

Should We Abolish Liberal Arts Degrees? Quite Possibly, Yes

A wonderfully provocative post by [Andrew Coulson over at Cato](#). What actually is the point these days of corralling students into universities so that they can be taught the liberal arts? Wouldn't it be better to simply remove that whole swathe of subjects from the college curriculum and concentrate instead on those things that must be taught directly? I think the answer may well be yes, it probably would be a good idea.

It's worth reading Andrew's [whole piece](#). The basic point is, and it's a point that makes this a reasonable subject for a tech/business based blog, is that the entire method of rounding up the young and sending them off to college is a remnant of medieval technology. Given that technology has indeed changed since then we should perhaps evaluate whether we're still using the right methods to teaching our younglings what we'd like them to learn. Or even, for those lucky enough, what they themselves would like to learn.

I first saw this point over at Brad DeLong's. That the whole teaching structure of a university is based upon the medieval expense of books. No individual student could possibly hope to afford even one book directly, let alone the small library required to read all around a subject. Thus the form of tuition of the lecture, where the Master reads to the assembled from the text.

This lives on in our current universities in the lecture: almost wholly a waste of time as far as I can see. [Reading](#) the set text is faster for each of the individual 500 students entrapped and the Master (now the Professor) probably wrote the text and she really doesn't need to read it out loud again. Even a video of a decent lecturer would work better than insisting that everyone turn up at the same time in the same place.

Further, with books now at \$2.99 each, heck, almost all of the canon of literature is available in e-book format for nothing, we really have got past that scarcity problem that led to this form of instruction in the first place. Given that we are not so technologically limited then perhaps we really shouldn't be using this technology any more.

I can see two places left for universities. The first is for graduate degrees. This is when you actually do get the individual attention of your professors and when it's

actually important to do so. Plus of course those professors who do research will need to have somewhere to research from plus a paycheck to do so on. But colleges as factories for teaching what anyone can now get out of a book seem archaic enough that we should probably stop using them to do such.

The second is that some subjects require a much more hands on approach. No one's going to learn much chemistry without a lab, astronomy requires a rather better telescope than WalMart sells and so on. So there's still a point to collective endeavour on one site for some subjects.

But which? It's difficult to see anything in English Literature that cannot be learned from books. Given that they are the point of the subject after all. Drama studies might be rather better studied by going and working as an actor: Mom and Pop subsidising a child for four years doing off Broadway would certainly be cheaper than college these days and would almost certainly result in a better dramatic education. Who would doubt that modern languages would be better taught by slumming around Europe for four years than by a few hours a week of instruction in an otherwise unilingual environment?

I think Coulson's actually onto something here. We of course, both of us being libertarian/classical liberal types, would not dream of telling anyone at all that they cannot study what they want at college. Nor attempt to determine what a college should attempt to teach. We would though suggest that perhaps the rest of us, in our guise as taxpayers, should not be paying for what is clearly an entirely outmoded, into'd the dustbin of history, method of doing these things. So no federally or state funded student loans for those doing the arts, languages and so on. No state subventions to the academy itself. That would very soon sort out those who wanted an efficient education in such subjects: and given the fearfully rising cost of college efficiency is indeed what we are looking for.

There is one final thing. That college is a great social time, a time to grow up, to network, to take those first steps into the adult world. These are all euphemisms for having sex with different people and getting drunk a lot. Indeed, a most pleasurable and vital part of that transition from youth to adulthood. But \$200,000 to provide four years of this does seem just a little steep as a price tag. Let them use bars as their forefathers did* in begetting them.

**Yes, I know, the 21 drinking age. But that should be lowered anyway on pure civil liberties grounds.*