the wrong question. The right question . . . is How can I keep my life and my work properly integrated?”

James Autry, retired Chair and CEO of Meredith Corporation  
Most important, it’s fundamental—you’ll develop essential skills that can be applied to many different situations, and you’ll develop them to a very high level, things like

- **Communication skills**—writing, reading, speaking, and comprehending and interpreting information

- **Problem solving skills**—seeing a problem from all sides, being able to anticipate what will happen if you do one thing instead of another

- **Analytic skills**—being able to break down complex issues into their simplest elements

- **Reasoning skills**—being able to follow an argument and see its strengths and weaknesses
You’re probably thinking, “I already have all of these skills.” But there’s always a difference between being able to do something, and **being able to do it really, really well**. A lot of people can play basketball, but they wouldn’t want to go up against an NBA allstar. Thinking skills are like basketball. You can play well enough for a pick up game, or you can be in the NBA. You want to be in the NBA.

You want to be able to exercise your thinking skills very, very well. That’s what’ll give you career **advancement**, career **flexibility**, and **leadership** at work and in your community. And that’s what you’ll get from a liberal arts education.

“The qualities that employers seek are the concern and result not so much of specialized education as of liberal education.”

Henry Ford

Okay, now that we’ve talked about why a liberal arts education might be the one you want, let’s get to specifics. What are the specific elements of a liberal arts education? And where do you get one?

Top ten qualities of liberal arts graduates:
1. They know how to listen and to hear.
2. They read and they understand.
3. They can talk with anyone.
4. They can write clearly and persuasively and movingly.
5. They can solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems.
6. They respect rigor, not so much for its own sake, but as a way of seeking truth.
7. They practice respect and humility, tolerance and self-criticism.
8. They understand how to get things done in the world.
9. They nurture and empower the people around them.
10. They see connections so as to be able to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways.

William Cronon
What does this kind of education—a liberal arts education—look like?
What courses do you take? What do you major in?

First, you want a **broad general education**. General education is usually the first two years of your college education. You want a general education that requires you to take courses in the **humanities**, like literature, history, art, religion, and philosophy; the **social sciences**, like psychology, sociology, political science, and economics; and the **natural sciences**, like math, physics, chemistry, and biology.

“…narrow specialization condemns us to inflexibility—precisely what we do not need. We need the flexible intellectual tools to be problem solvers, to be able to continue learning over time...”

Former Xerox CEO David T. Kearns
Many people don’t get the point of this part of their education. They think of it as a checklist of things they have to take that are pretty much a waste of time. They’re only taking these classes because someone is making them. They’re eager to specialize in things that are clearly related to their future career.

Don’t fall into this trap! You may never need to know about 19th century China for your job (though you might be surprised), but these courses are giving you the broad thinking skills you need to really succeed in your career. And they’re giving you the chance to explore what really interests you.

So, be careful of from programs that focus on a job-related field too early; instead, look for an education that gives you a broad general education.

“Having a broad understanding of the past and a broad perspective on the future will be more important than ever—and that’s what a liberal arts education, which exposes you to a range of perspectives, can help provide.”

Steve Case, chairman and CEO of America Online
Second, make sure the courses are tied together.

Like we said before, **real world problems** don’t come in nice neat packages—I need biology to solve this problem and political science to solve that one. The world doesn’t work that way. Real world problems draw on **many areas** of learning. You want to make sure that the parts of your learning work together, or they won’t help you in the real world.

“Former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina states that her two majors—medieval history and philosophy—serve her well on the job in the digital awakening. [Former] Walt Disney CEO Michael Eisner never took a single business course. He received a double major in English and theater...”

Gina Mauller, Business & Government Educational Development, MU Extension


Here are some other top executives and their college majors:

- Alan G. Lafley, President and CEO, Procter and Gamble Company, Undergraduate major: history
- Steve Case, CEO and Co-founder, America Online, major: political science
- Jill Barad, CEO, Mattel Inc., majors: psychology and English
- Brian Lamb, CEO, C-Span, majors: speech and communication
- Steve Forbes, CEO, Forbes Inc., major: American history
Third, you’ll have a major, but it doesn’t have to be a major directly linked to a career. This can seem scary—what am I going to do with a history major?—but it’s okay. In fact, it’s probably really smart. A literature major isn’t linked to a specific career. But it gives you skills useful in many careers—skills that will allow you to move up in your career or even to change careers, which, like we said, is very likely to happen. The same goes for a math major, or an economics major, or a philosophy major.

