Student Pieces: Liberal Arts with Fries

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I saw a sign the other day that
read "I got my degree in liberal
arts, would you like fries with
that?" Implicit in this message is
the assumption that a liberal arts
education is impractical.
Beneath this assumption, never-
over, runs an obvious and conser-
tative value judgment. This value
judgment, being the very soul of modernity, is the prejudice that the value of education is determined by its immediate practical or monetary rewards.

The liberal arts were devised as a curriculum of study fit for liberal free
persons. To the authors of the liberal arts curriculum, the assumption that
professional or technical training is more valuable because it is more prac-
tical would not only have been hu-
manistic, but trivial. Professional education trains one not for life and for
the flowering of one's supreme spiritual potential, but rather for a career and for
the accumulation of wealth, activities that Graeco-Roman pedagogy consid-
ered trivial. A professional education is one fit for a slave. Therefore, I echo
everyone who sees education merely as a tool for obtaining and commis-
sioning more goods to purge the univer-
sity and the, as I did from the shackles of obligation, secondary education.

Since I was a high school dropout, I was at a particular disadvantage
applying to colleges. My means and
family background are modest as my ambition is strong. The obstacles that I
have faced in putting myself in college
were all but insurmountable. Having
edited on nothing other than my own
commitment and determination, I was
awarded the CistSoSoo scholarship, a
full ride to study Greek at John Carroll
University, the Jesuit school of
Cleveland. Despite challenges
that I have faced, I have never once
looked at education as a means to
some other end. No, Education is noble, not merely; it will not let herself
be wooed so easily by the weary, googling
hands of capitalists and chores.

Desiring nothing more fervently
than a classical education — the core of
a liberal arts curriculum — I quickly
found myself in the minority, the
majority consisting of a mix of medioc-
rrity and conformity; business majors. I
cannot count how many times, having
told someone that I get a classical lan-
guages major, that I have been asked:
"But what will you do with that?" as
though an education were like a ham-
er or some strange instrument with
which one can obtain some result. Oh,
would that I had a hammer to knock
some sense into them! Geographically
they fulfill the core requirements of a Jesuit education: philosophy, religious stud-
ies, a foreign language, all the while
asking themselves, "But what am I
going to do with this?"

As Mark Twain says...:

Does it make sense to ask an ath-
letic what she is going to do with her
physical training? No, because she will
tell you that your question misunder-
stands the nature of physical well-
being as a good unto itself. Does it
make sense then, to ask what can be
do with an education? It is a life-long
journey that begins in infancy and
never quite ends. It is, as Pauli
Fleissner says, the process of "becoming who you are." The university, as an educa-
tional institution, has as much
to do with one's education as one
permits it to; it's a question of
nothing. As Mark Twain says: "I never
let school get in the way of my education."

Admittedly, I will eventually have to
submit to the constraints of specializa-
tion and of a career, and undoubtedly
my education will play no small role in
my career. Nevertheless, the relation-
ship between my career choice and my
education is incidental, not essential to
who I am as a free, educated person.

Formerly, the university stood as
the last bastion against an encroaching
harbormaster. But now that not only the
demand for majors in professional and
technical disciplines is rising, but also
certainly questionable new majors
— such as business and communications —
have in the last two centuries been
invented to meet this demand, the uni-
versity itself wants the very mouth-
piece and guardian of harbormaster.

Though we speak of the "liberal arts,
" on the one hand and "professional education" on the other hand, in truth,
there are only the liberal arts and the
secular arts. Or should I say, there is
education proper and then there is
apprentice.