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Why Choose the Liberal Arts?

Do humanities students really have the best employment prospects?

Leonard Franchi | Monday, 1 November 2010

America is home to many liberal arts colleges. Many have a religious ethos although religious commitment is not a condition of a liberal arts education. This rediscovery of a venerable tradition in education challenges much of the utilitarian and career-focussed dynamic which marks much of the modern academy and sets out a programme of study designed to introduce young minds to the received wisdom and cultural inheritance of the West.

The origin of the liberal arts as a “curriculum” for the free men of Ancient Greece reminds the modern student of education that there is no direct link between study and paid employment. Study was seen as the way to spend free time and contemplate the mystery of life on earth and life to come.

Writing in Victorian times, John Henry Newman proposed that the ideal university should integrate intellectual and moral formation in a systematic course of studies with a view to producing graduates who were immersed in the great thinkers of the history and who, in turn, would use their intellectual acumen to serve wider society. To read Newman’s *The Idea of a University* is to enter a world where the study of ideas and the “great books” is a fundamental pre-requisite of the educated person. Hence his statement that a good education and education designed to be useful are not one and the same.

Mark William Roche’s engaging book is a skilful weaving of two themes. He offers a heartfelt apologia for the study of the liberal arts while reflecting more broadly on his own personal academic career as a professor at the University of Notre Dame. This personal dimension adds freshness to the narrative. For him, the study of the liberal arts is the key to producing the well rounded graduates which modern society needs today as much as ever.

Like Newman, Roche focuses primarily on the need for immersion in the great works of the past as the primary sources for this process of development. This back catalogue of intellectual endeavour is the seedbed of creativity and in the hands of skilful teachers allows for the development of the softer skills of emotional intelligence and team work which are the hallmarks of a good employee. In Roche’s own words, “Liberal Arts students understand how to adapt to a rapidly changing world, which gives them confidence as they tackle projects in new areas.”

This lapidary statement is one which would offer a fledgling academic researcher a wide scope for a quantitative study dedicated to the career development of liberal arts graduates. Roche draws on a range of research to conclude that applicants from the arts and humanities have the highest acceptance rate for US medical schools. Is this

evidence for the general quality of such graduates? Deeper research would offer more room for manoeuvre and inform the wider debate of whether it is feasible economically to fund courses in learning which do not lead to employment. For Professor Roche, it is the humanities graduate who is on track to be the competent professional and good citizen which we need today. The debate on the economic implications of this continues.

Books which have an interrogative in the title need, of course, to offer concrete answers to the question posed. Professor Roche's reflection on his career is in itself a valuable argument in favour of this approach to education. His encomium of the personal and intimate nature of liberal arts study contrasts with the increasingly common industrial model of higher education in which vocational degrees with a strong focus on key skills are judged on purely utilitarian terms. At the heart of the case in favour of the liberal arts is the need to foster a love of learning for its own sake and demonstrate that Newman's ideal university is one in which these have pride of place.

Professor Roche is easy to read. He makes his case simply and with reasonable amount of helpful information supplied in the endnotes. His case is argued over four substantial chapters and his list of works cited forms a neat reading list of key works in the field. An index would have been a welcome addition.

A book such as this merits a wide audience. In a time of restricted funding for higher education, university and college principals need to be persuaded of the merits of a liberal arts education. Indeed, the case for the liberal arts is the foundation stone of the broader case for civic and broad-based universities which operate at arms length from programmes of study which are narrowly vocational in nature. School leavers and prospective students should be encouraged to look at broad-based study before considering more specialised courses at post-graduate level.

To conclude, this enjoyable book will not lie unopened on my shelf for long. I will dip into it frequently. It is my hope as a member of an ancient Scottish University founded in 1451 that British academics can shape a vision of the liberal arts in the way that Professor Roche and others have shaped academic life in the US.