



LIBERAL ARTS
& SCIENCES

FAQ

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

“...arts and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling [a person’s] life, lifting it from the spheres of mere physical existence and leading the individual towards freedom.”

— ALBERT EINSTEIN

CCAS

What is liberal education?

Liberal education is the simple idea of a broad and well-rounded course of study in the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and the arts. The overarching goal is to liberate the mind from ignorance and superstition.

Liberal education has nothing to do with liberal or conservative politics.

CCAS members often speak in terms of the “liberal arts and sciences,” reflecting our special commitment to liberal education in the context of comprehensive Colleges of Arts and Sciences.

What is its origin?

The roots of liberal education in western civilization are often traced to ancient Greece, where political philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle spoke of the need for citizens to be broadly educated and to pursue truth. As part of this tradition, colleges and universities discover knowledge and advance understanding of the world. We teach students critical thinking, reasoning, qualitative research, and the scientific method, and we advance disciplinary and interdisciplinary understanding. We hope that some of our discoveries will lead to commercial products and patents that improve the human condition.

The Roman jurist Cicero is usually credited with coining the actual phrase “liberal arts” education, which comes from the Latin expression for the best arts (*optimae artes*). Cicero believed that liberally educated people would live more informed and personally fulfilling lives, while also being more engaged citizens. As part of this tradition, colleges and universities educate young people to build personal character. We emphasize civic virtue and political participation, responsibility, moral reasoning, tolerance, community, stewardship, and global citizenship.

Education in the liberal arts and sciences is therefore both a quest for scientific truth and understanding, and an effort to create more informed and virtuous citizens. A detailed scholarly explanation of these two fundamental components of a liberal education may be found in Bruce Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University), 1986.

I’ve heard the phrases *trivium* and *quadrivium* – what are they?

The medieval western university emphasized a course of study for an educated person that included the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the *quadrivium* (geometry, arithmetic, music, astronomy). These “seven liberal arts,” as they are sometimes called, are still taught centuries later at colleges and universities because of their critical role in the intellectual development of students.

Is liberal education an old-fashioned idea?

No. Learning a specific trade is the old-fashioned idea because the rapid pace of change in today’s world constantly threatens the job security of people who learn a single vocation. In contrast, education in the liberal arts and sciences provides the skill set for people to learn, adapt, and thrive.

What is the relationship between general education and liberal education?

Most colleges and universities have some core of general education courses that all students are required to take regardless of their academic major. While these phrases are sometimes used interchangeably, it is best to think of general education as an important subset of what it means to be liberally educated in the arts and sciences.

Why is a liberal education particularly important in today’s economy?

Mostly gone are the days of vocation and apprenticeship, or lifetime loyalty to a particular company or a business. Today’s citizen is likely to change employers and even careers many times over the course of his/her lifetime. Embedded in liberal education is the ability to think critically, write well, separate fact from fiction, understand diverse perspectives, and arrive at cross-cutting solutions to complex problems. These are the skills that employers consistently say in surveys they value most.

How does liberal education serve the individual person?

- Providing a broad foundation of knowledge that lasts a lifetime.
- Expanding a person's social, cultural, and scientific horizons.
- Instilling analytical and communication skills that serve any career.
- Inspiring intellectual curiosity and life-long learning.
- Providing an appreciation of divergent worldviews.
- Contributing to the development of personal talent and character.
- Preparing a person for graduate or professional training in an arts and sciences discipline, law, or medicine, to name but a few possibilities.

How does liberal education serve our society?

- Providing citizens with fresh perspectives and creative solutions to problems.
- Redoubling a commitment to life's enriching activities, such as literature, language, and arts.
- Instilling a deep appreciation of democratic traditions in a world where tyranny often exists.
- Increasing scientific and mathematical literacy in an era of human history where the pace of scientific understanding is breathtaking.
- Promoting high ethical standards.
- Advancing global awareness and stewardship.

What specific role do Colleges of Arts & Sciences play?

Liberal education can be delivered across different academic structures, but a fairly typical and historical arrangement on campus is a College of Arts and Sciences. Such a college typically delivers most general education courses; houses academic majors in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences; and, provides intellectual leadership for education beyond the technical or purely professional.

Besides CCAS, what national organizations support liberal education?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is strongly committed to education in the liberal arts and sciences, advancing the cause through research, publications, panels, workshops, and conferences.

