

The Place of Liberal Arts in the Northwestern College Curriculum

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In 1920 the catalog of Northwestern College revised the college's statement of purpose to read as follows: "The aim of the Synod was and is to impart a liberal education in a Christian spirit, and especially to prepare students to take up the study of theology." The latter purpose was subsequently narrowed to read: "and especially to prepare students for the Lutheran ministry." In the early seventies the objectives were revised. The second objective read: "Northwestern College seeks to produce graduates with a well-rounded education. To achieve this objective, it also offers [in addition to a program for pastor-training which stresses language studies] a liberal arts program, with special emphasis on literature and the social sciences, in addition to the language studies named above." One word has since been inserted; we now offer a "selective" liberal arts program. North Central Association accreditation teams have questioned whether Northwestern College could claim to be offering a liberal arts program when it was apparent that the range and scope of our liberal arts program differed from what they considered to be standard liberal arts offerings. Apparently, "selective" was an acceptable qualification of our liberal arts course of studies. They haven't raised the point in recent years.

Basically, Northwestern College has a liberal arts curriculum, with several bulges: one in the area of religion (theology) and the other in the area of languages. On the other hand, the curriculum also has several constrictions as in science, philosophy, sociology, the fine arts. Nevertheless, our college is in the liberal arts family rather than in the professional, vocational or technological family of schools of higher education.

The liberal arts, or the humanities, have been with us for many years. By this time, then, we ought to know what they are, and what place they occupy in our curriculum. Yet the Faculty Development Committee has assigned a workshop paper on "The Place of the Liberal Arts in the Northwestern College Curriculum." I suggest that their assignment implies that we still don't really know just what should be included under the liberal arts, and that there are still unanswered questions about their place in our curriculum, especially in 1985. Without implication, in turn, I wish to state at this time that this paper will not settle these questions, even though I have been constrained, from within and without, to give thought from time to time to the rationale of our Northwestern College education. My hope is that this study will raise considerations that you will then be minded to resolve.

Despite the caveat that "the search for what really embraces a liberal education has been a persistent and difficult one" (LECNA "Curriculum Consultation Project"), there is a considerable degree of consensus on what the liberal arts are. Theodore M. Greene has arranged them according to "tasks or disciplines which guide the learner." In *Christian Faith and the Liberal Arts* (p 9) he lists the following aims of these disciplines:

to communicate clearly—language, mathematics, artistic idiom
to inquire accurately—the natural and social sciences, historical literary methodologies

to evaluate wisely—the humanities
 to understand synoptically—history, philosophy, theology
 to reason validly—logic (and mathematics)

The above list will profit by several annotations. “Language” will include grammar and rhetoric (how human beings express themselves, whether by writing or speaking). Under “artistic idiom” such “fine” arts (actually, “finished” arts) as painting, drawing, architecture and sculpture are included; also poetry, music, dancing and dramatic art. The “social sciences” are a large family: sociology, psychology, economics, political science, anthropology, social psychology, political and economic history and geography.

The “humanities” deserve a more extensive delineation because they are the staple of the liberal arts and may be loosely considered their equivalent (except, eg., for natural sciences and mathematics). The federal legislation that established the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965 defined the humanities as specific disciplines: “language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts”; and “those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods” (“The Chronicle of Higher Education,” November 28, 1984, p 17). It will be evident that the lines between Greene’s list and the NEH list above are blurred. Categorizing disciplines and branches of knowledge is not an exact science.

In the “Core of Common Studies” William J. Bennett, U. S. Secretary of Education, recommends “the following knowledge in the humanities as essential to a college education:

Because our society is the product and we the inheritors of Western civilization, American students need an understanding of its origins and development, from its roots in antiquity to the present. The understanding should include a grasp of the major trends in society, religion, art, literature, and politics, as well as a knowledge of basic chronology.

A careful reading of several masterworks of English, American and European literature.

An understanding of the most significant ideas and debates in the history of philosophy.

Demonstrable proficiency in a foreign language (either modern or classical) and the ability to view that language as an avenue to another culture.

In addition to these areas of fundamental knowledge ... some familiarity with the history, literature, religion, and philosophy of at least one non-Western culture or civilization. Finally ... all students should study the history of science and technology (“Chronicle of Higher Education,” November 28, 1984, pp 17–18).

Despite a certain unclarity regarding the *form* and *scope* of the liberal arts, particularly as they are represented in the curricula of liberal arts colleges, it is incumbent upon liberal arts schools to identify the *functions* their selection of liberal arts courses is intended to serve. What benefits are derived from a study of the liberal arts?

