

On the Future of Liberal Arts: An Interview with Interim Dean Cavanagh

Dr. Yubraj Aryal

Dr. Dan Cavanagh, Interim Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, was interviewed by *Global Insight* Executive Editor, Yubraj Aryal. Dr. Aryal asked Dean Cavanagh about a few of the current issues regarding liberal arts education.

YA: Why is a liberal arts education important for our undergraduates?

DC: The liberal arts provide a foundational set of skills for everyone. Indeed, it is one of the reasons that liberal arts courses are part of the “core” set of courses most undergraduates need to take across the nation. A comprehensive understanding of these subjects allows students to synthesize information, drive creative solutions to problems, and communicate those solutions to a wider audience. This is especially important in the workforce and in civic life. For students who do not major in a liberal arts field, it is important for them to also build a base of these skills to apply to their lives.

YA: A majority of students in my literature classes, on the other hand, are from the sciences or engineering. I learned from some of them that they find liberal arts to be boring, or a waste of time. They take liberal arts courses not because they know their importance to their lives and careers but because such courses are required by the university. In this scenario, what can we do to make a difference for the current status of liberal arts in a university setting? Are there more things we can do to inform our students that the normative orientation of a liberal arts education can be coordinated with the empirical evidence of their other fields?

DC: I think this is a common feeling among any college student about not wanting to take courses outside their chosen field of study – we hear the same things from students in the liberal arts being required to take a math course, for example. However, there is a reason we have a core group of courses, across disciplines, that students are required to take. I do think it will take educators spending a bit more time, in class, to explain the “whys” of what we are teaching and why it is required of all students. I speak with many people who did not realize until they were long out of school how important their education in the liberal arts turned out to be

for them. I also think we need to tell our story differently and more forcefully. We need to emphasize the skills and competencies that the liberal arts brings to the work environment and life outside academia. One way to do that is to continue to emphasize the importance that CEOs are putting on the skills the liberal arts provide. Communication skills, for example, are the top requested skill in job placement ads as analyzed by the Texas Workforce Commission. These are all skills taught and honed in the liberal arts.

I do think we can do more to help our students understand the connection between the liberal arts and STEM-focused empirical education. One way to do this is to better communicate among our fields in the professoriate. A long-standing problem in research has been a “silo” problem between academic research fields. I think we experience similar issues in the pedagogical side of our profession. That trickles down into our students’ experiences in the classroom. An enhanced focus on interdisciplinarity, not just with particular classes, but through “teams” of students bringing different skills to the table is one way to attack this problem. This demonstrates to students the value of different approaches and skillsets being brought to bear on any given problem.

YA: Since the value of education is conflated with career, money, and life-style these days, are you hopeful our students will develop a renewed interest in liberal arts in the current age of science and technology?

DC: I disagree with the premise of the question – it has been shown empirically that people with liberal arts degrees tend to earn the same or more than their counterparts across fields when you look at the five- to ten-year time frame. That is because students with a deep grounding in liberal arts fields develop skills that become more important the further one moves on in one’s career – such as strong communication, critical thinking, creative connection-making, understanding of context and history, and flexibility and adaptability. These skills allow people to lead change and drive innovation efforts. Likely it is a matter of us in the liberal arts telling this story better, something that is a driver in the national conversation right now about the value of the liberal arts.

YA: Since you are a music professor, I’d like to ask: Why is music important to our undergraduate students? How do they benefit from music?

DC: Music is an art form that is important for creators and appreciators alike. There is an element of studying music (similar to other art forms) that opens our understanding up of the human condition – the human experience that is still difficult to quantify in the hard sciences. The “hard problem of consciousness” is an illustrative and prominent example here of how it has taken centuries to develop a bioscientific, neurological understanding of our brain, yet we still do not understand how consciousness works. Music is a window into our souls and the souls of the performers and composers. The shared audience experience (for example, in a concert hall or at a music venue) is a human, shared experience that is invaluable to the processing of our place in this world and universe. Music, alongside all the arts, provides varied lenses through which we can contemplate these deep questions. Gaining structured experience, for example through a music appreciation course, or through performance in a musical ensemble, helps develop and hone those skills that will serve students all for life.