

Book Review:

IN DEFENSE OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

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“I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree”. President Barack Obama, who graduated from Columbia University with a political science degree, voiced this in a 2014 speech. President Obama’s speech in early 2014 is a sign of how the government envisages a liberal arts education – it is a waste of a college education. Obama’s speech is one of the indicators of how a liberal arts education, such as English or history, is out of favor in its country of origin - the United States of America. Zakaria makes his case in part through his semi-autobiographical work, describing how he eschewed the engineering major and test-centric culture of 1970s India to attend one of the elite liberal arts universities in the USA. The centrality of a rich curriculum in the sciences and humanities that he got through this education suggests he made a wise choice.

Zakaria brings the reader smoothly through the noble history of the liberal education ideal. It starts from European universities which were inspired by Moslem scholars and then brings the ideas of education to the USA. These days however, with students under pressure from rising college tuition fees, which make them more concerned about acquiring marketable skills, these liberal education ideas are losing popularity, except for those who can afford them. Liberal arts education is being left behind, since it does not offer any specific skills right away. However, Zakaria argues that students may be chasing success incorrectly. Pushing undergraduates into business, engineering and other trade fields usually leads to a good paycheck straight after graduation. This fact is certainly reassuring for most students and their

parents. However, Zakaria argues that in our rapidly advancing world, the likelihood of someone holding the same job until retirement is untenable, outdated and could be obsolete in the future. Technology evolves and corporations outsource more products. Corporations’ need for efficiency is elevated to a certain level, eliminating the need for large numbers of employees. Thus, choosing a capital intensive job is one way to secure employment in the future even though the world is changing through the advancement of technology. A current example is how Victoria University is creating an AI-computer to help lawyers give advice. The trend is to make such services available to most people. For example, one service is designed to help resolve asset and property disputes between divorcing couples. Aptly named SplitUp, the system can examine a client’s case and, by scrutinizing previous rulings, predict what the likely outcome would be if it went to court¹.

Zakaria emphasized that societal pressure even makes career choices complicated for students. If students pursue science and technology, their intelligence will be praised and rewarded. However, they will bear the risk of not being able to compete creatively. Zakaria quotes Steve Jobs when unveiling a new iPad edition, “Technology alone is not enough. It is technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yield us the results that make our hearts sing.” Thus if we choose the liberal arts, Zakaria says, our creative thinking and analytic skills may be finely tuned, but contrary to Jobs’ statement, our degrees could be

¹ <http://www.economist.com/node/3714082> accessed on July 21st, 2016

dismissed as “irrelevant” to future employers, or even worse, as a waste of a college education.

Zakaria argues that a liberal arts education offers a more competitive edge than a pure trade-skills education, such as an engineering major. He emphasizes that it is true that engineering is a great profession, but the most important skills that people need to acquire are creativity, design, lateral thinking, communication and the ability to continually learn & enjoy learning. All of these skills are mainly obtained through a liberal education. The current state of the economy, and today’s technology, has made liberal arts majors, and the skills that they impart, more important than ever before. Employers are recognizing that the technical skills of a job are mostly teachable. However, the communication and writing skills that a liberal arts major possesses are not as easy to teach. Karen Abigail Williams, Director of Admissions at Eugene Lang College, the New School for Liberal Arts in New York, says that the recent economic downturn makes a liberal arts education more important than ever. The decline or elimination of several important industries, leaving highly skilled employees out of work in careers where job growth is not expected², is a case in point.

THREE VIRTUES OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

Richard Sigurdson, former Acting Dean of Arts at The University College of the Cariboo, states there are at least three virtues of a liberal arts education³. First, it teaches people to write. Writing has become more than important for any aspect of human life. Any good CEO knows that clear writing, even just a memo, can have an impact on the future of the company. Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, is known to push his executives and managers to create at least a six-page memo for their subordinates. Bezos argues that only people with clear thinking can create a narrative structured memo. Clear thinking is

important for any business people who are facing important decisions on a daily basis.