Greene’s aims were listed above: to reason validly, to communicate clearly, to inquire accurately, to evaluate wisely, to understand synoptically.

Pre-Seminary Education (pp 15–16) indicates that the goals of a liberal arts education will enable the college student to have

1. The ability to write and speak English clearly and correctly;
 2. The ability to think clearly and correctly;
- also

Increased understanding of the world in which he lives

1. The world of men and ideas;
2. The world of nature;
3. The world of human affairs.

In its report on “Integrity in the College Curriculum: Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees” (pp 15–24), the Association of American Colleges listed nine “experiences” that are “basic to a coherent undergraduate education” [also to a liberal arts education]:

1. Inquiry, abstract logical thinking, critical analysis.
[Every subject and discipline should contribute to this.]
2. Literacy: writing, reading, speaking, listening.
3. Understanding numerical data.
4. Historical consciousness.
[History should be all over the course of studies.]
5. Science.
6. Values.
7. Art.
8. International and multicultural experiences.
9. Study in depth.

Perhaps Paul L. Dressel (“A Re-examination of Liberal Education,” p 6) has synthesized the competencies of a secular liberal arts education as well as anyone. He states, “Writers on liberal education, despite many and profound disagreements on specifics, have generally agreed that the liberally educated man should (1) have a knowledge in reasonable depth of the essentials of his cultural heritage; (2) be able to examine intellectual questions logically and apply the methodology and concepts of the various disciplines in so doing; (3) be able to communicate effectively with others; (4) have a sensitivity to values, cultivate consistency between his actions and values.... ”

It should be evident, even to a casual reader, that the liberal arts cover a wide spectrum. No professional or technical academic program has such breadth. The courses of study for medicine or business or engineering or fields of science or conservation or social service or dozens of other professions or majors are focused and narrow by comparison. Only pure liberal arts institutions with no professional goals, or colleges like NWC, which do not offer terminal professional programs, can accommodate even a moderate liberal arts program. Northwestern College, despite its pre-professional purpose, is in the position of being able to offer more liberal arts courses than most baccalaureate degree-granting colleges require or are able to provide.

That, in itself, is not sufficient reason for NWC to offer a strong liberal arts program. A more important consideration is whether the parish pastor can make good use of liberal arts

competencies. Will a liberal arts training stand a parish pastor in good stead in his calling? I contend that it can and does.

There will be no argument concerning the emphasis of the liberal arts curriculum on *communication*, whether it be outgoing communication (writing, speaking) or incoming communication (listening, reading). A pastor who can't communicate well and who doesn't read is not "apt to teach." He scants both the form and content of his communication.

Nor will there be any question about the liberal arts concern for *values*. Before "values" entered our academic vocabulary, we used such terminology as "ethics" or "morals" or "ideals." The *Heritage Dictionary* defines a "value" as "a principle, standard, or quality considered worthwhile or desirable." It would be unthinkable for a training school for the ministry to omit this aspect of a pastor's calling, especially since the definition is inadequate. A confessional Christian college like NWC will establish its "values" on a higher authority than a secular college can, but the parish pastor will profit from an acquaintance with secular "values" and how they are imparted, because many of his parishioners will have been inoculated by them.

Liberal arts lay much stress on "inquiry, abstract logical thinking, *critical analysis*"; on "examining intellectual questions logically" and applying appropriate "methodology"; on the ability "to inquire accurately," "to evaluate wisely," "to understand synoptically" and "to reason validly." In his calling, a pastor will encounter a wide range of concepts and ideas—moral, theological, social, scientific, academic, political, economic—to mention a number of them. They call for perception, evaluation, attitudinal response, interpretation, application. "Critical analysis" is a vital function in the ministry.

A word about interpretation. If the pastor isolates himself in a doctrinal capsule and ignores the problems his parishioners face in the world where they must live out their daily Christian lives, he can spare himself much of the considerable effort required to interpret contemporary life to his people. He will also be depriving them of much of the guidance and encouragement they need when the tides of evil and perversion are at the flood and are sweeping many from their moral and spiritual moorings. Charles L. Taylor makes the point:

The preacher, as he ascends the pulpit steps, does well to pray, "O God, day by day lead us deeper into the mystery of life, and make us interpreters of life to our fellows." This is his function, to interpret, to reflect, to see beneath the surface of the passing show. The [congregation] sets aside this man to think in the presence of God. Woe to him if his busyness interferes with this! The minister is called to do what no other calling, not even that of the news analyst, equips a person to do—to evaluate the occurrences of the present moment in the light of God's eternal purpose as revealed in the Scriptures and particularly in His Son Jesus Christ. His task is to understand thoroughly the work of God and the predicament of man in order to bring the one to the other. How can he if he be careless in his attempt to master either? (*The Making of Ministers*, pp 185–186).

