

How the flexibility and rigour of a Liberal Arts programme opens up diverse opportunities for students

With Teachers' Day round the corner, educationists explain how a Liberal Arts education allows students to chart personally meaningful paths that resonate with their authentic selves

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ARUNA SANKARANARAYANAN



As they have to pick their own majors, minors and electives from a cornucopia of offerings, students have to engage in self-reflection. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockPhoto

That a number of excellent Liberal Arts colleges have mushroomed in different parts of the country signifies that the need for a rounded education is finally being recognised and met within India. However, both students and parents remain diffident about career options. Unlike professional courses with reasonably predictable career trajectories, the future prospects of Liberal Arts students seem nebulous. So I spoke to educationists at two well-known universities on this topic and found that the field is wide open for those who opt for a liberal arts education.

Breadth and depth

Rajagopal C.V., who heads outreach at Azim Premji University, avers that the flexibility and rigour of Liberal Arts programmes equip students for a range of careers. Based on students' proclivities and how they navigate their collegiate experience, students may choose different paths. At the university, for example, all students have to take foundational courses, following a common curriculum, which furnish students with "transferable skills" like "critical thinking and analytical capabilities", while also making them discerning readers and persuasive writers. Additionally, each student picks a major, in which they gain deep knowledge of a particular subject, and a minor, of their interest.

Likewise, Nirmala Rao, Vice-Chancellor of KREA University emphasises that a Liberal Arts education equips you with both "breadth and depth". Students gain a motley of intangible, yet invaluable, skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, reasoning, sense-making, cross-cultural communication, empathy and leadership that are applicable to a range of careers. As these skills enhance a person's productivity and creativity, they are sought after by employers. Because Liberal Arts students are encouraged to think independently, they are more likely to grow into self-directed learners. To survive, let alone thrive, in today's fast paced work environment, being able to learn and upskill yourself time and again is a prerequisite.

Individual interests

According to Rajagopal, students majoring in the same subject may pick vastly different trajectories based on their interests and predilections. He cites the example of three Biology majors charted three distinct paths. One who was deeply interested in Biology pursued a doctoral program in Integrative Biology. Another who was also interested in data analytics opted for a Masters in Bioinformatics and is currently working in the pharmaceutical industry. A third with a penchant for the social sector worked in the field of Science and Language education. Thus, a Liberal Arts major allows you to craft a career path that resonates with your unique constellation of skill sets, talents and interests.

Rao asserts that a Liberal Arts programme prepares you for the rigours and demands of higher education because you are trained to think analytically, creatively and laterally. The interdisciplinarity also enables you to pursue a diverse range of careers that includes graphic design, human resources, public relations, mediation, technical writing, education, business and jobs that are yet to be envisioned. Instead of following

a linear preset path, a Liberal Arts programme opens up possibilities. It is up to each student to map their own journeys.

Another unique facet is the flexibility and freedom afforded to students. As they have to pick their own majors, minors and electives from a cornucopia of offerings, students have to engage in self-reflection. What courses do I want to pursue next semester? Which courses excited and energised me last semester? What questions do I find compelling? Do I see myself growing more curious in this field? By introspecting and making these choices for themselves every semester, students are more likely to chalk a personally meaningful path that resonates with their authentic selves. Rather than pick a field that is highly remunerative or prestigious from a social standpoint, Liberal Arts students have the opportunity to find and define themselves while garnering skills and knowledge leading to a fulfilling career.

The writer is the author of *Zero Limits: Things Every 20-Something Should Know*. She blogs at www.arunasankaranarayanan.com