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# The Intrinsic Value of the Liberal Arts: Cicero's Example

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The liberal arts, first described in Republican Rome, have been a component of higher education since the advent of the medieval university in the eleventh century. Despite such historical lineage, the value of a liberal arts education is continuously and publicly called into question, and this is a special problem for honors programs, most of which are rooted in the liberal arts. In the public debate about the liberal arts, politicians often insist that higher education must produce quantifiable results and consider subjects such as philosophy unnecessary at best and useless at worst. For example, Patrick McCrory, Governor of North Carolina, endorsed legislation to base funding for state higher education on post-graduate employment rather than enrollment. "It's not based on butts in seats, he said, but on how many of those butts can get jobs" (*Inside Higher Ed* par. 3). McCrory is not alone as numerous public figures argue for a concentrated focus on specific job training as an efficient path to financial stability. An uncertain economic climate adds sharpness to these heated public debates about what form of education will properly prepare students for an increasingly technology-driven world, and honors education has a lot at stake in these debates. The fate of the liberal arts is in many ways the fate of honors as well.

The phrase "liberal arts" is derived from the Latin "artes liberales" and originally referred to the skills needed to be an effective, informed, and voting citizen in ancient Rome, literally training in citizenship (Lind 52). Philosopher and author Martha Nussbaum still espouses this view, maintaining that the cultivation of citizenship through a liberal arts education is vital to democracy because it promotes critical thinking, an empathetic understanding of others, and proficiency at problem solving. For Nussbaum, a liberal arts education also enriches the soul, "the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human" (7). Although many writers and educators passionately defend and promote the humanities or liberal arts educational ideal, students often regard their college education as a tool for job preparation.

While politicians and parents debate what higher education should do for us, educators lament that it has failed us. In an extensive study based on analysis of the performance of 2,322 students on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the authors of 2011's *Academically Adrift* claim that 45% of students demonstrate no improvement in complex reasoning, critical thinking, and writing skills after two years of college (36). Noting the large number of students who never graduate, classicist Victor David Hanson calls into question the entire higher educational system. Hanson places the majority of blame on "professors of traditional arts and sciences who could or would not effectively defend their disciplines or the classical university system," leading to a situation where "agenda-driven politicians, partisan ideologues, and careerist technocrats" have assumed control of the academy (Hanson par.19).

Adding fuel to the fire, many in higher education see the definition of liberal arts itself as debatable. For some, it refers to a general education; others say it is defined by the subject matter, such as the humanities or perhaps the classics (Lind 52). Ethyle Wolfe comments that, although colleges endorse combining liberal arts courses and professional training, "we have failed to come to grips with defining and incorporating a substantive Liberal Arts educational component" (459). Disagreement over exactly what subjects should be part of the curriculum is an ancient discussion, dating from Republican Rome. Early Romans such as Cato the Elder worried that Greek education and especially subjects like philosophy would corrupt the sturdy, hardworking, dutiful Roman character. But the lure of Greek studies was too compelling, and a Hellenistic educational model became the norm, altering the simplistic Roman education. By the end of the Republic, knowledge of Greek language and literature were necessary skills for an elite Roman man. Then, during the Middle Ages, the liberal arts were infused with Christian virtues and studied in the university as the *Quadrivium* and *Trivium*. Wealth and a spirit of discovery in the Renaissance led to the recovery of most extant Latin literature and spurred the creation of a new, secular educational model based on Roman literature and correct, classical Latin. Writers such as Petrarch rejected scholasticism and believed Medieval Latin was full of errors and interpolation.

The current discussion takes place in this context of long-running historical debate concerning not only the ideal curriculum but also the purpose and usefulness of a liberal arts education. The Roman writer Cicero, who wrote extensively about education, discussed the worth of specific training versus a general education in his enormously influential dialogue *de Oratore*. For Cicero, there was no contest; a general education provided not only training for citizenship but also life-long learning and enhancement of the human spirit (Wolfe 461). As Aubrey Gwynn wrote, the driving force of education for Cicero was pursuit of human excellence: "To be a man in all that is most

human, and to be human in one's relations with all other men; that is Cicero's ethical and social ideal, and his educational theory is based on the same principle" (120).

In the contemporary rush to quantify knowledge, let us not forget Cicero's ideal of ennoblement of the human spirit. Through his intensely personal letters of pain and sorrow, the indisputable worth of a liberal arts education becomes apparent. Cicero advocated the widest study possible. Such a journey has the potential to create a rich inner life: an interior space that can nurture and sustain when the soul has been vanquished by grief. Cicero's life and especially his reaction to extreme loss were an eloquent testimony to this truth.