Liberal arts also call for *historical consciousness*. A knowledge of history is not only important for theology and for an understanding of the course of the church and salvation; it is also important for us as heirs of Western civilization to understand our cultural heritage. The citizen of every nation needs to know his own culture, to which he owes so much, and which influences him so deeply. What we know, what we believe, how we live—an educated man

ought to have a better understanding of his heritage than merely to know that it is there. He also needs to know its origin, its value and its mortality.

“Appreciation and experience of the fine and performing *arts* are ... essential ... to a civilized human being” (“Integrity in the College Curriculum,” Association of American Colleges, p 21). Northwestern College could get along without concerts and plays and painting and drawing and poetry, but God’s people have always recognized the arts as gifts of God, not only to gratify the eyes that were created to see beauty, the ears to hear melody, the heart to feel poetry, but also as gifts to enhance the beauty of our service to our God. Our people have the right to expect the educated man in the pulpit to have been at least brushed by culture along the way. Like *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, he should have developed some catholic tastes. The cultured and even the less cultured men and women in the pew are embarrassed if their pastor gives the impression that he reads little more than the sports page, views little more than TV entertainment, enjoys little more than his car or his garden or his restaurants. I suggest also that the legacy many a pastor has left his congregation in their house of God would have been richer if he had been a man of good taste.

Rightly understood, the pastor should be “all things to all men.” Not only should he adapt himself to the worship culture of those he seeks to win for Christ wherever he can do so without compromising integrity and truth—as Paul adapted himself when he associated with Jews and Gentiles. He ought also to endeavor to acquaint himself with and to adapt himself to the social concerns and customs of his people wherever he can do so without compromising his ministry. Rapport that does not involve sin or that does not demean the evangelist may be a carpet on which the unsaved walk more easily to Christ. The liberating benefits of a liberal arts education prepare the young man for the heterogeneous world of the parish ministry; they contribute to his being “all things to all men.”

But we need to become more specific. Let us walk through the liberal arts that are familiar to us or that could bring a contribution to the preparation of future parish pastors. Somewhat arbitrarily I shall follow the order of disciplines established by Emil Brunner (quoted in *Christian Faith and the Liberal Arts*, p 18). He proceeds from man’s relationship to God, to man in relation to man, next, man in relation to nature and finally man in relation to the symbols whereby he expresses himself (logic, language, mathematics).

The study of *religion* (theology) is central to a Christian liberal arts curriculum. Nor will a secular liberal arts curriculum leave this discipline out, even if it is represented only as comparative religion or the history of religion. Without apology the curriculum of a Christian college will be anchored in man’s relationship to his God. Theology centers the curriculum in truth. Christianity is the essence and the vital principle against which all human arts and disciplines are measured. Religion courses deserve a prominent place in the curriculum of a Christian college.

Philosophy has always been closely associated with religion. It also provides “a broad, overall intellectual orientation towards the totality of existence” (*Christian Faith and the Liberal Arts*, p 142). Both also concern themselves with man’s manner of living. Philosophy’s similarity to religion makes it a rival of religion. As a defender of the faith the pastor should be able to recognize this impostor and arm his people against the bad philosophy that deceives and misleads them. He needs to know the answer to bad philosophy. The graduate of Northwestern College should at least be a philosophies minor, even if he may have taken only a single formal course in philosophy. His education should have acquainted him with a number of philosophies: stoicism (whose resemblance to Christianity makes it a formidable foe of revealed religion),

epicureanism, humanism (a nemesis today), democracy (a philosophy misused), rationalism, deism, Darwinism, naturalism, materialism, Marxism, existentialism, behaviorism and others. In addition to his philosophy class, it is his literature courses, his history courses, his science and psychology and sociology classes and, above all, his religion classes that should not only have acquainted him with such philosophies, but they should also have armed him against them. The preacher in the pulpit and the ambassador for Christ in the parish are the more effective if they not only know the philosophies of men but have also learned how to contend with them, even on their own ground. Luther was the better able to refute Aristotle because he knew Aristotle. The liberal arts emphasis on philosophy is a valuable adjunct to Scripture in interpreting world views.

