

A Plea for Compassionate Education

Christopher Borth

“What are you going to do with that major?” is perhaps the most common question addressed to college students who plan on majoring in a subject either in the humanities, social sciences, or arts. This question has the underlying assumption that the primary reason for having a college education is to achieve gainful employment after graduation. However, there is more to a college education than preparation for the workforce. Indeed, the most important part of any college experience is a broad liberal arts education, which ingrains compassion into students, and in turn engages students with the plight of the poorest and most marginalized people in society.

Throughout my studies, I have volunteered in my community in such roles as helping at a social services organization, being a cook for the poorest neighborhood in my city, serving the mentally disabled at an organization called L’Arche, and taking care of homeless children. While I have always been passionate about serving marginalized people, my liberal arts education has increased my desire not only to help others, but to also examine ways that society can improve the conditions in which the marginalized live in. The humanities and social sciences give students a context for understanding past, present, and future inequities, and possible ways to resolve such conflict. For instance, when I took a world history course from Bellevue College, I learned about the Holocaust, how it came to exist, and I wrote a final paper about this tragic genocide. This experience impressed upon me an awareness of the terrible power discrimination has, and how it can lead to profound catastrophe. This research experience has inspired me to pursue a vocation in conflict mediation work after I graduate.

In addition to learning about historical injustice, a liberal arts education helps students understand why people are marginalized in society, and prompts students to critically examine their assumptions. For instance, I have taken social science classes that have analyzed historical and current discrimination against black Americans. These liberal arts courses have helped me gain a better awareness of the experiences and conflicts that people of color and other marginalized people experience in day-to-day life. This experience has also helped me critically examine my own privilege in society as a white male compared to the lives of disadvantaged black Americans. Truly, the liberal arts have helped me to question assumptions prevalent in society, and gain social awareness.

As I advance in my university studies, I am grateful that my liberal arts education has helped me to integrate compassion with new knowledge. A liberal arts foundation helps to ensure that students become aware of historical and contemporary conflicts that harm humanity. Students

are thereby equipped to recognize and improve the social problems that affect all of us. Most importantly, a liberal arts education instills compassion into students to care for those who are marginalized, and inspires future graduates to engage with our present and shared future.