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# Liberal Education **BLOG**

## Authoritarianism and the Liberal Arts



Nov 2, 2020 | Frederick M. Lawrence and Lynn Pasquerella

The linkage between liberal arts education and democracy is unmistakable. A renewed and strengthened national commitment to accessible and inclusive liberal arts education opportunities will not only permit members of our society to live more meaningful and productive lives, but will also allow our nation to resist authoritarian impulses and embrace the openness of mind and spirit that are essential for a self-governing people in a democratic society.

The essential need for liberal education in a functioning democracy was affirmed in a 2020 report by Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues at Georgetown's Center for Education and the Workforce. [\*The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes\*](#) examines the role of colleges and universities in relation to the challenge of rising authoritarianism at the global level and the resulting threat to democracies. The study identifies authoritarianism as a worldview that leads individuals to prefer authority and uniformity over autonomy and diversity.

Comparing the attitudes and preferences of people from fifty-one countries, the study found that Americans in fact hold moderate authoritarian preferences, ranking sixteenth worldwide, on par with Estonia, Chile, and Uruguay. Germany, New Zealand, Sweden, and Ghana were the countries whose residents were least likely to express authoritarian tendencies.

While America's rank is disappointing, another key finding of the Georgetown study suggests a way forward for this country. This finding confirms what has long been asserted by our respective organizations, the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Phi Beta Kappa Society: that a liberal arts education—the unique cornerstone of American higher education—mitigates most effectively against the adoption of authoritarian attitudes. The study found that liberal arts students are less inclined to adopt attitudes of political intolerance, signified by the inclination toward the repression of free speech, xenophobia, nativism, racism, ethnocentrism, and religious sectarianism. The researchers suggest that this is likely a consequence of the emphasis on vocational preparation within European models of education and training, as opposed to America's inclusion of and exposure to general education and the liberal arts, even for students in applied sciences.

The distinctively American tradition of liberal education is not only appropriate to democracy, but essential to fostering the sustained engagement of free individuals committed to our shared values of justice, liberty, human dignity, and the equality of persons. These fundamental democratic ends are fortified by liberal education’s emphasis on utilizing evidence-based reasoning, encouraging dialogue across difference, cultivating rational debate, and engendering the habits of heart and mind that both equips students and disposes them to civic involvement and the creation of a more just and inclusive society.

The authors of the study point to the ways in which authoritarianism tends to flourish when social norms and personal security are threatened. At this moment in the United States, historic inequalities of wealth and income, the devastating impact of COVID-19, and divisions over issues of racial and social justice, including the rights of immigrants, have fueled feelings of vulnerability among many Americans, who are then more likely to seek the protection of authoritarian leaders and political systems.

But a liberal arts education can serve as a bulwark against this sense of vulnerability. According to the study, liberal education reduces individuals’ sensitivities to potential triggers by providing psychological protection in the form of self-esteem, personal security, and autonomy. The capacity to deal with complexity and diversity and not be threatened by differences of opinion is significant given that perceptions of threat—to physical safety, economic security, group identity, social norms—often activate authoritarian tendencies. Exposure of liberal arts majors to diverse contexts, histories, ideas, lifestyles, religions, ways of life, and cultures diminishes the likelihood that differing worldviews will trigger authoritarian responses and increases the chances of their being countered with evidence. Engagement with the liberal arts also encourages empathy and tolerance.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that postsecondary education leads to greater political participation and civic engagement. Because democracies with higher levels of education have greater levels of political tolerance and are more likely to survive, the report concludes that “higher education is the cornerstone of successful democracies not easily shaken by authoritarian threats.”

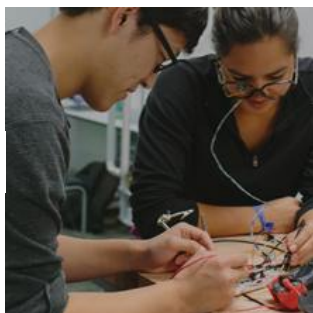
The “liberal” in liberal arts has nothing to do with a political orientation—it comes from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free” or “unrestricted,” and describes an education designed to open students’ minds, endowing them with the ability to question information and resist allegiance to authoritarianism. America’s unique higher education system, deeply in need of public and private support at this time, is crucial for the viability of our democracy.

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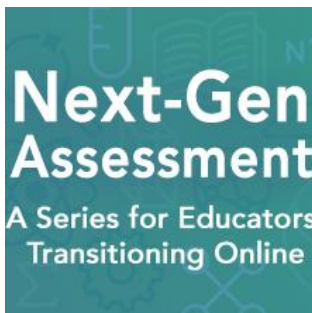
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