So don’t think your major needs to be directly linked to a career.
Finally, a lot of learning happens by doing.

Look for chances to put your education to work, through internships or service projects. You’ll learn to work as a team and to adapt your classroom learning to concrete situations.

So where do you get that kind of education? The best place is a liberal arts college, sometimes also called an independent college or university.

“Liberal arts colleges serve their students best by not forgetting that careers and technologies change; basic skills do not. The liberal arts promote thoroughness, intellectual curiosity, logical thinking and clarity of expression. These are the life-long occupational benefits of a liberal arts education, and time will not render them obsolete.”

Walter M. Bortz III, President of Hampden-Sydney College

Basically you’ve got four choices for where to go to college:

• Community colleges

• Regional state universities

• Public and private research universities

• And small private or independent colleges and universities

As Keith Caywood, a student at a public research university with more than 37,000 students, put it, “I got swallowed up. I didn’t know where any of my classes were. It was such a large campus.” He says he had classes of 200 people and, “no one knew if I was there or not.” Caywood dropped out after his freshman year, as did 22% of the other freshman students that year.

Excerpt from PBS documentary “Declining by Degrees”

“The great enemy of learning…is anonymity and invisibility. People who are invisible don’t learn.”
Lee Shulman, President, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
One big difference between the first three and the last one is size.
And for the kind of education you’re looking for, size makes a big difference.

There are two basic things that a small college or university gets you that it’s very difficult for the big places to offer: personal attention and a sense of community.

These can be very important to your success. You’re twice as likely to finish your degree if you go to a liberal arts college than if you go to any other kind of school.
There’s another big difference between the big schools and a small one; at a small school you can often see the relationships between the things you’re studying and between your learning and the rest of your life much more easily than at a big place. At the big places, your learning can be fragmented, and it can seem like just one small piece of your life rather than being related to your whole life.
One challenge with these small private places
is that they can be expensive.
But don’t let that scare you away too quickly. They’re always less expensive than they look—they all have some scholarship money to give, sometimes a lot. And they want students from a variety of backgrounds—they realize that that helps everybody’s learning.

The other thing is that at these small private schools you can actually finish in four years, and sometimes less. At a big public university you can figure on five years to graduate just because the courses you’ll need to take to graduate fill up too fast or are offered at conflicting times. And it’s even worse if you transfer from a two-year college to a four-year college. If you go to college for four years instead of five, you’re not only not paying for that fifth year, you’re out making a full time income somewhere. That makes a huge difference in the total cost of college.
But some people still can’t go to a liberal arts college.
Can you get a liberal arts education if you don’t? The answer is yes, but you really have to know what to look for. Here are some of the **critical things** to look for if you want a liberal arts education at a large public college or university:

- Look for honors programs with **small class sizes**.
- Look for living/learning communities, where you **live with the people** in your classes.
- Make sure you have an **academic advisor** and get to know him or her. Let your advisor know what you want from your education.
- Ask your professors how their **classes relate to others** you’re taking.
- **Choose a major** that is part of the College of Arts and Sciences at your university.
- Consider a major that doesn’t require lots of courses in your first two years, and use that time to **explore many different subjects**.
- Look for opportunities to apply your learning outside the classroom, such as **internships or service learning** projects.
- Above all, visit the colleges you’re considering before you apply, and ask about all these things. They’ll want to show you the stylish dorms and the new fitness center; you want to know about the **learning**.
“…what constitutes a high quality education are the kinds of practices that involve a high degree of personal interaction between students, [and] between students and faculty…”

Kay M. McClennen, Director, Community College Survey of Student Engagement, University of Texas at Austin

“Learning communities—co-enrolling the same students in two or more of the same classes—creates a social community…. The learning community compels people to come to grips with who they are, and what they’re studying, but more importantly, it gives them opportunities to use what they are learning in their out-of-class life.”

George Kuh, Director, Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

“A lot of the competition in colleges and universities is not for things that add to the educational experience. They’re competing to have better facilities…. Wouldn’t it be a better higher ed system if they were competing over who offered the best educational experience?”

Lara K. Couturier, Director of Research, The Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World
Looking for a college can be a challenging experience. There are a lot of choices and a lot of pressures. But if you focus on the kind of education you want, that can make your choices a lot easier.

Just remember two things.

• First, if you want an education that really serves your career interests, one that allows you to choose the career that’s right for you, that equips you for career advancement, and that prepares you for career change, consider a liberal arts education.

• Second, think about how your education can serve all of who you are. If you want an education that sees you as a whole person, not just a worker, you want a liberal arts education.