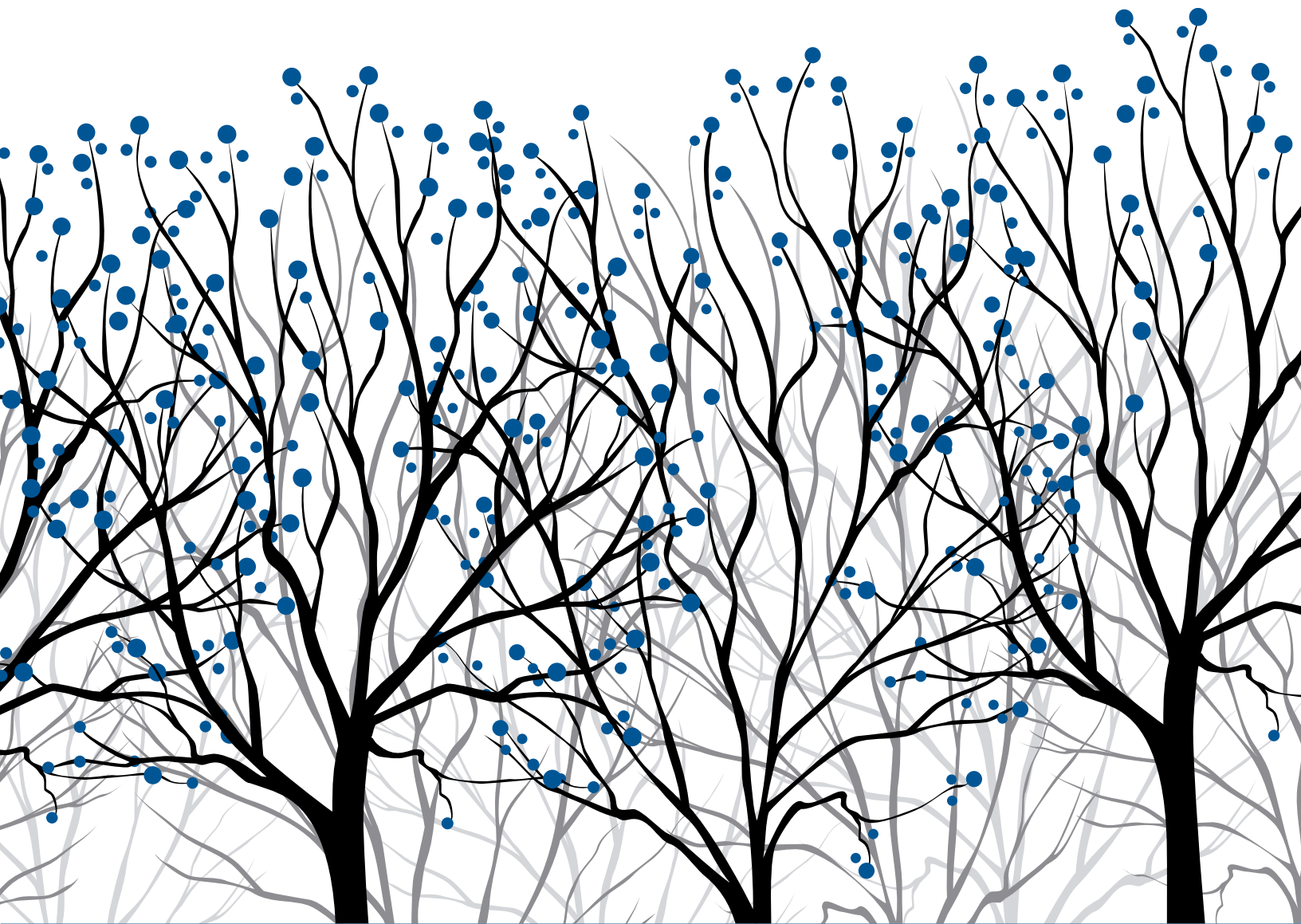
Phi Beta Kappa (PBK) is the most prestigious undergraduate society devoted to study of the liberal arts and sciences. Started in 1776 at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, PBK today consists of 276 chapters at colleges and universities. PBK members include 17 Presidents of the United States, 37 Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, and 131 Nobel Laureates.

What is the role of Arts & Sciences deans?

Deans are responsible for helping maintain high academic standards in the academy. They help hire the faculty responsible for delivering the liberal arts and sciences curriculum. They advance the principle of peer-reviewed research in order to maintain the intellectual integrity of discovery. They articulate the many dimensions of an education in the liberal arts and sciences to internal and external audiences.

Deans must be effective advocates of liberal education in the 21st century. Financial pressures on colleges and universities pressure them to suspend lightly enrolled programs, such as Latin. Student indebtedness pushes them toward narrower, professional career paths. Commercialization of higher education has cut into the principle that education is intrinsically valuable, substituting the idea that a diploma is a ticket to a lucrative career. These and other trends have pressured some colleges and universities to chip away at the liberal arts and sciences. Deans with administrative jurisdiction over the humanities, social sciences, and sciences must articulate the values and virtues of liberal education. The role of deans is especially critical in this time of tremendous change in the higher education environment.

*Contributed by Dr. Matthew C. Moen,
CCAS President, 2007-2008*



CCAS

networking arts & sciences deans

CCAS is the national association for deans of arts & sciences. CCAS represents 800+ deans and 1200+ associate/assistant deans and fosters excellence in colleges and schools of arts & sciences by connecting deans with each other, providing professional development, and serving as a forum for discussing issues in higher education.

Council of Colleges of Arts & Sciences
(952) 641-3037 • connect@ccas.net
www.ccas.net