



Putting the liberal arts to work

Article published in the Middlebury Campus (January 26, 2012)

This week, Middlebury is lucky to have an array of remarkable speakers and educators coming to our campus for the kick-off of the new Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship. In a related Winter Term course, 12 students and I have explored how two ideals — social entrepreneurship and the liberal arts — can be complements. We've learned a lot.

First, we've learned to ask questions related to the overarching goals of these two ideals. Some of these questions will be front-and-center during the kick-off this week: What gives your life meaning? How do you define success? How should the liberal arts foster a moral education? Do teachers have a social responsibility? Do social entrepreneurs or business entrepreneurs make a bigger impact? We can't wait to engage all in attendance on these and related questions!

Second, we've learned how productive it can be — for students and faculty alike — to think about the changing role of the liberal arts in the 21st century. In doing so, we've considered the phrase “putting the liberal arts to work” and concluded that it has three related meanings.

First, “putting the liberal art to work” offers a clear calling about how and why we educate young people in this challenging new century. The liberal arts are, of course, about not providing skills, per se. For that, get an engineering degree, a business degree: those are important, but different.

And yet the wonderful contradiction in all of

this is that the essence of what one learns in the liberal arts — how to ask questions, how to seek answers, how to reflect on leading a life of meaning — all add up to great work skills. None of this is any secret to those who seek out and hire liberal arts students (and their counterparts at top universities built around similar ideals) year after year.

In our Winter Term course, we have discovered how closely the characteristics of social entrepreneurs and change-makers line up with the best qualities of those who have been “liberally educated.” In his essay, *Only Connect: The Goals of a Liberal Arts Education*, environmental historian William Cronon delineates “ten qualities I admire in the people I know who seem to embody the values of a liberal education:”

They listen and they hear.

They read and they understand.

They can talk with anyone.

They can write clearly and persuasively and movingly.

They can solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems.

They respect rigor not so much for its own sake but as a way of seeking truth.

They practice humility, tolerance and self-criticism.

They understand how to get things done in the world.

They nurture and empower the people around them.

They follow E.M. Forster's injunction from *Howard's End*: Only Connect ...

Guess what? These could easily be a list of what makes the best social entrepreneurs.

So “putting the liberal arts to work” means helping students to reflect on and to celebrate these qualities, to dig deep as they build these qualities within themselves for the long term, and then to understand that in fellow social entrepreneurs and change-makers, they will find kindred spirits all around the world with the very same qualities. It’s really true: to aspire to the best of the liberal arts is to prepare to engage the world.

Second, “putting the liberal arts to work” has immediate meaning for the vibrant, growing, global network of those committed to securing a better world: a world with less poverty, more sustainability and more human rights. In his *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken claims that this is “the largest movement on earth, a movement that has no name, leader or location, and that has gone largely ignored by politicians and the media. Like nature itself, it is organizing from the bottom up, in every city, town and culture, and is emerging to be an extraordinary and creative expression of people’s needs worldwide.” Our students and alumni have already so ably contributed to this movement in recent years, with the development of 350.org, the growth of projects financed by the Davis Peace Projects and student and faculty commitment to public health, among other examples.

The recent invitation to this week’s kick-off offers the promise of doing more: “The Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship is designed to be a hub in a growing global network of schools, colleges, NGOs, government agencies, businesses and foundations that are committed to sharing ideas and resources in order to build 21st-century solutions.” This promise will come to life if all of us at liberal arts colleges — through our students, our scholars, and our communities — can add a little something to this growing movement. Many universities — Duke,

Harvard and Oxford — are already in the forefront of social entrepreneurship education and research. As Middlebury, Wesleyan (they too have a new center!) and similar schools come online, there’s a real promise of “putting the liberal arts to work” in the name of a better world.

There’s a final meaning to this phrase, a kind of recursive meaning, that a student brought out in our class and which I love. Consider this: by orienting what we do on our campuses around the change-making potential of our students — by making them realize the power of Cronon’s qualities — we are putting the liberal arts to work on behalf of itself.

For in response to naysayers who are predicting the demise of the liberal arts, we can hold up a mirror to the liberal arts in the 21st century and say: “Fear not!” We can show that what so often happens at Middlebury — students rolling up their sleeves, engaging the community, reflecting on what worked and what didn’t — is a prescription for the future of the liberal arts.

So with luck, the new center will help our extended Middlebury community to do that much more of what we’ve been doing for some time now: help students to grow and learn, help students and their allies to engage the world, and in doing so to act on a vision of an even better liberal arts experience.

Professor Jon Isham is the faculty director of the Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship as well as the Head of the Environmental Studies Program and a professor in Economics.