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STEM aside, liberal arts are alive and well in Washington

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Although a liberal arts education may be considered an anachronism, a relic from simpler times, that position's spectacularly wrong. Let me explain.

Washington state educators have created an organization, Washington Consortium for the Liberal Arts (WaCLA), whose mission is both simple and clear: We're "an association of public and private higher education institutions, organizations and individuals promoting the value of a liberal arts education to the people and communities of the state."

With so much attention on higher education seemingly focused on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), WaCLA institutions ensure that students are educated broadly to best serve them and their communities.

Please understand that none of us are opposed to STEM; in fact, we celebrate science as an integral part of the liberal arts. But we know that students who are broadly educated, who understand both the nature of science and of literature, who can solve an equation as easily as they engage in conversation about an artistic performance, will be best positioned to successfully enter the workforce and deal with unforeseen challenges undoubtedly coming their way.

Don't take my word for this. The Association of American Colleges and Universities commissioned a study to determine characteristics expected by employers. While employers never mentioned the liberal arts, they described the essence of a liberal education, articulating their desire to hire employees excelling in four areas:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world.
- The ability to communicate effectively, think critically and solve complex problems.
- Personal and social responsibility, including ethical decision-making.
- Integrative learning and applying knowledge to real-world settings.

Employers aren't alone in explaining the value of a liberal arts education. The student winners of WaCLA's first essay contest did a superb job describing why educational breadth is important. This

contest, open to students at WaCLA's 23 member institutions, asked what it means to be liberally educated.

First-place winner Rebecca Korf, a Whitworth University student, described her experience working at Olympic National Park on a project examining the removal of century-old dams:

"In the process, I met many scientific researchers and graduate students examining what was happening on the ground level. I began to see a disconnect. The graduate students, while highly knowledgeable about fluvial flumes and LIDAR, had difficulties communicating their findings. The rangers working in education, on the other hand, didn't have the training to understand what they were supposed to communicate. As a science major, I had taken enough science classes to understand the science, but, in addition, my general education classes had given me the communication skills to explain these concepts to a general audience. I found myself working between the two groups, bridging the communication and understanding gaps in an area of great scientific and cultural importance."

WaCLA's second-place winner, University of Washington student Eleanor Lutz, entered college committed to exploring a new subject every quarter. She wrote, "I was astonished at how much there was to know, as I learned about racial justice in Art History, epistemology in Philosophy, behavior in Neurobiology . . . and ASCII in Programming."

Lutz explained, "Without this eclectic mix of classes, I would never have found my passion for behavioral neurobiology or realized that I find so much happiness in art education. A liberal arts education really is the best way to learn more about the world while in college, and consequently, to discover ourselves as people, students and community members."

She concluded, "Although I started college believing that my 'extra classes every quarter' were merely a fun diversion, I realized that they weren't 'extras' after all. I was learning to solve important problems, to understand people from extremely diverse backgrounds, and to express my ideas in anything from writing to painting to HTML code. I was learning from the best teacher there is: a liberal arts education."

Some might find it surprising that WaCLA's essay winners are science students but that simply underscores the importance of being able to cross intellectual boundaries; to know broadly and communicate creatively.

WaCLA institutions are committed to educating students to best serve society and to the value and transformative power of the liberal arts. As our contest has so well demonstrated, our students have learned this lesson well.

Michael Zimmerman is the vice president for academic affairs and provost at The Evergreen State College. He helped found the Washington Consortium for the Liberal Arts.