“What’s a Liberal Arts Education Good For?”
By Michael Roth

Over the next few months, in homes across America, seventeen and eighteen-year-olds will be conferring with one another and with their parents about a life changing decision: What college to go to! After months of research, visits, and advice from "experts," these young men and women must now decide: Where will I be happy? Where will I make friends? Where will I get an education I can afford now, and an education that will remain valuable for years after graduation?

In this same time period, our government officials will be deciding where an investment in America's economic infrastructure will do the most good. Commentators from different political perspectives have often noted that one of the great advantages of America is its peerless higher education system. Although other sectors have diminished international roles, higher education in this country continues to inspire admiration around the globe. When politicians talk about this, they often emphasize the research output of large universities, but the focus should also be on American undergraduate liberal arts education. Liberal arts in the USA provide not only a pipeline of talented and prepared students to the great graduate schools, but also a model for life-long learning that other countries are beginning to emulate.

But in these challenging times, what's an education in the liberal arts good for?

Rather than pursuing business, technical or vocational training, some students (and their families) opt for a well-rounded learning experience. Liberal learning introduces them to books and the music, the science and the philosophy that form disciplined yet creative habits of mind that are not reducible to the material circumstances of one's life (though they may depend on those circumstances). There is a promise of freedom in the liberal arts education offered by America's most distinctive, selective, and demanding institutions; and it is no surprise that their graduates can be found disproportionately in leadership positions in politics, culture and the economy. A quick look at several members of President-elect Obama's leadership team can stand as an example of how those with a liberal arts education are shaping the future of our society.

What does liberal learning have to do with the harsh realities that our graduates are going to face after college? The development of the capacities for critical inquiry associated with liberal learning can be enormously practical because they become resources on which to draw for continual learning, for making decisions in one's life, and for making a difference in the world. Given the pace of technological and social change, it no longer makes sense to devote four years of higher education entirely to specific skills. Being ready on DAY ONE, may have sounded nice on the campaign trail, but being able to draw on one's education over a lifetime is much more practical (and precious). Post secondary education should help students to discover what they love to do, to get better at it, and to develop the ability to continue learning so that they become agents of change -- not victims of it.

A successful liberal arts education develops the capacity for innovation and for judgment. Those who can imagine how best to reconfigure existing resources and project future results will be the shapers of our economy and culture. We seldom get to have all the information we would like, but still we must act. The habits of mind developed in a liberal arts context often result in combinations of focus and flexibility that make for intelligent, and sometimes courageous risk taking for critical assessment of those risks.

The possibilities for free study, experimentation and risk taking need protection and cultivation. Looking around the world, we find no shortage of thugs who desecrate or murder those who seek to produce a more meaningful culture. And here at home we can easily see how mindless indifference to
the contemporary arts and sciences facilitates the destruction of cultural memory and creative potential.

America's great universities and colleges must continue to offer a rigorous and innovative liberal arts education. A liberal education remains a resource years after graduation because it helps us to address problems and potential in our lives with passion, commitment and a sense of possibility. A liberal education teaches freedom by example, through the experience of free research, thinking and expression; and ideally, it inspires us to carry this example, this experience of meaningful freedom, from campus to community.

The American model of liberal arts education emphasizes freedom and experimentation as tools for students to develop meaningful ways of working after graduation. Many liberal arts students become innovators and productive risk takers, translating liberal arts ideals into effective, productive work in the world. That is what a liberal education is good for.

We were surprised last week to hear reports from several liberal arts colleges and universities that they had seen significant increases in 'early decision' applications. At Wesleyan, we were up almost 40%, an increase none of us on the staff would have predicted. Early decision applicants have already decided that if they are accepted at the one school to which they apply in the fall, they will attend that school the following year. Many of the highly selective schools like Wesleyan have robust financial aid programs, accepting students regardless of their ability to pay. In my next post, I'll write more about issues of affordability even with financial aid.

In these turbulent economic times, it appears that students want to know as quickly as possible if they are going to be able to attend their first choice school. Many of our talented high school seniors are doubtless deciding that the significant investment of time and money in a liberal arts education will give them the capacity for a sustainable and creative future. Perhaps they have something to teach us!

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Discussion Questions:
1. Are you planning to graduate with a degree from the School of Arts and Sciences or are you planning to transfer to another school within the University for a professional degree? What factors influence that decision?
2. Do you agree with Roth in his description of a liberal arts education based on your experience?
3. What is a liberal arts education good for? (Assuming that it’s good.)