

# The true value proposition of a liberal arts education: Karen E. Spierling

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Deeds Field-Piper Stadium at Denison University, photographed in 2006. In a guest column today, Denison professor Karen E. Spierling asks just what is the 'value proposition' of a college education. (Special to The Plain Dealer)The Plain Dealer

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## By Guest Columnist, [cleveland.com](http://cleveland.com)

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- We are living in a state of panic intensified by every glance at the headlines. Or Twitter. Although the coronavirus spread is top of the headlines at the moment, the sense of panic I am thinking of has been building for far longer than the coronavirus outbreak. It is a deeper anxiety about the future — of our communities, our country, our world.

One problem with this panic is that, even though it is about the future, it often excuses us from planning well for that future. Decisions must be immediate. Deep thought and careful consideration are a waste of time.

Every day, the American system of higher education built around the liberal arts takes one step closer toward being swallowed up in this general state of panic, which is often expressed in a single question: What is the value proposition of a college education?



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When applied to colleges and universities, the corporate marketing concept of articulating the “value proposition” of a product or service is almost always reduced to return on investment: What is the financial benefit, as calculated by lifetime income, of any particular college degree?

Responses from college administrations that accept the framing of this question — such as Georgetown University’s recent report, “[ROI of Liberal Arts Colleges: Value Adds Up Over Time](#)” — overlook a basic question: What is the value proposition of college education for American society as a whole?

Yes, there are enormous financial challenges facing both universities and students. These challenges cannot be separated from current systemic economic and racial inequalities in American society. And they cannot be solved by expecting all students to following a single, college-bound path to job security.

But.

The current state of panic over a college education revolves around the rising costs of tuition; the “inevitability” of a tech-controlled world; and the accusation that the goal of colleges is to force students to think a particular way. As we rush to defend higher education based on these limited and of-the-moment terms, we risk losing a fundamental building block of America’s global success.

The U.S. liberal arts model is exceptional among global education systems today. Yet American colleges are gutting their humanities programs, reducing their faculty to one-year contracts, and focusing on vocational training, all in the name of reducing costs. Rather than strengthening our system of higher education, these desperate measures threaten to make it just as empty and valueless as opponents claim it already is.

When the notion of “liberal arts” first appeared, the United States was more than two millennia away from existing as a nation.

The “liberal” in liberal arts is not about current American politics. It is, instead, like the “liberal sprinkling of confectioner’s sugar” in a French toast recipe. As in, freely applied, plentiful, generous. Without constraint.

The goal of the liberal arts is to help students learn to think. Freely, widely, and without fear of complexity. It is to have students read, analyze, and interpret information. Plentiful, abundant information. It is to ask students to explore many different perspectives and ways of thinking. And to consider them generously, willingly, and with an open mind in order to make wise decisions and take effective action. It is to prepare students to take on the responsibility of doing all of this work in order to be prepared to be productive team members, effective leaders, and clear, persuasive communicators in whatever work they do. And to make these contributions without being constrained by limited knowledge, incomplete understanding, or lack of perspective.

For our society as a whole, the value proposition of a liberal arts college education — whether at a small college or a large university — is that it prepares people, at all levels of their careers, to navigate the complexity of a globalized world.

This kind of versatile education is a fundamental requirement in order for our country to flourish in the coming decades, and it must be accessible to any student who wants to access it. Otherwise, we are resigning our young people to mere survival, without the tools for envisioning and creating a better future for themselves or our society.

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