

The Difference Between Knowing and Understanding

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There is an astounding amount of information available. In most of our pockets, a smart phone is at the ready with all of the resources of the internet. With the touch of a few buttons and a little wifi, it is almost alarmingly easy to find out just about anything we might want to know.

While smartphones and google are powerful, they don't provide the knowledge of what to do with the information they retrieve. Their power becomes useless unless we are able to understand, interpret, and discern—all skills that come from a liberal arts education.

For example, two years ago there was an initiative in Washington that called for the labeling of genetically modified organisms. A relatively new voter, I was very excited to do my civic duty and set out to investigate the measure online. When I tried to research the issue, however, I was met with a flood of seemingly contradictory information. The arguments from both sides pulled from scientific, political, and moral issues and came from diverse sources such as farmers, moms, and doctors. One link brought me to a study that showed that GMOs could be harmful to health; another brought me to a different study that demonstrated the opposite.

As a sophomore Biochemistry major, I had experience deciphering scholarly scientific journal articles—but as a liberal arts student, I had many more tools at my disposal. I had taken an ethics course that allowed me to recognize the different assumptions behind the moral assertions, and English and public speaking courses that gave me the ability to separate political rhetoric from logical arguments. My broad education showed me how to interpret the research, understand the arguments, and weigh the value of each perspective. It also gave me the empathy to understand the passion that came from proponents of both sides. When the time came to fill out my ballot, I was able to vote informed by the research and guided by the critical thinking skills I learned from my liberal arts education.

Whether it be initiatives on the ballot or Facebook comment conversations, we are surrounded by important issues that call for informed voices. Climate change, vaccination debates, response to infectious diseases, new drugs and medical treatments all affect our daily lives and are surrounded by a cloud of political, emotional, moral, and scientific arguments. The liberal arts provides Washington's students with the tools that they need to cut through the flood of information and engage in rational discussion about perspectives from a variety of disciplines, enabling students to be effective, fulfilled, and well-reasoned citizens. While I'm grateful for the powerful smartphone I have in my pocket, I know that the skills I have learned from my liberal education will be much more necessary and useful for my—and Washington's—future.