

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 40 *Re-creating Jesuit Higher Education: The General's Challenge*

Article 21

9-1-2011

In Search of Roundedness, in Praise of Liberal Arts

Taylor Sasse

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Sasse, Taylor (2011) "In Search of Roundedness, in Praise of Liberal Arts," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 21.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/21>

Learning is living, so...

In Search of Roundedness, in Praise of Liberal Arts

By Taylor Sasse

When discussing liberal arts education, we often throw around the elusive concept of “well roundedness.” This rather awkward term reminds us more of a stone we might find on the beach, one whose rough exterior has been smoothed away by the waves of the sea, than an intellectual state of being. What do we mean, after all, by “well rounded”? The image that springs to my mind is that of a perfectly ordinary person who enjoys reading Einstein at the breakfast table. To be more specific, however, the Jesuit model of well roundedness springs from the Ignatian notion of finding God in all things. Charged with such a task, we have to accept that everything is worth investigating. This can be challenging and overwhelming for the student, but it is ultimately a rewarding and enriching experience and possibly the most vital element of a Jesuit education.

First of all: Why should we be well-rounded? After all, not everyone wants to read Einstein at the breakfast table. But if we understand human nature, we see that we all need to be well-rounded because human beings are made to be well-rounded. We are, in the scheme of things, rather unimpressive animals. We lack sharp senses and survival instincts. Instead, we have complex minds that learn by experience. The knowledge we need to survive must be acquired—it doesn't simply exist in our brains, waiting to be accessed. Thus, the most effective way to maximize our own nature is to learn as much as we can about a variety of different things. If we don't, we lose the ability to do even one thing well.

For example, imagine you are a musical prodigy. Your parents, afraid your talent will go unrealized, limit your studies to all things musical. You become the most talented musician in the world—only, when you sit down to write music, you have nothing to write about. What else do you know, besides the music itself? You have never been inspired by one of John Donne's Holy Sonnets. You have never read what Plato said about the soul. You have never studied biology, never found the area of a sphere, never *lived*. Learning is living, and the more things you learn, the more you live.

Now, how does Jesuit education promote the development of well-rounded individuals? The simplest—and most obvious—method is through the liberal arts curriculum. I am often surprised when I talk to people attending non-liberal arts colleges. By their sophomore years, they are taking classes that only have to do with their majors. My experience has been completely different. In my three years of college, I have taken, among other things, three semesters of theology, two semesters of philosophy, one semester of psychology, two semesters each of biology, chemistry, and physics, and one semester of world history.

None of these classes is part of my two majors, English and math. I have not yet had one semester in which all of my classes were within my major areas. I don't think I ever will. Much of this is due to the rather long list of core courses required by my Jesuit university. However, it is also due to the places that those core courses led me. I probably never would have chosen to major in math (my least favorite subject in high school) had I not been required to take a single math course. This

can happen in other subjects, as well. A student might easily come to college planning to major in marketing and, after taking the required course in ethics, decide to study philosophy instead. The liberal arts core opens doors.

My understanding of well roundedness is this: It's a sort of rhetoric for the soul, a way of finding a means of fulfillment in any subject whatsoever. In a way it *is* like a stone smoothed over by the

sea. Part of learning is burying your feet in the sand and letting the waves of the tide strike you from every angle, smoothing away fear, insecurity, and ignorance until finally you walk away, a round, shining, intelligent gem. ■



Taylor Sasse, a senior, majors in English and math at Rockhurst University.