

## Introduction to the Forum: “Liberal Arts Starts & Circuitous Routes”

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I would never let my child major in the arts.” So began a conversation with a (fairly inebriated) guest at a wedding that I recently attended. Unfortunately, it is a view that is becoming more and more common. “Return on investment,” typically measured in terms of starting salaries and career ladders, drives many of the conversations between high school students and their parents and counselors. Cautioned by woeful tales of people who “wasted” time and money pursuing degrees in ceramics or theatre, parents and prospective students do not want to spend (or borrow) any money for a degree they think will not yield a strong financial future. However, such lore can be countered, not only with statistics telling a different story,<sup>1</sup> but with the tales of transformative career journeys taken by those who studied the liberal arts as undergraduates. This forum is an attempt to start telling those tales.

More fully, this forum includes stories of career paths that can best be described as “circuitous routes,” from starting points in the liberal arts to positions of responsibility in critical fields. These stories show that the skills and perspectives the authors developed in liberal arts major programs served them well in a variety of future roles.

As Chief Century Thinker at Verdis Group, Dan Lawse provides sustainability consulting services to a range of institutions across the United States. In his essay, Lawse recounts his journey to this position from his undergraduate days studying theology at Creighton University. Lawse credits his foundation in the humanities, complemented by his professional training, with enabling him to arrive at a place of Regenerative Entrepreneurialism, using business as a “force for good.”

For Megan Barry, it was unlikely that a major in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame was going to land her a job in “Liberal Studies,” but that program prepared her well for her current work in community service and justice education at Loyola University Chicago. By responding to a series of intellectual “invitations,” Barry forged a path that offered her fulfillment and tremendous personal growth.

The itinerary for the peripatetic Michael Varga began with studying English at Rider College (now University) in New Jersey. His plans to teach that subject at a local high school took a detour, and eventually were canceled, with a stint in the Peace Corps and later a career in the U.S. Foreign Service. As he conveys, the study of literature as an undergraduate offered him ways to evaluate the characters he encountered in various posts with the State Department. It was not only his master's degree in economics that prepared him for his work as a diplomat.

Like the other authors, Greg Johnson takes the reader along a self-reflective journey: in his case, from studying music and the Bible in Appalachia to serving as Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Providence in Montana. Not only did he cross multiple time zones from one institution to another, Johnson also passed through several disciplines and perspectives. He credits the liberal arts with helping him to “bring together seemingly unrelated and often divergent paths.”

The stories in this forum make it clear that one need not take a straight—or worse, straight-jacketed—path to a meaningful life. Rather, the stories reveal a deep richness in lives that paired the liberal arts with focused post-graduate training.

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<sup>1</sup> See the study of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, “Ranking ROI of 4,500 US Colleges and Universities,” <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/collegeroi/>.