



# Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries with Civic Literacy

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Most universities require students to complete a core undergraduate curriculum that emphasizes a balance among the sciences, humanities, and the arts. This curriculum is designed to challenge the intellect and encourage a lifelong curiosity and hunger for further learning. Upon graduation, a liberally educated person is able to explore disciplines outside his or her own specialty with the expectation of at least grasping what professionals in other fields are discussing.

A liberal education also ensures that students graduate with civic literacy. Civic literacy provides students with three capacities: critical thinking, proficiency in bridging and understanding different cultures, and the ability to imagine and sympathize with the situation of others (Nussbaum 1997). Each capacity prepares students to go forth and be enlightened citizens. Graduates with a liberal education should understand that, whatever their chosen profession, they are part of a larger society in which the choices they make affect not only themselves but those around them as well. Civic literacy cuts across all disciplines and benefits all sectors of society and work. Furthermore, it provides a grounding for students in moral and ethical reasoning and enables graduates to use their critical thinking skills to add value in their chosen professions and in their communities.

A Hart Research Associates 2013 survey of 318 employers, conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, affirmed the need for such attributes. The survey identified the most important characteristics for graduates entering the workplace. These included the ability to think critically and rationally and the ability to uphold high ethical and moral standards. Ultimately, graduates must be able to offer employers more than the knowledge of their majors, be that finance, art history, or any of the other narrow disciplines taught in the academy.

We use two case studies to demonstrate the importance of a liberal education, with an emphasis on civic literacy. On first glance, these case studies appear to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. One perspective is from business education, a world frequently and repeatedly challenged as being myopic and at odds with liberal education. The other perspective is from museum curation, a world seen as intimately related to a liberal education, yet also a world that relies increasingly on entrepreneurial initiative for sustainability. What these two case studies demonstrate is the shared importance of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and a broad world view—civic literacy.

Of equal importance, these case studies highlight why it is important for faculty who teach liberal arts courses to embrace the role they play in preparing students for future career success, whatever the chosen profession. When academics and professionals begin to embrace their connectedness rather than call out their differences, the long, ongoing debate about the relevance of a liberal education will no longer be necessary.

## CASE STUDY 1: A VIEW FROM THE BUSINESS SCHOOL

James Madison University (JMU) has recently embarked on two university-wide initiatives in which the College of Business stands to benefit and to play a leading role. The first initiative is the Madison Collaborative, Ethical Reasoning in Action. Developed as the Quality Enhancement Program to meet reaccreditation requirements for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the Madison Collaborative is a university-wide program designed to teach an ethical reasoning framework to all JMU students. The goal is to provide students with a decision-making framework that they learn and apply throughout their university education and beyond. Designed around eight key knowledge



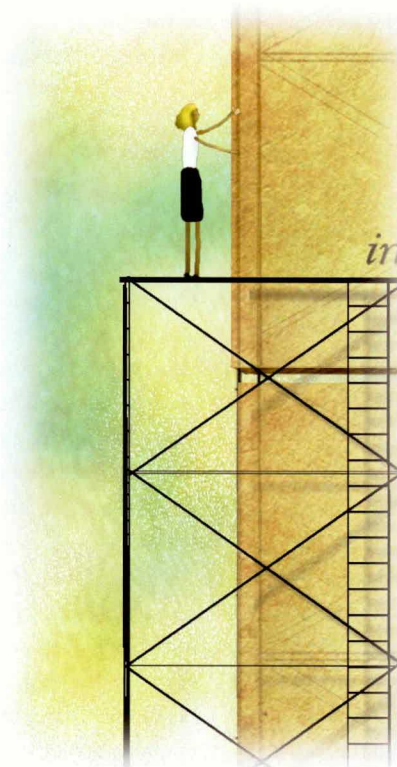
questions, known as the 8KQs, drawn from the ethical reasoning tradition, the Madison Collaborative teaches students a set of prompts to use in making decisions. These 8KQs apply across cultures and provide students with a set of lenses that prepares them to embrace the tough choices they will inevitably face. The 8KQs focus on fairness, outcomes, responsibilities, character, liberty, empathy, authority, and rights. Applying these 8KQs requires critical thinking, proficiency in bridging and understanding different cultures, and the ability to imagine and sympathize with the situation of others. In other words, civic literacy.

The second initiative is still under development and focuses on providing all JMU students the opportunity to develop an entrepreneurial mindset through exposure to concepts in classes or through participation in extra- and/or cocurricular activities. This effort is being led collectively by all of the academic deans on campus. The Center for Entrepreneurship, housed in the College of Business, serves as a hub and a catalyst for much of the activity, which includes a focus on innovation, creativity, and collaboration.

Entrepreneurial thinking involves looking beyond what is to what can be, an ability and willingness to identify and exploit opportunities. On the surface, such a way of thinking may be perceived in a negative light. Taken within the context of a strong grounding in civic literacy, however, that view changes. Consider the student who learns to look beyond the current health initiatives in a community to define and exploit opportunities to make health care more readily available. Or the musician who will need to take ownership of his or her own career to be successful (or even to just have a paycheck).

