

Getting Ready

The Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Post-Pandemic World

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With a foreword
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Conclusion

ONE OF THE MOST IMPRESSIVE LEADERS to emerge from the ordeal of COVID-19 was Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Fauci is a gifted scientist and researcher, and he has a long history of combating epidemics, including AIDS. But what impresses most is his ability to make sense of very technical material and convey that material to the public with clarity, conviction, and compassion.

Fauci is the product of a Jesuit education at Regis High School in New York and the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. At both Regis and Holy Cross, Fauci was steeped in the sciences, history, philosophy, and language. At Holy Cross, he majored in Greek Classics and Premed. “We did a lot of Classics, Greek, Latin, Romance languages,” he noted in a recent profile. “We took many credits of philosophy, everything from epistemology to philosophical logic, etc. But we took enough biology and physics and science to get you into medical school.”¹

The Anthony Fauci we observe today is the product of many years of technical work in scientific laboratories and specialized training in the laboratories and classrooms at Cornell Medical College. But Fauci’s *readiness* to succeed so impressively in graduate school and then in the busy professional world of high science and government was just as surely the result of his exposure to the liberal arts and sciences, which provided insight into the human domains and questions with which medical science must ultimately cope. Along the way, Fauci’s liberal education also taught him how to think and communicate across different modes of experiencing and knowing the world. It is hard to imagine a more compelling demonstration of how the liberal arts and sciences establish *readiness* for meaningful engagement in professional, public, and interpersonal life, especially as cultural, scientific, and technical challenges and opportunities become more integrated.

Even as we admire and laud Fauci’s example, we can and should expect that the economic pressures for more specialized and fragmented modes of higher education will increase dramatically in the post-pandemic world that is now before us. This means that the defense of the liberal arts and sciences

will need to be made at high volume and with relentless insistence on the multiple purposes of undergraduate education. But as I’ve argued throughout these essays, that defense needs to be made in new and more compelling ways.

First and foremost, we must become much more comfortable with the pragmatic register, where students, parents, and public officials are reasonably inclined to begin thinking about the purposes of higher education. Following the work of Danielle Allen, I’ve advanced the idea of *readiness* as a possible point of departure, but one could certainly imagine others. The important point is that we can’t shy away from discussing why and how the liberal arts and sciences will prove useful to students as they enter adult life.

Exploring the idea of readiness for work is an area of particular importance and opportunity because it signals openness to a more egalitarian, inclusive, and democratic vision of liberal learning. Advocates of the liberal arts and sciences must shed once and for all the notion that liberal education is intended for cultural and social elites. One way to do this is to engage in conversations about broad, emergent patterns and requirements in the post-pandemic economy and how the liberal arts and sciences might address those patterns and requirements, keeping always in mind that readiness entails a sense of “knowing about” as well as “knowing how.”

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Anthony Fauci’s career and example also alert us to how fundamental scientific and technological literacies are to readiness. The economic, political, and interpersonal spheres of life are already saturated by scientific and technological knowledge, and that will be even more true in the post-pandemic world. But scientific and technological literacy is not just about knowing what sequestered academic disciplines have to say about and within their enclosed subject matters. It consists, rather, in understanding that scientific and technological knowledge and practices are now embedded in every part of our personal and social lives. That is why I have argued

throughout for the idea of the integration of the major disciplines and domains of knowledge, bringing the arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences into deeper, prolonged conversation and collaboration. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that the fragmented knowledge produced by disciplinary specialization is inadequate to our circumstances. In the post-pandemic world, we will require an increasingly integrated understanding of what is happening. Realizing new forms of curricular and pedagogical integration will put the liberal arts and sciences back on the cutting edge of higher education and the production of knowledge.

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Relaxing the hold of traditional patterns of disciplinary specialization and graduate and professional education on the undergraduate curriculum also opens the door to innovations more attuned to the needs of

students seeking broad preparation for moral, working, and civic lives. One form of attunement I've explored is connecting the curriculum to prominent issues, questions, and challenges that await our students following graduation. While certainly not exhaustive, I hope that the examples I've offered might stimulate further thinking about what a problem-based curriculum, attuned first and foremost to the futures of our students, might look like.

It is unlikely that more than a meaningful minority of future undergraduates in the United States will earn their degrees in programs and institutions that legitimately lay claim to the educational ideals and practices of the liberal arts and sciences. But preserving that strong minority position is vital. The American system of higher education is still the best in the world. Its preeminence is due in part to the dazzling success of specialized research and technical education, but it is also due to the long history and stubborn persistence of the notion that higher education serves civic and moral as well as economic purposes. The utility of this vision of higher education will only increase in the post-pandemic world, where experience will reward breadth as well as depth of intelligence, understanding, and interpretive capacity.

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The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is a global membership organization dedicated to advancing the vitality and democratic purposes of undergraduate liberal education. Through our programs and events, publications and research, public advocacy and campus-based projects, AAC&U serves as a catalyst and facilitator for innovations that improve educational quality and equity and that support the success of all students. In addition to accredited public and private, two-year and four-year colleges and universities and state higher education systems and agencies throughout the United States, our membership includes degree-granting higher education institutions in more than twenty-five countries as well as other organizations and individuals. To learn more, visit www.aacu.org.



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