

## **Liberal Arts and Sciences – Hope for the Future or Condemned to the Past?**

*Laurent Boetsch, Amsterdam, 18 October, 2025*

I had the good fortune to spend 40 years as a professor teaching at a 4-year liberal arts college. I have seen English majors become surgeons, philosophy majors make millions as hedge fund managers, chemistry majors thrive as art dealers, religion majors turn into bankers, and business majors make their mark as social activists. I have seen former students elected to Congress as Republicans and others to the Senate as Democrats. I think that all of them would recognize that their success owes much to the freedoms to which democracy aspires but they would also recognize that without the firm foundation for work and life that their liberal arts educations provided it is unlikely that their lives would have turned out as they have. How does this happen?

We are all aware that the Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS), despite its minimal practice within contemporary higher education in Europe, is nothing new. Rather, with origins in the Graeco-Roman tradition, its evolution throughout the mediaeval and renaissance periods, its 19th-century resurrection at the hands of Wilhelm von Humboldt, and its more recent 20th-century manifestations, primarily in the United States, the liberal arts tradition has sought consistently to help educate young minds for the responsibility of citizenship. This particular focus on the liberation of the mind through developing habits of learning that will endure, and on assuming responsibility for one's actions and thoughts as a means to contribute to the common good, is what helps to distinguish LAS as a form of education in the broadest sense, rather than as a simple instrument of training. Professor Hans Adriaansens has pointed out to us that the current environment of the pillared, mono-disciplinary structure of curricula delivered in a comparatively impersonal manner represents the antithesis of the aspirations of a liberal arts education. This simple transfer of disciplinary knowledge, knowledge that in many cases will be obsolete within a decade, does little to inspire students to seek more or to prepare them for active roles in their communities. Yet, at

a time when the benefits and aims of LAS are most necessary and appropriate to meet the critical challenges of our time, it remains very much in the background in the European higher education context. Professor Adriaansens describes the Liberal Arts and Sciences movement as “an attempt to turn the tables”. While I would agree that higher education reform should look towards LAS as a foundation for reform, it is clear that, although the guiding principles remain the same, the Liberal Arts and Sciences movement requires a 21st century makeover. Such a makeover is at the forefront of our thinking at ECOLAS and we hope that this panel will be just a beginning of a wider and even more substantial conversation about how that reform might be realized.

We are reminded of the demands of a liberal democracy: tolerance of differing opinions, a serious level of reasoning and rational or critical thinking, a capacity for empathy, engagement with our communities. The goal of the liberal arts education is to develop in students not just the skills but the attitudes necessary to meet these demands. Here it is important to note that a liberal arts education defies a formal definition because it does not fit into a prescribed format. By its very nature it is an ever-evolving *process* that instils modes of thought, attitudes toward learning and ways to view the world. These are meant to develop over time as part of a commitment to life-long learning. The values associated with LAS learning are meant to prevail in the graduate’s relationship to her or his work, community and family, thus implementing the two components of education as defined by Professor Adriaansens: the cognitive and the moral. Its salient features can be integrated into a variety of educational settings as long as there is a will to emphasize good teaching, and an effort to help students realize their full intellectual and personal potential. In this way students acquire preparation in the skills and attitudes that will enable them to navigate successfully the world in which they will work and live. In a university setting this requires a set of essential characteristics:

1. A curriculum that offers both a broad learning perspective from among multiple disciplines that will then help to inform the study of deep knowledge in one or more academic disciplines.

2. Outcomes to learning that reflect a commitment to highly developed cognitive skills including problem-solving, independent critical thought, the ability to work both individually and collaboratively and a capacity for clear and accurate oral and written communication.
3. An emphasis on the application of these characteristics in the exercise of citizenship within a democratic society.

We should note that the skills defined here are meant to be introduced and addressed discretely within the curriculum. They apply across the breadth portion and are refined and mastered within the disciplinary concentration stages. They form the fabric within which the course of study proceeds. Increasingly, we hear from employers that these are the very skills that they now seek in their employees. While artificial intelligence can do many things in the workplace, innovation in business and industry still requires agile minds that can engage in creative problem solving, can adopt an ethical viewpoint, can determine which sources of information are valid. They need to know who should be at the table to help address complex challenges. If, for example, the issue is finding and distributing fresh water, the solution requires more than a hydrologist. One can imagine the need for an economist, an engineer, a cultural anthropologist, a local politician. Twenty-first-century employees must be mobile in their outlook, ready to adjust their skills to new challenges, new modes of thought, new technologies. They must keep up with the latest developments not only in their own but in related fields as well. This is precisely the kind of preparation a liberal arts bachelor's degree is meant to provide. These same skills are required to help build our communities and to protect our democracies.

Let me conclude with one more thought. Democracy is aspirational. Democratic governance in the hands of the people can succeed only when that people believe in its possibilities and strive to make them real. At the same time democracy is fragile and sustaining it is hard. As an example one need look no further than at my own country, which finds itself struggling mightily to rekindle the promise of its revolutionary and founding principles in the face of those who seek to undermine our democracy by establishing a corrupt authoritarian autocracy that benefits the few at

the expense of the many. Alas, it is going to take more than a few thousand liberal arts graduates each year to save our democracy.

Twentieth-century educational reformers understood that the strength of any democracy relied upon the importance of instilling the same capacities that the liberal arts represent in students of any age. The educational philosopher, John Dewey, viewed democracy not as mere political form but as a way of life. For Dewey, a corresponding education would be one that cultivates good judgement and enables informed participation in society beyond just voting. For Francisco Giner de los Rios, the great Spanish educational reformer, education was all about exploration, discovery, tolerance and freedom of thought. Maria Montessori told us that “democracy begins at birth” and that education must instil the values that would preserve it. Each, I think, would see the Liberal Arts and Sciences at the university level as an appropriate continuation of what early and secondary education ought to be. So, while we want to extol the many virtues of an LAS university education for the sake of democracy, we must not overlook the importance of the kind of education at every level that can contribute to democracy’s future. In my view, that future is at risk and each of us must do what we can to secure its endurance. As educators and citizens, we must seek the ways and means by which education in the broadest sense can guarantee a democratic future for our children. I would ask you to focus our discussion on just that.