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Reviewing *Liberal Arts at the Brink*



Liberal Arts at the Brink
by Victor E. Ferrall, Jr.
Harvard U.P., Copyright 2011. 176 pages.
ISBN 978-0-674-04972-7
by
Keith E. Gogan, M.A.

Today's Americans seem to be living in a time of dying institutions. Hand-written letters, manual-shift automobiles, and telephone booths are just a few. Could the classic liberal arts education be yet another? Author Victor E. Ferrall, Jr., fears so in his book *Liberal Arts at the Brink*. Although not a premature requiem, his book is, though, a clanging alarm about the reality of faltering liberal arts colleges in the United States. Educators can appreciate this book for its close look at the changing scenery of American education as a whole—one moving toward pragmatic outcomes and distance learning. However, anyone interested in the future of American education and the value of a varied, classical “Great Books” education will find Ferrall’s book intriguing. In it, the author asserts, “Today, liberal arts colleges are in trouble. In the face of steadily declining demand for liberal arts education...and surging demand for career-oriented, vocational instruction, they are struggling” (p. 3) and are “at the brink” (p. 156). Ferrall explores the causes of the “trouble,” the economic realities facing liberal arts colleges, and any possible solutions for these colleges. He succeeds by presenting a thorough, thought-provoking, and sufficiently scholarly yet accessible study of the plight of today’s American liberal arts colleges.

To his credit, Ferrall, Jr., President Emeritus of Beloit College, begins with definitions, both of liberal arts education and of the problem facing it. His definition implies three characteristics: that which is not vocational, that which is broad, and that which is “intimate” (p. 13). In a section titled “Why Should We Care?” he gives compelling reasons to care by revealing the qualities of liberally educated persons and provides a list of well-known successful products of liberal arts colleges, including twelve U.S. presidents (p. 21). All in all, the first part of the book lays a good philosophical foundation for the assertions and findings that follow.

Ferrall spends much ink on the financial realities of liberal arts colleges. Some of the information about these realities might be a bit esoteric for some readers, but it does support the reality that much of the trouble facing these humble institutions is indeed financial, including endowment disparities, operating expenses, and surprisingly generous (and apparently necessary for marketing) financial aid and tuition discounting. In a later chapter, “Competing,” Ferrall acts somewhat like some of the earthy professionals interviewed on television who get analogical for the sake of unknowing audiences. This is not a flaw but a strength as Ferrall’s analogies work. For example, the section “Sweetening the Deal” reveals two tactics colleges in general can use to make themselves more attractive: reduction of required courses and grade inflation (p. 67). He introduces these two tactics with “There is some sugar that all colleges can sprinkle to attract students—and many do now” (p. 67). Much later in the book, Ferrall cleverly uses a “fable,” an imaginary dialogue between a potential customer and an auto dealer, to analogically illustrate the current relationship between parents looking for colleges and the colleges themselves, with the auto dealer here representing private colleges, which can offer either a “high-end, liberal arts LA model” or a “stripped-down, vocational, V model” (pp. 163-167). This fable closes the book, leaving the reader with a concrete image to chew on instead of abstract figures or ideas.

Perhaps Ferrall's greatest accomplishment in *Liberal Arts at the Brink* is his defense of the philosophical necessity and beauty of liberal arts education. Examining causes of the decline of liberal arts education, the author asserts, "Careerism is now at the heart of the demand for higher education" (p. 50). According to Ferrall, another cause, fascinating to say the least, is technology. He thinks that the many "Internet and video sources" actually promote merely a passing familiarity with things, resulting in mere "microexposure" to them, rather than "experimentation" (p. 51). Additionally, he opines, "The ubiquity of the Internet and information technology has also undercut the perceived desirability of a book-centric liberal arts education" (p. 51). Such causes expose dubious societal trends, thus highlighting liberal arts education's strengths. To his credit, Ferrall also lauds the often overworked teachers at liberal arts colleges, writing, "For most liberal arts college students, a professor will be included in the small group of the most important people in the student's life" (p. 125). It is clear that the author is passionate about the liberal arts experience, which he defends valiantly throughout the book.

Despite the book's ominous title, Ferrall rightly provides some specific rays of hope for liberal arts colleges and thus some balance for his book. One solution he proposes is cooperation among liberal arts colleges through consortia and national associations. He also has some suggestions about recruitment: tout the liberal arts colleges as last refuges of critical thinking skills, focused oral and written communication skills, and broad education that can prepare students for careers in a broader range of disciplines rather than just one (p. 112). Also, he implies that, in general, liberal arts college professors are dedicated, capable, and less obsessed with publishing, a boon and thus a selling point for their colleges. Were it not for these bits of hope, his book would paint an almost hopeless picture of the future of such colleges, and few would want to read a book providing no hope whatsoever.

For anyone interested in the survival of the classic liberal arts education, Victor Ferrall, Jr.'s, *Liberal Arts at the Brink* is enlightening and sobering reading. The book is sufficiently scholarly, with its detailed tables of statistics and its copious notes, but it is also accessible and pleasant to read because of the author's competent writing and informal anecdotes, analogies, and use of first person. For Christian readers, not much ink is devoted to religious institutions, so those seeking revelations about Christian colleges might look elsewhere. Nonetheless, after having read this book, no one will be able to doubt the author's dedication to the high and noble institution known as the liberal arts education, a dinosaur staring extinction in the eye.

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