

Introduction

The “Blind Men and the Elephant” is an old Indian parable about a group of blind men who were touching an elephant to understand what the animal looked like. Each man touched a separate part of the elephant (e.g., trunk, tail, and body), but no man touched the whole elephant. When the blind men got together later to discuss their understanding of the elephant’s appearance, none of them agreed, because each of them was influenced (and biased) by the particular part he had touched; none of them had the broader experience of touching all the parts to get an integrated and accurate perspective into the elephant’s total being.

Using the elephant to symbolize your college education, this book is designed to help you see the “whole elephant.” Its purpose is to give you a sense of the “big picture” or the total jigsaw puzzle before you get involved (or get lost) with handling all its particular pieces. It will articulate how the liberal arts—the broad set of courses that you will experience most commonly during the first two years of your college education, will provide the general context and framework for making sense of your entire college experience, and equip you with deep and durable skills that serve as the foundation for your success in college and beyond.

This book will also demonstrate that the benefits of the liberal arts are magnified when they are infused with diversity. Learning about and from diverse cultures reinforces the mind-expanding influence of the liberal arts by enabling you to view issues from a multitude of perspectives. Just as experiencing the diverse disciplines (academic fields) in the liberal arts liberates you from narrow, egocentric (self-centered) thinking, experiencing diverse cultural perspectives liberates you from the tunnel vision of ethnocentric (culture-centered) thinking. Your experiences with the liberal arts and diversity complement one another; they work together to enable you to see the common *theme* (humanity) and the variations on that *theme* (diversity). As a result, you develop a broader, more complete understanding of yourself and the world around you.

You will also learn that there are very *practical* benefits of experiencing the liberal arts and diversity. They will combine to supply you with the key skills and perspectives needed to succeed in today’s increasingly diverse and global economy. A global perspective, breadth of knowledge, and the ability to understand cross-cultural differences are skills that have become critical for career access and success. These are the very skills and developed by the liberal arts and diversity.

Studies show that college students, as well as their parents, are very interested (and concerned) about majors and careers, but they overlook, underrate, and underestimate the importance of the liberal arts for career success (72, 129, 164).

They often believe the “liberal arts” are something idealistic or impractical that cannot be put to use in the “real world” and will not help you get a “real job” (72). As a result, liberal arts courses are sometimes seen by students as unnecessary requirements they must “get out of the way” before they “get into” what is really important—their specialized major. This narrow viewpoint probably stems from two sources: (a) lack of knowledge about what the liberal arts actually stand for and are designed to do, and (b) misinterpretation of general education—a term often used interchangeably with the liberal arts—as something very “general” (non-specific) and without any particular value or practical purpose. As you will learn, this is far from the truth. This book will clearly document and demonstrate the practical advantages of the liberal arts—for your major, your career, and your personal life. Indeed, one of the major goals of this book is to capitalize on the practical skills developed by the liberal arts and diversity to promote both your success in college and your career success beyond college.

In addition to helping you understand *why* the liberal arts and diversity are essential to being a well-rounded, well-educated person who is well prepared for the twenty-first-century, this book provides you with suggestions on *how* to do it. It offers research-based recommendations for developing a systematic plan and a set of specific strategies for integrating the liberal arts and diversity into your college experience to maximize their impact on your personal development and future success.

Compared to your previous schooling, college will provide you with a broader range of course choices, more resources to capitalize on, more educational freedom, and more decision-making opportunities. Your own college experience will differ from any other college student. This freedom gives the opportunity to shape and create a college experience and a final college transcript is unlike any other college student—one that is uniquely your own and that will maximize your prospects for future success.

A well-planned college education infused with the liberal arts and diversity will supply you with the seeds for lifelong growth. By devising an early plan for planting those seeds strategically, you ensure that your investment in college will yield the greatest personal growth and have the greatest impact on your future success. This book will help you create that plan.

Enjoy the greater academic freedom you have in college, but employ it to your advantage—use it strategically to make the most of your college experience and college degree.