

# The Death of the Liberal Arts?

The term ‘liberal arts’ originated over two thousand years ago as the classical concept ‘artes liberalis’: the idea that a free man should be skilled in seven arts: grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. Today this term has evolved to refer to the traditional study of subjects in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Though early on the liberal arts curriculum was the standard in the United States, many universities are moving away from this focus on breadth in education. Instead they are emphasizing depth and specialization in order to help students find well-paying jobs upon graduation.

In this shifting world of academia, liberal arts colleges are often under scrutiny as they maintain the importance of a well-rounded curriculum in today’s employment focused world. The humanities themselves are facing a decline: in 1967 nearly one in five degrees earned in the United States was in “humanities disciplines traditionally associated with the liberal arts,” while in 2018 this number was closer to one in twenty degrees. As the traditional liberal arts model collides with a growing emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs designed to meet labor market and global competitiveness goals, liberal arts colleges have found themselves to be at the center of debates about access, affordability, and return on investment. These pressures have contributed to declining enrollment at many liberal arts colleges.

Even in the face of these threats, some have held steadfast to the idea that the liberal arts education, firmly rooted in the classical, Western tradition is what is needed in the face of contemporary issues. But as classical traditions interact with new ideas, another debate regarding the liberal arts curriculum has emerged: the relevance of teaching the Great Books in today’s world.

However, the Great Books are considered to have shaped Western culture and thought. A 1994 study found that the list of most common authors of the Great Books contained “very few women, racial minorities, or non-Western contributors”; common authors included: Homer, Shakespeare, Plato, Dante, Aristotle, and St. Augustine. But in recent decades, with the feminist and the Black Lives Matter movements, the Great Books curriculum has faced criticism as a large majority of authors are ‘dead white men’. In response, colleges and universities across the country are adding a more diverse range of literature into their curriculum. Liberal arts schools must continue to address the issue of how to embrace modern education, without forgetting the stories of the past.

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Information gathered from: William Roche’s *Why choose the liberal arts?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); Bradley Thompson’s “On the Decline and Fall of the Liberal Arts” in *Academic Questions*, 2015; Thomas Tomcho, John Norcross, and Christopher Correia’s “Great Books Curricula: What is Being Read?” in *The Journal of general education*, 1994; Brian Bourke, Nathaniel Bray, and Christopher Horton’s “Approaches to the Core Curriculum: An Exploratory Analysis of Top Liberal Arts and Doctoral-Granting Institutions” in *The Journal of general education*, 2009; “Study Gives Liberal Arts Education A Yes Vote”, *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2020; Socrates (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022); The Hechinger Report ([hechingerreport.org](http://hechingerreport.org)); Michael R. Wing ([michaelrwing.com](http://michaelrwing.com)).