

## Liberal Arts as Invitation

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**A**s I reflect on how I became a community engagement professional in academia, I am certain that invitations have played a significant role in my trajectory. In particular, the invitations that I encountered in my liberal arts education—to deepen my knowledge, draw out my natural skill, hone my critical thinking, and enhance my communication abilities—proved foundational to the skills that I employ each day in my career.

In my professional role, I direct the Office for Community Service and Action at Loyola University Chicago, overseeing direct service programs and justice education initiatives. As a staff member at a university, I regularly hear students being asked, “What’s your major?” Sometimes students ask the question of each other, sometimes faculty and staff are the curious ones, and sometimes it is a nervous prospective student or parent. I understand that the question has value, but I also see that the answer can elicit preconceptions about the student’s future. Neuroscience? Oh, you want to be a doctor. English? You are going to teach.

Having once been the student who was regularly asked that question, I am grateful that I never viewed my own studies as an entrance to a predetermined pathway. To be fair, I often faced discomfort in the lack of a well-defined way forward from my academic focus; the certainty that some of my peers had about their futures was hard to witness. Time and distance, though, have helped me to appreciate the pathways that allowed me to hear and respond to invitations.

*The invitation to think deeply, to build my confidence, and to draw forth my natural skills*

Let me go back and explain more about my academic journey. I was an undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame, where I entered the College of Arts and Letters unsure of what I would study. I started my first year with a required seminar. Meeting weekly with fellow students to unpack texts was interesting and new. I said little and felt like a very little fish in a very large pond, but I followed conversation closely, intrigued by the ways

people would make arguments, unpack a passage, or relate the text to issues beyond it.

Though I was uncomfortable in classroom discussions, I found confidence in writing for the seminar. Constructing arguments, working on clarity, articulating new thoughts—I was learning! And as my writing became stronger, so did my speaking in class.

As my confidence grew, I was able to identify some of my unique tendencies as skills. I may never be the first person to speak in conversation, but I am likely to add a contrasting perspective or an incisive question. I still consider this a gift of my education: the ability to understand and develop my natural skills while also tending to the areas where I am not as inclined.

*The invitation to appreciate my abilities, to ask questions, and to seek opportunity*

By sophomore year, I officially selected a major: the Program of Liberal Studies. Class discussion and writing remained central to my studies. Instructors with diverse interests and methods sharpened my thinking and communication. I learned to change my posture from “What do they want to hear?” to “What do I want to say?” This interior shift was difficult for me, but gave me a sense of authority over my own growth and abilities.

Perhaps most notably, this shift helped me to discover a skill of asking questions. I found that if I was patient with myself and really thought about classroom conversations, questions would come to me that could deepen or redirect conversation in a helpful way. To be clear, this was not a comfortable learning process. I had to push through insecurity and beyond the notion that there was a single “right” answer.

Importantly, my studies also helped me to seek opportunity beyond the classroom, particularly study abroad in Ireland. The posture of curiosity, questioning, and seeking new things in the world and myself led me to immense learning and growth through my studies abroad. As a result, I learned to value experience as vital to personal growth and learning, and I am certain that this informs my current work with student community engagement.

*The invitation to listen, to engage new experiences, and to put the pieces together*

I am grateful for my liberal arts degree because it opened pathways before me, but that openness did not come without doubt and concern. By the end of my undergraduate studies, I had no plans for what would come

next. Law school was a viable option, but I really had no interest in it. Instead, I entered Holy Cross Associates, a post-graduate service program, to test the law school notion through service at a legal aid clinic.

As I answered phone calls, completed intakes, and connected clients with professional staff members, I adapted my liberal arts classroom skills to a professional environment. I needed to listen for facts, to question the unstated, and to isolate the root problem. I needed to adapt the concepts of liberal studies to the very real-world issues clients were facing.

While I appreciated the legal aid clinic work, I knew that law was not the pathway on which my liberal arts studies was leading me. Instead, I was invited to serve in a community engagement role at King's College, which had been the host for my Holy Cross Associates service. Though it took being asked twice, I eventually accepted and began two years of working with King's students in community-engaged learning and social immersion.

Suddenly, pieces began to take shape. The abilities developed in my studies were exactly what I needed to draw upon. Critical thinking helped me to build new programs. Listening allowed me to understand community partner needs and student interest. Clear communication helped me to advocate for support and to share the story of our work.

### *Ongoing invitations to cultivate meaningful behaviors and practices*

While there is more to my professional journey beyond these experiences during and immediately after my undergraduate liberal arts studies (most notably graduate studies in macro social work and pastoral ministry), I will fast-forward to my current professional role at Loyola University Chicago. Administering a community engagement office at a university provides me with the joy and challenge of ongoing invitations. I invite students into the important work of building community and of learning how their own academic skills might contribute to the common good. I invite community partners into relationship so that we can join together in support of their missions. I am invited by both students and community partners to learn from and with them about social realities and the work of justice.

Throughout all of my professional responsibilities, I employ the skills that I developed in my liberal arts studies. Critical thinking, spoken and written communication, and deep listening are essential to what I do each day. My students appreciate the challenges that I pose to them, particularly when we discuss how their studies will form who they are, what good they will contribute to the world, and where the content and concepts of their studies are tested by their contact in the world.

Most simply, I speak of my work as an invitation to students to develop and engage the behaviors and practices that support the common good and a good life. Just as I approached my undergraduate studies as an open pathway for my professional journey, I meet my students with the belief that they are capable of and responsible for using their education to build an intellectual and interior disposition that will enable them to live their values. Having walked this journey myself, with the support of my liberal arts degree, I am confident that they can do the same.