The second advantage of a liberal arts education is to teach people oral and communication skills. These days, a lot of people possess great ideas but lack the means to communicate them properly to promote them. We learn from history how it was not only Steve Jobs’ ideas which reshaped Apple Computers into one of the tech giants, but also his superb communication skills. He is famously known for his superb presentational skills which can persuade people to buy his products. Jobs’ speeches are so hypnotizing, that even when Apple launch a product which is behind those of its competitors, people will still buy it. That is an example of how powerful and important oral and communication skills are in current business activities.

The last virtue of a liberal arts education is how to think analytically. This skill has become far more important in recent years. Computers and new technology can replace manpower for menial jobs. A lot of industries already have automation or machinery installed, replacing part of their workforce with them. Thus, critical and analytical thinking become an important asset for workers to get or keep their jobs. In the future, workers without this ability will all be replaced by machinery, and even specific vocational skills could become outdated.

THE ILLUSTRIOUS LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION ON THE JOB MARKET

Liberal arts education’s popularity started to grow in the early 2000s, along with the booming technology companies’ start-ups. Until now, a lot of tech companies’ CEOs are liberal arts education graduates. Stewart Butterfield, Slackbot’s CEO, graduated with an Bachelors degree in Philosophy and a Masters degree in the History of Science. Slackbot is a company worth more than \$300 million, which provides a service to bridge and connect users of different social media and cloud accounts, such as Twitter and Dropbox⁴. Somehow engineering and

² <http://mycollegeguide.org/articles/liberal-arts-degrees/what-are-liberal-arts> accessed on July 21st, 2016

³ <http://www.uni.edu/reineke/whystudyla.htm> accessed on August 8th, 2016.

⁴ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/georgeanders/2015/07/29/liberal-arts-degree-tech/#30527835a754> accessed on August 7th, 2016.

technology cannot be separated from the philosophical touch of a liberal arts education. The complexity of engineering and technology needs a liberal arts education's touch in order to make them simple and more user friendly.

Liberal arts education not only gains a foothold in tech companies. A lot of CEOs from well-known big companies are liberal arts education graduates. Time magazine listed at least ten CEOs in big companies who are from a liberal arts education background⁵. Howard Schultz (Starbuck's CEO), Michael Eisner (Walt Disney), Richard Pepler (HBO), Susan Wojcicki (YouTube), John Mackey (Whole Foods), Carly Fiorina (HP), Andrea Jung (Avon), Steve Els (Chipotle), Alexa Hirschfield (Paperless), and Jack Ma (Alibaba) are all liberal arts graduates. These well-known people got their degrees from liberal arts majors, ranging from B.S. in Communications, B.A. in English, B.A. in History, to B.A. in Government. It seems all these people gained from the virtues offered by a liberal arts education, such as communications, writing and analytical thinking skills, which all helped them to reach the success they have in business today.

CONCLUSION ON THE BOOK

Throughout the book, Zakaria informs us of the virtues of a liberal arts education, how to write clearly, how to speak convincingly, and how to think analytically. "In Defense of a Liberal Education" serves as a reminder to us of the importance of the free pursuit of knowledge, for the sake of knowledge. Zakaria also cites a number of works and books that give further information about liberal arts education such as Michael Roth's "Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters", and Bruce Kimball's "Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education". I would like to recommend this book to academics and scholars in universities. We have to keep in mind that universities should not only be places to learn technical skills, but much beyond that. A liberal

arts education offers skills that might be not directly related to the trade or specific skills industry requires. However, a liberal art education offers much more with its three virtues. Thus, people with a liberal arts education have a competitive edge over other people without one. One of the advantages people with liberal arts education have is the ability to adapt to new technology, instead of being sidelined because of the new technology.

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⁵ <http://time.com/3964415/ceo-degree-liberal-arts/> accessed on August 6th, 2016.

About the Book

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Overall rating:	3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)