As the deans worked collectively to define and foster this entrepreneurial

thinking initiative, we realized the importance of folding the Madison Collaborative, Ethical Reasoning in Action framework into how we talk about and teach entrepreneurial thinking. For those of us in the College of Business, it is through these two different lenses—ethical reasoning and an entrepreneurial mindset—that we live out our mission to prepare students to be engaged, principled business professionals and



leaders. Through these lenses, topics such as social entrepreneurship and conscious capitalism move from the realm of theoretical constructs to actionable ways of managing organizations. Ultimately, the business landscape is transformed by ensuring that profit maximization is not the only goal, or even the primary goal.

The collective of the strong focus on civic literacy as part of the rich JMU liberal education heritage, the Madison Collaborative, and entrepreneurial thinking ensures our business students are receiving

a grounded, unique, and solid business education that prepares them to excel as principled business professionals and leaders who are enlightened citizens. They leave JMU prepared to be collaborative business partners, engaged with ideas and the world.

## CASE STUDY 2: A VIEW FROM THE MUSEUM

The link between business and museums is evident in the kinds of people museums hire. Museums generally look for people with expertise and interest in collecting, preserving, and interpreting material culture, but in recent years, the buzzword “entrepreneurial” has infiltrated a wide variety of job profiles and calls across the field. As a preference for hiring committees, “entrepreneurial” has become a code word for candidates with business savvy, money-raising connections, and marketing capacity. There is recognition that having a mind toward profits is not necessarily a bad thing and can lead to sustainable futures for museums. This inclination, however, can present conflicts of interest, especially if it influences the contents of collections, exhibitions, and the presentation of public history.

Museum advocates may lament this trend toward museum corporatization, but there seems to be no going back. In this profit-driven environment, how do we make sure that museum management remains ethical and focused on its real task—providing an important resource for continuing to tell the story of time and history? Museums in this environment need people who are knowledgeable about the subject matter (arts, humanities, science and technology, history, etc.), entrepreneurial, and ethical. In other words, museums need individuals with a high level of civic literacy complemented by business acumen.

The Smithsonian National Museum of American History (NMAH) recently





has begun a new hiring initiative to replace retiring staff and rejuvenate the museum's curatorial force. This initiative follows the development of the NMAH's 2013 strategic vision and set of core values that seek to operationalize civic literacy in our work at the museum. The values focus on stewardship, critical thinking, inclusion, curiosity, collaboration, risk taking, and ethics. We are looking for people who practice a kind of social entrepreneurship that comes from training in ethical reasoning provided by a liberal education like the one found at JMU. As JMU and other higher education institutions have shown, this can be cultivated by a liberal education that has at its core strong traditions in the arts and humanities and includes a focus on civic literacy.

Civic literacy allows students to develop broad intellectual and cultural understanding; it nurtures creativity and deepens participation in public discourse and modern democracy. Society flourishes with citizens whose understanding of the world is broad and analytical, and that is true of museum management as well.

In the best cases, arts and humanities in higher education encourage what philosopher Martha Nussbaum has called a "narrative imagination"—the capacity to enter into worldviews and experiences different from one's own (2010). According to Nussbaum, this kind of learning can foster real democratic practice and lead to shared values of respect for freedom and human dignity; empathy, open mindedness, and imagination; a desire for tolerance, justice, and equality; and responsibility to a larger good, all of which are characteristics of the ethical citizen. Humanities fields teach this kind of understanding through literature, arts, language, history, and other fields that encourage people to imagine themselves in the situation of others; diverse stories

transport audiences to other moments in time, make foreignness familiar, and allow a person to get lost in the beauty of objects and images. This kind of imaginative work is at the very foundation of museums.

Museums like the NMAH provide a space in which the evidence of our material past and present (collections) can be used to tell such stories, to remind us of what has happened on Earth and beyond, and to shape a more humane future. Cultural artifacts remind us of our interconnectedness; the way we live our lives is not so different from the manner in which others—past and present—existed in this world. More than ever, we need people who know how to tell stories about how we exist in complex intersection. Graduates with civic literacy acquired as part of a strong liberal education foundation and coupled with an ethical approach to life and work can use the knowledge gleaned from our material culture to inform and nourish our sense of connection to each other and the world. This is a significant responsibility given the corporatization of cultural institutions, and it will be taken up by the next generation of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders at the NMAH and beyond.

Funding for museums will ebb and flow, as ever, but we see that across the board—from business to medicine to cultural institutions—a commitment to ethics and entrepreneurial thinking will always be needed. As funding cuts continue to be felt in the museum sector, organizations will adapt, and they will need to search for people with entrepreneurial minds and broad expertise who can resist being swayed by funders' objectives. A liberal education based on tenets like those exhibited by JMU's Ethical Reasoning in Action initiative can cultivate the museum professional who also practices ethical entrepreneurship.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, what we need is a fundamental rethinking of how we position the value and role of a liberal education. Clearly, a liberal education should provide the civic literacy that crosses disciplinary boundaries and is necessary in all sectors of society—for business students *and* for students who will lead museums. In the university setting, we need to be more purposeful in guiding students' selection of courses and showing them that, for instance, having an interest in science is not mutually exclusive with having an interest in working on Wall Street or curating a museum exhibit, but rather can be complementary.

Having an interest in art does not preclude one from becoming an entrepreneur but rather can lead one to be a successful entrepreneur by studying both art and entrepreneurship and enabling a museum to be more successful in finding resources to continue and grow its work. As the academy deepens its efforts to enable students to perceive the necessity of all learning being deeply grounded in civic literacy and an ethical framework, we begin to equip our students to succeed both professionally and personally in ways we can only begin to imagine. ■

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