Literature ranks high on the list of liberal arts disciplines. Literature alone could provide a good liberal arts education. What an insight into the world of man and nature can be gained from a thoughtful reading of Homer's "Odyssey" and "Iliad," Plato's "Republic," Aristotle's "Politics," plays of Sophocles and Euripides, Virgil's "Aeneid," Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," Dante's "Divine Comedy," Montaigne's essays, the great tragedies of Shakespeare, Milton's "Paradise Lost," the poetry of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning, Tolstoy's "War and Peace," Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," Goethe's "Faust," Dickens' "Great Expectations" and "Tale of Two Cities," Melville's "Moby Dick," Emerson's essays, Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter," Marx's "Communist Manifesto!" What an understanding of America from the Declaration of Independence, "The Federalist Papers," the Lincoln-Douglas debates, De Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address!

In literature the reader gains a wider and deeper understanding of human nature; he learns to know himself through the vicarious experiences of others. Its style holds up before the student the finest example of writing skills. It adds to his storehouse of knowledge and understanding. It presents him with the best that has been thought and said by man.

The importance of critical analysis in a liberal arts program can hardly be overestimated. What better field for the exercise of critical thinking than in reading and reflecting on literature that portrays the great truths and issues of life? "Students can memorize and recall, but they can't interpret, infer, judge, or persuade." ("Focus," Educational Testing Service, 1984, p 6). The challenge of literature is an invitation to think perceptively about life's enduring, fundamental questions and to interpret and evaluate its answers. By exercising his critical faculties, it can prepare the ministerial student well for examining and evaluating the issues of life he will encounter in the parish.

Carl F. Henry, former editor of *Christianity Today*, indirectly underscores the importance of literature in presenting the great issues of life. In his address, "The Crisis of Modern Learning" ("Faculty Dialogue," Fall 1984, p 9), he deplores the banishment of God from university classrooms: "Courses in science and in history dismiss deity as irrelevant. Psychology texts usually introduce God only as a psychic aberration. Philosophy departments are in the grip of postpositivistic analysis and tend to sidestep supernatural concerns; others disown the supernatural and creatively restructure ultimate reality. Over against most departments where both the God of the Bible and John Doe god are now shunned as extraneous, the literature department alone seems at least to reflect the great theological concerns in a literary context." Literature raises the central issues of life—the concept of deity, the nature of man, the fall and regeneration of man, moral values, utopian ideals—and gives natural man's best answers to them. It is just such issues which the preacher must address and to which he applies revealed truth.

Concerning *history*, I have already pointed out that it is important in theological preparation and in the understanding of our cultural heritage. The Association of American Colleges makes some perceptive comments concerning the value of historical consciousness in examining and evaluating the contemporary scene. “The more refined our historical understanding, the better prepared we are to recognize complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty as intractable conditions of human society.” A study of history “will disabuse any student of the harmful notion that life is a simple process of cause and effect. To exercise historical consciousness is ... to avoid the pitfalls of oversimplification, shallowness, and unexamined and unchallenged evidence” (“Integrity in the College Curriculum,” pp 18–19). Such a student becomes a “cautious skeptic” in his reading—as indeed the parish pastor must be as he analyzes and interprets Christendom and the world for his people.

Foreign language studies serve various purposes at Northwestern College. Most obvious in our function as a pre-seminary college is their “professional” purpose. Directly and indirectly the study of Greek and Hebrew enables our graduates to hear the voice of God more immediately and accurately. The study of such theological languages as Latin and German helps to keep our church’s culture and theology alive.

Other liberal arts colleges have more secular reasons for promoting foreign language study. We add theirs to our own distinctive rationale for such study. Prominent among them is our obligation to understand the origin and development of our Western civilization, of which we are heirs.

Consider, for example, our debt to the Romans. The Latin language provides an intimate “acquaintance with the thought and culture of one of the greatest civilizations of the past” (NWC *Catalog*). “There is no language so useful for teaching a student the principles of grammar, whether that grammar be English, Greek, or German” (E. E. Kowalke, “An Evaluation of Our Present Ministerial Training Course,” WELS *Proceedings*, 1961, p 160). It helps the student to understand and spell many English words derived from Latin. To the Latin scholar it provides “an appreciation of those qualities that make literary masterpieces classic” (NWC *Catalog*).

