

*Center for Gifted Education*  
*College of William and Mary*

**Literature and the Liberal Arts**

by Judith Wynn Halsted

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**The following is Judith Wynn Halsted's keynote address at the Second National Curriculum Network Conference, 1997.**

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A liberal arts education is an education for a life rather than for a living. It is the study of what it is to be human, leaving the study of skills for graduate courses or technical school. The liberal arts are not just the humanities -- they include art, music, literature, history, and philosophy, yes; but also math, and the natural and physical sciences. A liberal arts education is made up not merely of the content of courses in these areas but of the goal of studying them, which is to understand them in isolation enough to begin to comprehend, and even to create, a network of relationships from one to another to another.

Is it safe to say that for most very bright young people, liberal arts is the way to go? In pondering this question, I remember several current trends. First, most of our students will not finish college in four years. Second, since most students will change their major several times during a college career, it seems unwise to choose a college because it offers a specific major. Third, since most people now have several careers in a lifetime, it seems as important to learn mental agility as it is to learn any particular skill.

All of these trends would point to the value of the education offered at the small liberal arts college. To them I add one more: adolescence, that stage of shifting enthusiasms and allegiances, is now thought to last until the mid-twenties. The trends I've mentioned are all characteristic of the general population. To them we can add, for gifted youngsters, one of the most subtle and difficult aspects of giftedness: multipotentiality.

Multipotentiality -- the high, flat profile on aptitude tests like the DAT that leads the counselor to say, "You can do anything you want to do" -- is often the problem when the student who cannot choose between music and math is forced to face the fact that although he has enough talent to be successful -- maybe very successful -- at either one, there simply is not enough time to become as good as he could be at both. This realization of limits, and the injustice of it, the sense of waste, can lead to existential depression. It is not to be taken lightly, and it is not at all helpful to tell such a person, "You can do anything you want to do."

Multipotentiality becomes most troublesome during the late teens and early twenties, when possibly for the first time, adolescents have to make serious choices, which by definition eliminate other choices. Gifted people may flounder through the decade of their twenties, having

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a series of wonderfully interesting but short-term adventures, and turn up in my office at 30, having decided it is time to settle down and wanting career guidance.

In career counseling for the gifted, it is suggested that the core question is not "What do you want to do?" but "What do you want to do first?" In asking "What do you want to do first?" we imply that a student will have an option in deciding what to do second. How does he or she gain that option? By laying a foundation that includes a broad background, several areas of potential expertise, and a wide enough perspective on the world, as it develops over one's working lifetime, to make decisions about where to step next to remain employed.

Does that sound like a liberal arts education? How would a liberal arts education help a student burdened with the conflicts of multipotentiality?

Since they were preschoolers, gifted students have been spontaneously seeing relationships in unique ways and drawing links between apparently separate bodies of knowledge. Also, because they have wide-ranging interests, they are open to the advantages of a major feature of the liberal arts curriculum: the requirement that they take courses in areas they haven't yet explored. As they gain experience and knowledge in new areas, they build a store of material available for forging future links. Furthermore, if they spend the college years studying liberal arts, they give themselves time to mature while they postpone a first career decision. Finally, the intellectual restlessness of the gifted may make them more likely than most to follow a lifetime pattern of accepting one challenge, meeting it, and then feeling finished, ready to find a new task to master. A liberal arts college provides a general background, preparing them for a life of seeking new challenges as they meet old ones and move on.

So we return to our original question. Should our gifted students be directed toward college programs in the liberal arts? Whatever your answer, it has implications for your work at the elementary and secondary levels. If you believe they should take a liberal arts course, you recognize that the curriculum you offer must prepare them to be successful. If you think not, you have the responsibility of providing them with all the liberal arts study they will ever have. In either case, what is the role of literature?

First, I have one glib answer to that question -- that is, it's true, but so practical, even conniving, as to be hardly worthy of a high and noble discussion, so let's get it out of the way first: Literature -- leisure reading, and the amount of time spent doing it -- can lead to higher SAT scores. This is in part because reading fiction is a surprisingly painless and effective way of increasing our range of general factual knowledge. My second point in favor of the role of literature is less calculating but still practical: literature can be used to supplement areas of the curriculum, especially in the humanities, that you feel need support. In the study of the liberal arts, we must begin with literature. The other arts follow.

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I believe that learning how to be read to is the beginning of a liberal arts education. (Remember, I define liberal arts as the study of what it is to be human, not the acquisition of skills. If we learn to be read to, we learn to love books, and then we can study what humans have thought and dreamed and achieved throughout history.) Literature and the liberal arts meet in the readers, child and adult, who bring their own lives to literature and play their own very personal role in making meaning, in the liberal art of making a life.