

Liberal Arts Education

Meaning and Etymology

In today's politically charged climate, the term 'liberal' may have meanings for some that aren't related to its meaning in the academic setting. The "liberal arts education" or "liberal education" is not about indoctrination into a political party or persuasion. The term simply refers to the broader learning tradition originating hundreds of years ago in European universities. In many ways, this tradition was re-invigorated in the US during the 19th Century.

Here's a definition of "liberal education" as it is now understood by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the foremost association of higher educational institutions in this country:

An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. This approach emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility; strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills; and the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.¹

As you can see, political allegiance is not required to endorse this idea. It's about making us all better citizens.

In what follows, you will find some of the history of the term 'liberal', as it is used by educators.

Liberal Arts – "College or university curriculum aimed at *imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities*, in contrast to a professional, vocational, or technical curriculum. In Classical antiquity, the term designated the education proper to a freeman (Latin *liber*, "free") as opposed to a slave. In the medieval Western university, the seven liberal arts were grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the *trivium*²) and geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (the *quadrivium*). In modern colleges and universities, the liberal arts include the study of literature, languages, philosophy, history, mathematics, and science."³ "The study of the *trivium* led to the Bachelor of Arts degree, and the *quadrivium* to the Master of Arts."⁴ Further study, of course, leads to the Ph.D., which abbreviates Doctor of Philosophy.

¹ What is a 21st Century Liberal Education (2014). AAC&U, <http://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education>. Web

² Yes, this is the origin of our word, *trivial*.

³ Liberal Arts (2006). In Britannica Concise Encyclopedia. Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved August 25, 2009, from http://www.credoreference.com/entry/ebconcise/liberal_arts

⁴ Liberal Arts (2008). In The Columbia Encyclopedia. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved August 25, 2009, from http://www.credoreference.com/entry/columency/liberal_arts

Liberal – from *liberalis* (L), “of or relating to a free man, worthy or typical of a free man (especially of studies, education, arts, professions), worthy of a free man in personal appearance, fine, noble, magnanimous”⁵

Art – from *ars* (L), professional, artistic, or technical skill, craftsmanship, artificial methods, human ingenuity, artificiality, crafty action, trick, stratagem, craftiness, guile, personal characteristic or quality, systematic body of knowledge and practical techniques, magic, one of the fine or liberal arts, profession, craft, trade, task, pursuit, artistic achievement or performance, artistic design or representation, work of art, device, contrivance, rules or principles of an art, treatise, method, system, procedure, principle of classification.⁶

Bachelor – from *bachelier* (OF via unclear L origin), a young knight, not old enough, or having too few vassals, to display his own banner, and who therefore followed the banner of another; a novice in arms; yeoman; inexperienced person; one who has taken the first or lowest degree at a university, who is not yet a master of the Arts.⁷

Master – from *magister* (L, via *magis*, more), master, chief, head.⁸

Doctor – from *doctor* (L, via *docere*, to teach), teacher; one who, by reason of his skill in any branch of knowledge, is competent to teach it, or whose attainments entitle him to express an authoritative opinion; an eminently learned man.⁹

Philosophy – from *philosophia* (G), love of wisdom or knowledge

⁵ Liberal, adj. and n. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Web.

⁶ Art (2009). *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from OED online database.

⁷ Bachelor (1989). *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from OED online database.

⁸ Master (2009). *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from OED online database.

⁹ Doctor (1989). *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from OED online database.