Consider also our debt to the Greeks. Werner Jaeger has written: “Before them we never hear of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic ... clearly the systematic expression of the principle of shaping the intellect because it begins instruction in the form of language, the form of oratory, and the form of thought. This educational technique is one of the greatest discoveries which the mind of man has ever made ... ” (*Paideia I*, p 314).

The laws of thought and knowledge that Socrates and Plato established to counter the Sophists and their relativism have rarely been challenged. Augustine knew Greek philosophy well. As a Christian he challenged it, not because pagan laws were invalid, but because reason cannot attain to inspired truth; however, he also used it to understand and formulate Christian theology. Before him, Paul too knew well the Greek thought that he challenged before Augustine. The theologian needs to know both the validity and the limits of man’s thought as the Greeks explored and established them. The liberal arts originated with the Greeks.

The knowledge of another culture through the intimacy of its language, which is the expression of its soul, not only broadens and deepens our knowledge of another people, but it also gives us a new perspective on our own. An understanding of German psychology and culture via its language, for example, gives us a better perception of our own. It helps us evaluate our culture critically rather than that we mindlessly accept it as the ideal culture.

Mastery of a foreign language also contributes to a student’s “flexibility of outlook, of speech, tone, and linguistic form. The broader, more supple turn of mind (for one does learn to

twist it this way and that in studying a foreign language) is invaluable in other disciplines as well” (*Christian Faith and the Liberal Arts*, p 167). As our synod moves actively into Hispanic ministry, our language studies background and experience will stand us in good stead as we endeavor to communicate our heritage to another culture.

Following Brunner’s structure of liberal arts studies, we now come to “*the other arts*,” which are also “languages.” First among them is music, followed by the visual arts (painting, sculpture, architecture) and the performing arts (eg., drama). Strictly speaking, they are not liberal arts; rather, they are arts that are products of liberal arts culture. As such they have a place in a liberal arts curriculum, whether as individual disciplines or as corollaries of other disciplines, such as history and literature. Even if educators do not properly include them in the “core” of liberal studies, who would consider the Parthenon, the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, the Chartres cathedral, Michaelangelo’s David, or the St. Matthew Passion intruders among the liberal arts when they express the distilled essence of liberal arts culture? Or when the fine (and performing) arts bring so much beauty and pleasure to man, even in the church, which has its own beauty of holiness, and where the Word of God is the joy of our hearts? Or when they have achieved their quintessence where the gospel holds sway?

There is no dispute about the place of the *social sciences* (sociology, psychology, economics, political science, anthropology, social psychology, political and economic history, etc.) in the liberal arts curriculum. The sciences that “deal with human society or its elements, as family, state, or race, and with the relations and institutions involved in man’s existence and well-being as a member of an organized community” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*) are in the very center of the sphere and preoccupation of the liberal arts. The humanities are man-oriented.

Christian education is God-oriented, but it is also man-oriented. Man’s origin, his nature, his predicament and his destiny are a primary concern of religion. Man’s relation to his fellow man is a primary concern of the organized church. The social sciences have valuable things to contribute to the curriculum of a college that prepares men for a calling that requires an extensive knowledge of the psychology of man and the sociology of man, of man individually and man communally.

Curriculum limitations preclude the introduction of a number of social sciences as separate disciplines in a liberal arts curriculum. But the courses in religion, history and literature, for example, are rich in social science. Taught from a Christian perspective, these disciplines not only supply an abundance of social science substance; they also reveal the false philosophy of secular social science, correct its distorted assumptions and supplant its ignorance with true knowledge. At the same time, no Christian college will claim to have all the insights and knowledge a study of the social sciences requires.

Psychology certainly deserves its place in our curriculum. The individual’s keener understanding of himself, of how he perceives the world and himself, is a primary outcome of a liberal arts education. To a lesser extent, sociology and anthropology courses have a place in our program. A course in economics might also make a contribution to a well-rounded training for the future parish pastor.

The *natural sciences* (physics, chemistry, biology) clearly fulfill one of the purposes of a liberal arts education: understanding the physical nature of the world in which we live. A study of the natural sciences also serves other purposes of the liberal arts. It develops our powers of rational discrimination and critical thought. It teaches us how to inquire accurately (the methods

of research). In its outcome it also contributes to the development of our aesthetic sense (Psalm 19; Song of Solomon 2).

