

By the range of interdisciplinary topics I have been exposed to. I love learning about science, politics and history in the same class.

Evelyn Atwater '15
POLITICAL SCIENCE AND
LEGAL STUDIES

How do you measure the value of a liberal arts degree?

By the ability to think critically and analyze ideas from diverse perspectives.

Liz Livingston Howard '86
HISTORY

By my ability to witness and appreciate the beauty and purpose of what I do as a physician, especially when it is challenging.

Nicholas Butowski '95
RELIGION

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INTERVIEWS BY REBECCA LINDELL

Laurie Zoloth
PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

As a society, we're used to asking about "worth" in terms of metrics. We apply scientific theories of measurement, as if there were some number that would allow you to exchange your liberal arts degree for something else: Does the degree get you a certain amount of money over a lifetime?

I'm going to suggest that that might be an appallingly wrong way to think about liberal arts education. We need to see the significant ethical issues that also determine "worth." We need to ask if there is anything that is of worth for human societies that lies outside the marketplace-exchange relationship. How do we value the virtues of courage, intellectual curiosity and integrity unless we ask a different sort of question?

That is not to say that scientific theories of measurement aren't really important. I want my engineers to know exactly how to make a bridge that isn't going to fall down and my physician to know precise dosages. But I also want anyone who's going to be an engineer or a physician to understand the ethical questions that emerge in those practices. The answers are not inherent within the practices themselves, because someone has to address the nature, goal and meaning of human acts. It is the task of the liberal arts education to raise this question: What is the good act, and what makes it so?

We've seen that when social enterprises are organized without considering such questions, they tend not to work very well. When science and marketplace exchanges fail, it is often because someone has not paid attention to the basic tenets of what it means to live a moral life. When leaders lie or cheat, one wonders: Have they never read Shakespeare? Socrates? Hebrew Scripture? Do they not know core narratives about love or justice? What is the challenge to the claim, "Oh, everybody does it," if not the quiet voice of the arts and humanities that is raised to say, Here is a better way, a noble way, to live? ■

Worth & Ethics

Medicine & Chaucer

Jared Wunsch
PROFESSOR OF MATHEMATICS

For me, much of the enduring value of a liberal arts education is that it allows me to take more pleasure in the world around me. I can appreciate the natural world better for having studied science, and enjoy the world of human creations more for having taken humanities courses as a student.

As a parent, that kind of education is a gift I'd hope to give my kids. I'd like to be able to talk to them about books and ideas that have meant a lot to me, and I'd like for them to have an intellectual curiosity that gets further stimulated in college. I'd want them to cultivate a certain skepticism, which is one of the attributes I most prize among liberal arts academics—a skepticism about what the media is telling them, and an ability to sort out for themselves where the truth lies. I'd like them to be informed citizens of this country.

And I'd like them to be able to find out what really interests them after trying many things. There's plenty of time later to pursue a single intellectual interest or profession. If my daughter decides she wants to go to medical school, that's great. But I would hope she would also find some time to read Chaucer on the way. ■

Past & Present

Bruce Carruthers
PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY

I would want to broaden that question and think in terms of assessment rather than measurement. There are all sorts of things that matter that aren't necessarily easy to measure.

For liberal arts students, college is a hugely formative period in their lives. They discover all kinds of things that will excite and engage them later on. It's transformational. It changes who people are.

The value of that educational experience unfolds over a lifetime. Some of it translates into income, although you have to wait 40 years to get the full measure of that effect. You won't know if it was such a good investment to get that degree in Chinese literature, for example, until China becomes the biggest economic engine in the

world next to the U.S., and suddenly, an appreciation for Chinese art and language and history becomes a very useful thing. The world can unfold in unexpected ways.

And the value need not apply only to business and careers. There are lots of realms in which having some knowledge of the cultural and historical diversity of the world is very valuable. And that is a hallmark of a liberal education. In a world that's changing rapidly, it's almost a way of hedging your bets, because we just don't know what's going to matter in a little while. To the extent that you learn how to learn, problem-solve, work with others as well as by yourself and remain curious, you will have some general skills that will serve you very well in any endeavor, and over a lifetime. ■