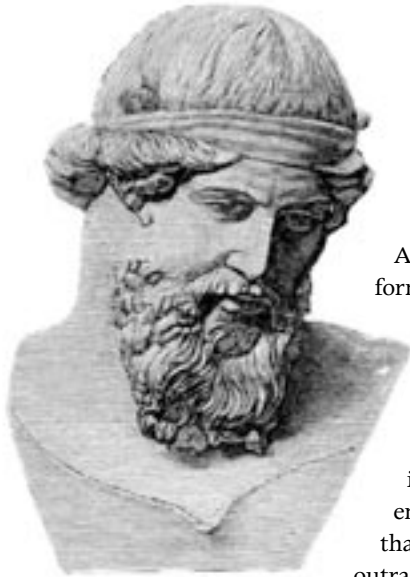


## Plato Without Apologies

A Liberal Arts Education Offers a Great Job, and a Great Deal More

By Bruce Arnold



Plato: still relevant after all these years

**Interest in the American liberal-arts curriculum** is waning in favor of greater specialization and career-oriented studies.

As one notable critic bitterly formulated the problem, “In the state where the acquisitive individual especially values material goods...such a one pays no attention to education.” He means education in its liberal sense, studying mathematics and philosophy rather than accounting and business. The outraged critic is Plato, writing about 2,400 years ago in *The Republic*.

Plato’s diagnosis reveals that the decline of the liberal arts—a hot topic in higher-education circles—is of long-standing interest because the problem is deep-rooted in human nature. In a competitive economic environment, it’s alluring to consider education a short-term instrument for acquiring a successful lifestyle rather than a long process in cultivating the soul. Plato thought personal happiness and health depended on learning to reason adequately and to meet the complexity of the cosmos and human experience with real discernment, even wisdom.

But try to explain that to a seventeen-year-old writing college applications and wondering how she will meet college expenses and afford the goods (and goodies) her parents enjoyed. Wouldn’t it make more sense to take a degree in “casino management” (which is possible, though not at MHC) and work the odds to your own advantage?

The cultural trends and economics of higher education make it difficult for all but prestigious liberal-arts colleges such as Mount Holyoke to make a go of it. And even they cannot afford to leave perplexed applicants facing the future with only the arguments of Plato’s *Republic* to brace them against the tide of concerns common to the debtor class. So colleges argue that, if you want to make a livable income, a liberal-arts degree will *most usefully* serve your purpose.

Schools that continue uncompromised by “professional” programs can claim that attendance places their graduates in a

privileged confraternity of upper-income earners. The school is certifying that it sends out the best and brightest and provides them with a network to help with the job search.

More honorably—and more publicly—schools argue that a liberal-arts education is the best training for employment in today’s highly technological society because intense study of the liberal arts develops the productive capacities of reasoning analytically, solving problems, and communicating effectively. You want a great job? Study Plato! I have told students that myself.

However, I can’t ignore the irony that the purpose of a liberal-arts education as traditionally conceived—to pursue knowledge for the pleasure it gives, to seek to know why the world is as it is, and to delve into the complexities of human experience because such knowledge is deeply interesting—has been pushed aside in favor of utilitarian arguments, internship strategies, and résumé-writing workshops.

It serves no purpose to blame students (or the institutions serving them); the world is what it is. In fact, it’s exactly what Plato said it is, a place where material goods are more alluring to human nature than rigorous study. Nevertheless, Plato’s appeal still holds significance. What’s most at stake in preserving a comprehensive liberal-arts education is the capacity it holds for us to renew ourselves and the world we live in through study pursued with passionate interest.

Plato believed that such study subordinated an individual’s appetitive drives to the higher powers of the rational faculties. While a life lived with the aid of developed reason is better in many respects, we shouldn’t neglect the other issue that Plato touches on—that study renews us and can change us in ways laws and regulations cannot.

Liberal-arts institutions will endure because the need to explore the world and to renew our experience of it will inevitably percolate powerfully in the human consciousness. Liberal-arts institutions probably need to make prudent and limited compromises to meet students’ practical needs, but we shouldn’t lose sight of our core mission, and we shouldn’t apologize for being so enthusiastic about what we study, even if it’s Plato.

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