Since science is one of the great gods of our age, we must become familiar with its methods, and evaluate its reliability and its limitation. The informed student must know its great strengths and achievements; he must also know the weaknesses that are inherent in scientific inquiry, “the kinds of questions that science neither asks nor answers” (“Integrity in the College Curriculum,” p 19). A study of the natural sciences should teach both respect and skepticism.

To impart an understanding of natural science and its methods, it should be taught on two levels. There should be a course in hands on (laboratory) science in a limited area (perhaps even restricted to a single problem) to learn the scientific method in detail. There should also be a course to present the history and philosophies of science, to relate them to our culture and to our faith. The educated Christian may perform a laboratory experiment in mutation; he must also survey the broad canvass of the physical, educational, moral and spiritual (even political) implications of the evolutionary worldview.

Brunner’s list concludes with mathematics, language and *logic*. They are the “basic studies” for the liberal arts. “No matter what one studies in the liberal curriculum, one must use his intellect, and the art that governs this ‘use’ is logic. Logic is the common structure of all knowledge, whether theoretical or practical” (*Christian Faith and the Liberal Arts*, p 9). A liberal arts education needs to form the intellect, and through the practiced intellect to gain an intellectual grasp on human experience. A course in logic that is not merely a code of rules and a pathology of errors, but is an exercise in rational thought, serves a good purpose in a liberal arts curriculum, particularly if it relates to other disciplines.

If no formal course in logic is required, each discipline should provide students with training and exercise in the logic that is germane to the form and substance of that discipline. We need to know how to think when we study science and mathematics, read poetry, discuss religion, learn history, take a course in speech.

Mathematics has a high concentration of logic. It demands clear and consistent thought. It trains the mind in formal thought. It inexorably exacts its penalty for a failure to use logic with knowledge and precision.

Mathematics is essential for an understanding of the empirical sciences. Geography and physics and astronomy could not be exact sciences without mathematics. Nor could our world have been expanded into space without that science.

The Association of American Colleges points out another use for mathematics. Its report states: “We have become a society bombarded by numbers. The interpretation of numerical data requires a sophisticated level of understanding ... ” There is need for “sharpening the ability of students to understand numerical data, to recognize their misuse, the multiple interpretations they often permit, and the ways that they can be manipulated to mislead.” “Students must be made aware of the ways numerical data increasingly make accessible levels of knowledge and understanding not possible for earlier generations” (“Integrity in the College Curriculum,” p 17).

Many concepts depend on numbers and statistics. Even the program of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod can be expressed in graphs, probabilities, “rates of change” and other mathematical statements. The need for mathematics has also been accentuated by the arrival of the computer, which throws out numbers in such proliferation and with such ease. If the liberal arts are needed to understand our contemporary world, they need mathematics.

At the risk of being faulted for using a hackneyed expression—last but not least, the liberal arts include *language* itself. Without the competencies developed by language study, the

liberal arts would be seriously hampered, if not disabled. Man expresses himself primarily by the medium of language. Grammar, rhetoric and logic have been the chief educational instruments in the history of the liberal arts. “The knowledge of language and mathematics provides fundamental tools that must be a part of an individual’s intellectual equipment if one is to master other skills” (College of Letters and Science: Objectives of a Liberal Education, UW-Madison).

The function of language study, to be found in both English and foreign language study, is to communicate clearly. Clear communication involves a knowledge of grammar, which “investigates how a language is put together, how one should read; [and] rhetoric, how human beings express themselves, whether by writing or speaking” (*Christian Faith and the Liberal Arts*, p 10).

If Northwestern College has a “major,” it is the study of language(s). Forty-two percent of the 149 credit hours required for graduation are credits in languages, not including English courses. If a student requires a complete “special” program, 48% of his graduation requirements are in the languages. The multiple experiences with learning a series of languages develop perceptiveness and flexibility in language communication. They give a student greater facility in understanding new kinds of communication and adapting to them—an asset in the parish ministry.

The parish ministry is a language calling. The pastor must continually use language to communicate God’s vital messages to his people. He must comprehend God’s language well, employing his hard-earned language skills to do so, and must interpret it well for God’s children. His calling is a ministry of the Word. He needs to appreciate its power and its beauty and its winsomeness, and must strive to mirror it with as much power and beauty and winsomeness as he can muster. Sunday after Sunday, week after week, he must render God’s language well. He should speak it intelligibly, effectively, reassuringly, compassionately, firmly. He must deliver it with authority and clothe it with grace. The pastor should also write it well—clearly, effectively, persuasively, if not handsomely and gracefully. He should also read it well to his congregation, with perception and interpretation. *God* is speaking to his people through his minister.