In February of 45 BCE, Cicero's beloved daughter Tullia died a month after giving birth. He was inconsolable. So piercing was his grief that Cicero withdrew from public life. The hectic atmosphere of Rome accentuated his sorrow, cracked his disciplined public face, and forced him to flee to his villa in Asturia. Secluded on his seaside estate, he desperately sought a way to conquer the melancholy of his soul. He wrote daily to his close confidante Atticus and admitted to a desperate state of mind: "When I am alone, all my conversation is with books, but it is interrupted by fits of weeping against which I struggle as best as I can. But so far it is an unequal fight" (*Atticus* 252 [XII.15]).

Cicero also worried about his public persona. Roman men were expected to show *gravitas*, or seriousness, and keeping sorrow under control was a sign of dignity. His was not a culture that promoted introspection. Public men, always subject to gossip and scrutiny, had to respond in the correct manner when faced with tragic events. As Wilcox explained, a Roman man had to "not only act virtuously; he had to be seen doing so" (270). Thus Julius Caesar behaved in the proper way when his daughter died: "It gave me much pleasure," wrote Cicero to his brother, "to learn from your letter of the courage and dignity of Caesar's bearing in his great sorrow" (*Quintus* 26 [III.6]).

Thus Cicero's behavior and absence from Rome were cause for concern, and in several letters fellow senators urged him to return to public life. For example, Servius Sulpicius Rufus asked "can you be so greatly moved by the loss of one poor little woman's frail spirit?" (*Friends* 248 [IV.5]). In a remarkable and slightly sarcastic answer, Cicero said he was ashamed for not bearing his grief as Rufus, a man of such wise counsel, had recommended, but the dictatorship of Caesar had taken away the honor and distinction previously available to men from his class; in the chaotic world of Roman Republican politics, Cicero's political fortunes rose and fell, but his home and family provided solace, especially Tullia, "one in whose conversation and sweet ways, I put aside all cares and sorrows" (*Friends* 249 [IV.6]).

Now Cicero was isolated, his career in ruins, the Republic on the verge of collapse, and his darling daughter was dead. Cicero's letters to Atticus show a

man in the grips of extreme pain and stripped bare of his carefully controlled public face. He reacted to the scornful criticism of his peers by protesting that he was not broken in mind and spirit; instead, he was pursuing the vocation of an educated man, writing on challenging topics.

I believe that in common decency they would either spare their criticisms or even admit I deserve some praise . . . I have so far recovered as to bring an untrammelled mind to writing on these difficult subjects or else that I have chosen the most elevated means of distraction from my sorrow and the most fitting for a man of culture. (*Atticus* 279 [XII.38a])

Immediately after Tullia's death, Cicero first consulted Greek philosophical works on the subject of emotions, reading every work on alleviation of sorrow, yet they all proved inadequate, thus precipitating Cicero's writing.

I have even done something which I imagine no one has ever done before me. I have consoled myself in a literary composition. I will send you the book, as soon as the copyists have finished it. I can assure you that there is no consolation as effective as this. I write all day long, not that I do myself any real good, but for the time being, it distracts me—not indeed enough, for grief is powerful and importunate; still it brings a respite. (*Atticus* 251 [XII.14])

Cicero used writing as a process to work through grief. Although he did not claim to feel much relief, his letters to Atticus demonstrate that the process enabled Cicero to find a measure of peace “to ease and heal my mind” (*Atticus* 258 [XII.20]). To his fellow Senators who gossiped and criticized his unseemly grief, Cicero pithily said to Atticus: “I don't know what people find to criticize or what they expect. Do they want me to stop grieving?. . . These happy people who reprove me cannot read as many pages as I have written—how well is immaterial” (*Atticus* 281 [XII.40]).

Because he had an extensive liberal arts education, Cicero had the ability to create a rich interior life and could draw on this source in his time of turmoil: “You would not believe how much I am writing, even at night, since I get no sleep” (*Atticus* 286 [XIII.26]). The period after Tullia's death became the most productive period in Cicero's life. By the end of 44 BCE, he had completed *Academica*, *De finibus*, *Tusculanae disputationes*, *De divinatione*, *De senectute*, *De amicitia*, *De fato*, *De officiis* and *Paradoxa Stoicorum*. Many of these works as well as the forensic orations would become fundamental to the new Renaissance curriculum (Proctor 63). Cicero's letters discussed building a monument in honor of Tullia, and, while no physical structure was ever

erected, his influential writings served, in effect, as an extraordinary monument to Tullia.

Cicero's extensive education and training provided the framework for his solace, and surely honors educators want to provide such frameworks for their students. Education and training need to focus on more than getting a job; they need to prepare students for their future and for the suffering that they, like Cicero, will inevitably experience in their lives. Also, for honors students as well as for Cicero, a liberal arts education has a vital public purpose: the health and continuation of the Republic. His words continue to strike a chord after two millennia: "To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history" (*Orator* 120). In providing a liberal arts education, honors programs enable their students to grow beyond childhood into a full sense of their worth as individuals and as citizens.

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