The problem many colleges face, as they tried to shape a curriculum that expresses their identity as a Christian liberal arts institution, is that they have too vague an understanding of the term “liberal arts”—or at least no shared understanding of it. And this is not at all surprising. Surveying the history of higher education in Europe and America, quickly reveals that the phrase has been used in very many ways, ways that often conflict with one another.

For example, if any curriculum in the history of Western education has the right to claim to be a liberal arts education, it is the curriculum of the medieval university. That curriculum was, after all, composed of the seven classical liberal arts. Yet the curriculum advanced by the renaissance humanists in protest of the medieval university curriculum matches contemporary understandings of the liberal arts far more closely than that of the medieval universities. Indeed many identify the humanities (the disciplines advanced by the humanists) with the liberal arts, an identification that flies in the face of at least the historical origins of the terms, in which they were understood in stark contrast.

Several things distinguish different traditions of liberal arts education. One difference is the ethical goals each sets forth for the student or for the broader society. As Christian institutions identify themselves as providing a liberal arts education, they either tacitly or explicitly affirm the ethical goals of a of a liberal
arts education. But the diversity of liberal arts traditions makes clear that this affirmation must be importantly qualified. With which liberal arts tradition are we identifying?

Let’s begin by differentiating between distinct liberal arts traditions and then further differentiate those traditions from other views of education. The best way, I think, to distinguish different educational traditions is by their answer to the question: What is education for? or Why is it valuable? or Why pursue it? Aristotle approached the question this way, and in doing so arrived at the famous distinction between liberal and practical education.\(^1\) While practical education was pursued as means to some further end, liberal education was pursued as an end in itself. Liberal education was free in the sense of being unconstrained by concerns for its usefulness.

Many still see this as the hallmark of a liberal education. Catalogue copy that makes “love of learning” a goal of students’ education is appealing to this tradition. Students who, when asked “A philosophy major? What are you going to do with that?” respond, “That’s not the point, the ideas are interesting in their own right” have been successfully converted to this view of liberal education (and it usually is a conversion.) When I delight in such conversions, and I do, I reveal my own identification with this tradition.

Indeed this educational ideal is embedded within institutions and disciplines that one might initially regard as offering practical education. Much scholarly research is undertaken with the simple goal of pushing back the frontiers of the discipline, without regard for the applicability of the research results to practical problems. The institutional differences between liberal arts colleges and research universities might suggest that liberal education happens at liberal arts colleges and that the research that goes on in major universities is not a part of the liberal arts tradition. But that is simply not true. Pure research, pursued simply for the purpose of discovery, stands firmly within this first tradition of liberal arts education, which we might call the scholarly tradition.

Nevertheless, defining liberal education as having strictly intrinsic rather than instrumental value has been opposed by many since at least Roman antiquity, and perhaps even by contemporaries of Aristotle himself. In Roman antiquity what distinguished a liberal education was that it was education for the free man as opposed to the slave, and the free man’s education was clearly a useful education. But its use was not for trade, or manufacturing, or engineering, or agriculture, but for civic leadership. So another major tradition in liberal education distinguishes it, not by whether or not the learning was useful for some purpose beyond itself, but rather by what kind of use it was put to. If its objective was to shape the character of the student, it was deemed liberal, if it was to develop vocational skills in the student, it was deemed practical.

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So there are at least two ways of thinking of liberal education, one as pursing knowledge for its own sake, the other as valuing it for what it can do for the character of the student. This is a way of stating the distinction made famous by Bruce Kimball in his oft-cited *Orators and Philosophers.* However, Kimball understates important differences in how education might shape the student’s character. Educators might be after very different things in attempting to shape the character of the student. In fact we can discern two major streams within those understandings of liberal education that seek primarily to shape character through education.

The first, stretching back to the renaissance and beyond to late antiquity, seeks to inculcate the culture’s aesthetic and moral values in the student so that he or she (and until quite recently it really was he) might be prepared for a leadership role in the society, or more properly, so that those predetermined by blood to have leadership roles might be suitable bearers of the tradition. We might call this the humanistic tradition. This is the tradition to which Matthew Arnold appealed when he argued that the purpose of an education was to pass on “the best which has been thought and said.”

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4 Recognizing the gendered nature of the term, I have elsewhere referred to this tradition as the “gentlemanly tradition” since in its origins it really was an education for males of the aristocracy. See my *Liberal Arts Traditions and Christian Higher Education: a Brief Guide* available from http://www.westmont.edu/institute/pages/resources/libarts_tradition_guide.html.
The second stream is more recent, rooted in the enlightenment, though it often looks to Socrates for inspiration. The educational goals of the enlightenment and the liberalism that succeeded it stand in stark contrast to those of renaissance humanism. Where the humanists sought to inculcate the values of the tradition in the student, the enlightenment sought to throw off tradition. Appealing to traditional authorities was seen at least as intellectual weakness if not cowardice. The greatest, perhaps the sole virtue that education is to produce is autonomy—as Kant famously put it “the courage to use your own understanding!”

This anti-traditional tradition is the source of the connection between liberal education and liberation. Education was to allow the student, and thereby the society, to throw off the shackles of ignorance, superstition, and parochialism, and to stand up to traditional authorities with the power of his (and, not much later, her) own reason. Liberal education, on this enlightenment view, is liberating education. Thus we might call this the liberating tradition.

What emerge then are three very different ways of thinking about the purpose of education yielding three major liberal arts traditions each appealing to a different sense of freedom. The scholarly tradition pursues the truth free of constraint by concerns for practical application. The humanistic tradition offers an education for the free man. The liberating tradition offers a freeing or liberating education.

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The three liberal arts traditions are, as I have already indicated, by no means the only responses to the question: what is the purpose of education? In fact two other responses dominate American higher education today. They are the vocational tradition and the applied research tradition. Each of these is practical education in Aristotle’s sense—each sees education as having instrumental value, though its instrumental value does not lie in what it does for the character of the student.

Vocational education, like humanistic and liberating education, focuses on changing the student, but that change has less to do with the student’s values, or character, or breadth of understanding and more do with the student’s mastery of the specialized skills and knowledge necessary for a particular role in the economy. It should be noted that the distinction between humanistic and vocational education has never been absolute. Many of those who went through colonial and antebellum colleges in America, colleges clearly in the humanistic tradition, were preparing for ministry. And the distinction between humanistic and vocational education has only gown increasingly blurred in the twentieth century, principally because the civic leadership roles once played by the recipients of humanistic education, gentlemen, is now played by highly skilled professionals. A humanistic education might serve you in your role as civic leader, but it is increasingly unlikely in our society that you will play that role without a vocational education.

The applied research tradition has much in common with the scholarly tradition. With the scholarly tradition it emphasizes expanding knowledge over shaping
the student. But for the applied research tradition, discovery is not an end in itself. The applied research tradition seeks knowledge for the sake of satisfying social needs or wants—curing disease, relieving poverty, providing energy, strengthening the military. This tradition is rooted in the scientific revolution with its emphasis on mastering nature, though with the application of the scientific method to human questions beginning in the 19th century, it has moved well beyond the mastery nature to, shall we say, the mastery of humankind itself.

Given the many different purposes for higher education, and the very different uses of the term liberal education, it’s no wonder academic institutions struggle with coherence. Most of them are trying to do all of these things at once. In many, different departments draw upon different educational visions, and even within departments there might be very different conceptions. Imagine the varied responses one might get from within, say, an English department to the question “Why study literature?”

And the situation is only made messier for Christian institutions. For the goals of a Christian education may or may not cohere with the goals of these various traditions in liberal and practical education....
Works Cited