To communicate well, the pastor should be competent in his own language. He should handle English well, but even if the foreign languages he has studied primarily for other purposes are not as familiar to him, and even if he does not analyze them as well as he understands his mother tongue, they too make a contribution to the pastor’s desire to use language well, and to his feel for expressing it.

The facility to receive the message of language, both its prose content and its nuances, and the facility to express oneself well in language are effective instruments in responding to and appropriating the rich stores of the liberal arts. Much of the treasure the liberal arts have to communicate is royally crafted by artisans of the language. The liberal arts yield more riches to those who take pleasure in the language setting in which those treasures are found.

When Theodore M. Greene arranged the liberal arts under such categories as “to communicate clearly,” “to inquire accurately,” etc., he identified one category as “to understand synoptically.” Under that category he subsumed history, philosophy and theology.

While these three disciplines are inherently extensive and far-ranging, other liberal arts disciplines, like logic, literature and the social sciences, are also expansive, arching over wide areas of human learning, life and culture. In fact, the sweep of literature can be said to cover even significant aspects of history, philosophy and theology. Logic, of course, directs rational thought in almost all liberal arts disciplines.

This leads to the observation that, overall, the liberal arts are broad and synoptic rather than narrow and specialized. The liberal arts are broad in the sense that “an individual who is generally or liberally educated is not thus characterized because of what he knows but rather because of his sensitivity to and grasp of a wide range of ideas, concepts, principles, and values ...” (“A Re-examination of Liberal Education,” p 5).

The antithesis is the type of education that is endemic in college programs that express “relevance, practicality, and accommodation of individuality” (*op. cit.*, p 4). Professional education tends to fragment education into limited areas and “isolated bodies of knowledge which deal ineffectively with the real world and with life experiences in it” (P. Dressel, p 6).

It does not require much imagination to see that when American college students are “lacking even the most rudimentary knowledge about the history, literature, art and philosophical foundations of their nation and their civilization” (“Should More Liberal Arts Be Required?” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 6, 1985, Adult Education, p 3), they are like the six blind men and the elephant in the familiar poem. Each saw the same elephant but could report his distinctive observations only on the basis of his vantage point in contact with an elephant. Similarly, each vocationally and professionally oriented college student sees the same society and culture, but each one perceives it only from the vantage point of his special discipline. The world is seen from the casement window of the discipline, not from the parapet of general knowledge. A good liberal arts education provides an eminence from which to survey life in many aspects and this world in its variety. The educated man should view the world about him comprehensively rather than narrowly, synoptically rather than fragmentarily. He cannot afford to be numbered among those who “believe without judgment, decide without wisdom, act without standards” (*New York Times*, Edward B. Fiske).

I see a liberal arts education as a grid or a network into which to “plug” the diversity of knowledge. A liberal arts education helps its graduates to organize and align elements of knowledge with the master thoughts and principles of human knowledge and experience. It enables them more readily to relate one area of knowledge to another. The liberal arts graduate has a broader pattern into which to fit human knowledge and experience; the specialist has primarily only the pocket-sized sketch of his discipline. Too many college graduates have only an engineer’s, a nurse’s, a computer programmer’s, a mathematician’s, a lawyer’s view of the wide world in which they live.

Can the Northwestern College liberal arts program provide this broad pattern? Because it is semi-professional, it cannot offer the large roster of liberal arts disciplines available at a pure liberal arts college. The NWC curriculum cannot accommodate so broad a range. Then efforts should be made to incorporate the objectives and goals of unavailable courses into the goals of courses in the curriculum that are sufficiently germane to accomplish this purpose, at least in part. Literature courses, for example, offer a variety of opportunities to identify and weigh the philosophies of men in their natural setting; so do history courses, because the events and eras of history are frequently philosophies acted out. Literature, history, psychology and religion courses offer the same kind of opportunities for anthropology and sociology courses. Specific disciplines must often do double and triple duty in selective liberal arts programs.

A faculty like ours is well suited for this type of “crossover” into related areas of learning. Our faculty is not composed of specialists who concentrate on narrow fields of learning. We do not confine our teaching to Neo-Augustan poetry, for example, or to immunology or 16th century music. We are not narrow graduate school specialists. Our own baccalaureate education, by and large, gave us the subject matter and the breadth of view needed

to expand and extrapolate our own disciplines into related areas of learning. NWC faculty are non-union educators.

