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The Starry Dynamo in the Machinery of the Night: Liberal Arts and Libraries in a Digital World

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The Ancient Heavenly Connection

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night…

-A. Ginsberg, Howl

History of Liberal Arts

- Subjects appropriate for free men and women, rather than tradesmen
  - Medieval European university: Seven liberal arts were grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the trivium) and geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy (the quadrivium)
- "Liberation" from need to labor

Liberal Arts Today

(ideally)

- Literature, languages, philosophy, history, mathematics, and science
- Cultivate democratic freedoms
- Libraries: A place for scholarly discourse; “town square” of the campus
- Helps students understand their relationship to the world

Liberal Arts Emphasis

“Only Connect” - E.M. Forster

- Intensive interactions between students and faculty
- Holistic student development
- Challenging
- Integrated
- Residential experience
- Extracurricular involvement
- Peer interaction

A Roundtable Discussion with:
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What’s really happening to the Liberal Arts?
- Homogenous products
- “One size fits all” learning
- Minimum standard of quality
- Decreased interaction with faculty
- Workload quantified by credit hours instead of knowledge created...
- “Teaching machines”

Students as “Paying Customers”
“Students of a consumerist bent are unlikely to be interested in studying or working at anything which has no clear connection with their grades or future employment prospects…”
(Kayes et al, 2006)

Do the Liberal Arts matter?
- Higher Education Report (2006) suggests that a strong liberal arts emphasis during the first year results in:
  - Higher critical thinking abilities
  - Positive attitudes towards literacy
  - Positive results in reading comprehension

To Read or Not to Read
- 2006 study by National Endowment for the Arts concludes that Americans are reading less (and less well)
  - Among 17 year olds, percentage of non-readers doubled over a 20 year period (9% to 19%)
  - 15-24 year olds spend 7 minutes a day on leisure reading (online or print)
  + 2.5 hours of TV

Do Libraries (and librarians) matter?
- Librarians are often the one “constant” faculty member…present for the student’s entire undergraduate experience.
- Libraries can be the “stabilizing force” which connects students to the community.
- How can physical Libraries remain relevant in a virtual world?

Brick and Mortar Libraries
- “Information Commons” Community
- Personalized assistance: research, writing, advisement, computer help, counseling referrals...
- Social Activities: “Rooftop Poetry Club”
- Creativity Showcase/ “Town Square”
- http://www.buffalostate.edu/library/

References