The matter of proportioning a liberal arts curriculum to professional and technical courses remains a vexing problem. Preparation for a profession appears to call for specific training in addition to the general studies a college is expected to provide. Most American colleges are crowding out general studies by requiring a large number of specialized courses. Their humanities have yielded to the professional majors; the “core of common studies” to “how to” courses. The emphasis has been on the development of vocational skills rather than on the synoptic education a liberal arts program can provide.

Seminaries and pre-seminary colleges have also been affected by this trend. Seminary courses in professional techniques, in administration, and in counseling and psychology have left little room for dogmatics, exegesis and church history. A pre-seminary college is also tempted to offer more practical courses that will benefit the future pastor. A parish pastor could, conceivably, make use of a variety of skills: bookkeeping and accounting procedures, blueprint reading, mechanics, media operation, graphics, computer programming, electronics. How many should the pastor trainee acquire from his college education?

The “skills” our curriculum offers are largely in the field of communication: a speech course, writing courses, possibly remedial reading. Our physical education course teaches athletic, recreational and safety skills. We require typing credit and computer orientation. Perhaps we could number our training in exegesis among the “skills” we inculcate.

Can we add other “how to” courses? I suggest that if we do, we proceed with caution. Practical disciplines have a way of displacing valuable liberal arts courses—as many American colleges have come to realize. Most students also prefer practical exercises to the rigors of mental discipline. We are on a slippery slope when we expand these offerings. Satisfy one priority and two others will be knocking at the door. It should be noted, also, that many “practical” requirements in the parish ministry can be met better by trained and competent members of the congregation. Let the pastor concentrate on work for which his liberal arts theological education has prepared him well.

Learning on the job has not been intimidating for liberal arts graduates, who have developed versatile study skills. They know how to read, and how to organize and assimilate new knowledge. Other liberal arts graduates have entered professions without “practical” skills and have done better than their competition in business and management. A report in the *New York Times* (“Different Approaches”) states that more than 80 percent of corporate executives rated verbal communication skills and reasoning ability [liberal arts benefits] as “very important” to success in business. A private consultant expressed the advantage of liberal arts education thus: “Liberal-arts graduates are able to communicate with a wider spectrum of peers, subordinates and managers, and that’s always a help.” Another liberal arts graduate, successful in banking, had this to say about history: “Studying history teaches you not just facts, but how to write, how to think and how to be analytical. And that serves you well in whatever you do.” A growing number of colleges are asserting that a liberal arts education will enrich students monetarily as well as intellectually and prepare them for a variety of careers.

It is, therefore, my opinion that the scope and demands of the parish ministry are better served by a liberal arts baccalaureate program than by a Bible college type of program or by vocational theology disciplines. “Ripeness is all,” as Shakespeare expressed it. Martin Marty’s observation is apropos here: “The typical liberal arts college, while it may be well staffed in the religion department, cannot hope to be sufficiently comprehensive to encourage a wholesome

approach to theology. For another, the student will reveal his readiness for the rigors of theology by his proof of restraint and self-discipline. On this scale, theological answers commensurate with an increasing depth of questions will more likely be forthcoming. Premature theological tantalization ordinarily leads to superficiality and—if my seminary professors are correct—unteachability when the prodigy reaches seminary.” “Premature ripeness is fatal. It produces a narcissism, a dilettantism, or a fascination with religion at the expense of theological hard work” (*The Making of Ministers*, pp 142–143).

Does this advocacy of the liberal arts endorse our liberal arts curriculum exactly as it is conducted today? Not necessarily. The times may call for adjustments. Other liberal arts courses may more nearly meet present needs. Furthermore, in the business world programs are revised or even discontinued if they are not “cost effective.” Similarly, liberal arts courses should be “education effective”. If they do not yield the benefits they promise, they also call for revision, if not replacement. Low ratings in popularity polls, however, cannot be the determining factor. In the troubled 1960s many colleges and universities yielded to student demands for curriculum changes. They have since rued the day.

Summa summarum, I believe that the second objective in the Report of the Curriculum Review Committee (1971) is still valid when it approves a Northwestern College curriculum that “offers instruction that aims to provide the student with an understanding of sinful man, for whom the Word of God is intended. To do this, it offers courses that outline God’s dealing with mankind as recorded in history, and it includes a study of man’s accomplishments and failures as they are reflected in the various disciplines of a liberal arts course of study.”

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