

Expectations for Graduates of the Pharr Oratory Schools System:

Formation of Personal Identity

and the

Fruits of a Classical Liberal Education

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The wisdom of the ages is the content of the Oratory School System curriculum. It can be briefly described using William Cronon's (1998) teaching experience in a widely known essay describing how to recognize liberally educated people. What others have deliberated on deeply and at length, Cronon outlined succinctly by making use of E. M. Forster's counsel: "Only connect . . ." Ten themes show the identity and fruits of a classical liberal education; they represent what is expected of a graduate of the Pharr Oratory of St. Philip Neri School System:

People Who Hear and Listen Attentively

Liberally education people know how to listen, paying attention to those around them. Liberally educated people try hard to understand what other people are saying; often they ask for clarification if they miss or do not understand a key point. In short, educated people work hard to hear what other people are saying. In Cronon's words: liberally educated people "can follow an argument, track logical reasoning, detect illogic, hear the emotions behind the logic and illogic, and ultimately empathize with the person who is feeling those emotions" (Cronon, 1998, para. 10).

The classically liberally educated persons listens carefully to understand completely what their partner in conversation is saying before offering their own view, especially when giving advice. They pay attention to the body language of the listener.

There might be signs that the person is not listening: Tapping of the foot. Picking lint off their clothing or, even, your clothing.

Products of a veritable classical liberal education are not threatened by dead air in conversation, frantically feeling compelled to keep the dialogue going even though they have nothing worthwhile to say. Pauses can be valuable thinking time; some people like to take a moment to think and structure their response carefully; they do not, therefore, feel obliged to jump in at every pause, but stay calm and do not talk simply out of senseless emotional impulse. They think before they speak. In this way, their story has more impact, having given thought about to what to say and how to say it.

Interrupting people is rude, self-centered. It can be interpreted as: “What you are saying is not interesting enough; I will talk and make the conversation interesting.” Personal input is a wonderful way to express oneself, but never at the expense of the other person's feelings. If the other person is not talking, it may be because that he or she is not as fast a talker and as long-winded. Care must be taken not to overwhelm and exhaust the conversational partner.

Understanding with Insight the Written Word.

Mortimer Jerome Adler wrote two books that teach people the best way for reading a book: One book is titled *How to Read a Book* (Adler, 1972); this book offers guidelines for critically reading good and great books of any tradition. The second book is titled *How to Mark a Book* (Adler, 1940), suggesting reasons for systematically marking up a book with helpful information for the book's future use. Adler gave four reasons for annotating a book: (1) to create trails like the first person to hike through a particular forest, for the reader may want to read the text, or part of a text, more than

once; (2) to interact with the author—in making reading a conversation by jotting down the reader’s reactions as well as new ideas evoked by the author’s material; (3) to learn what the book teaches—by annotating, the book becomes the reader’s territory, becoming, in a way, part of the reader; and (4) to learn how to write, or at least to learn how a book was written. Some writers have a style worthy to be imitated—by closely reading the book with notations, the reader remember patterns in the use of nouns, pronouns, verbs and other parts of speech, patterns in syntax and in sentence variation; and patterns in sound devices, such as alliteration and assonance. Such a practice will improve a writer’s style.

Communication with People of All Levels, Ages, and Cultures.

Liberally educated people are other-centered. In the presences of others, they are not immediately concerned that others might be interested in them, but their attention is simply and primarily that everyone needs to be recognized and loved. As a result, putting themselves, as best they can, in the other’s stead, they speak and they act, not to manipulate, but to serve others. A classical liberal education, therefore, teaches the learner how to talk to others, because from their earliest years of liberal learning they were taught lovingly to understand others.

Liberally educated people know how to talk to others. Speech is for others. When they give a speech, they try to accommodate language and theme to their listeners. Their questions are not entertainingly self-centered or boringly impressive, but reflect a humble interest in the importance and value of others. When they make people laugh—and it is often—it is at their own expense and for the re-creative service of others. They know when they themselves are really interested in others and they are aware when true

interest is absent. This is important to them.

Learners of a liberal education are patient with their own human limitations that helps them to be patient with others. This sensitivity serves them well in friendly conversation with a 3-year-old kindergarten child, with a 30-year old farm worker, or with an octogenarian scholar. Liberally educated individuals can accommodate themselves to the level of the souls being attended. Moreover, they participate in such conversations, not because they like to talk about themselves, but because they are genuinely interested in others.

Ability to Express One’s Self Clearly, Persuasively and Movingly

Prepared in grammar, dialectic and rhetoric during the early years of liberal education, students—who ideally study, besides English, Latin and another modern language—end up learning how to express themselves well, commanding both the rudiments and subtleties of the language arts. If in live conversation they are successful in talking to anyone, *mutatis mutandis*, they will thrive with the written word as they put their thoughts into writing with care and deliberation. Logic, grammar, and rhetoric allow the liberal education student to understand language at a much deeper level than mere punctuation, syntax, vocabulary and spelling. A truly liberal education prepares students for the clarity, precision style and logic of university and professional writing.

Adept at Problem-Solving

The Association of American Colleges and Universities facilitated the *Great Expectations Report: New Vision as a Nation Goes to College* (Ramaley, 2001). In Chapter 3, the “Learning Students’ Need for the 21st Century”, the student was identified as an *intentional learner* characterized in the manner of a veritable student of classical

liberal education: The Report described the intentional learner as one who “draws on difference and commonality to produce a deeper experience of community” [and they are students] intent on

- developing self-awareness about the reason for study, the learning process itself, how education is used;
- becoming integrative thinkers who can see connections in seemingly disparate information and draw on a wide range of knowledge to make decisions;
- adapting the skills learned in one situation to problems encountered in another;
- consciously choosing to act in ethical and responsible ways; and
- willing and able to place themselves within a diverse world. (Ramaley, 2001)

The vision of the participating educational institutions was that intentional learners be empowered in “the mastery of a range of abilities and capacities as they progress through grades K-12 and the undergraduate years and at successively more challenging levels, . . . during which intentional learners excel at:

- communicating in diverse settings and groups, using written, oral, and visual means, and in more than one language
- understanding and employing both quantitative and qualitative analysis to describe and solve problems
- interpreting, evaluating, and using information discerningly from a variety of sources
- integrating knowledge of various types and understanding complex systems
- resolving difficult issues creatively by employing multiple systems and tools
- deriving meaning from experience, as well as gathering information from

observation

- demonstrating intellectual agility and managing change
- transforming information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action
- demonstrating intellectual agility and managing change
- working well in teams, including those of diverse composition, and building consensus. (Ramaley, 2001)

Accustomed to Rigor and Discipline in the Search for Truth

Colleges and universities have as a principal obligation inculcating in their students (1) a respect for a rigor and unbending seriousness in the pursuit of truth, (2) an understanding that knowledge serves values, and (3) that the responsibility of educators is to put understanding and values in dialogue with each other. Knowledge is not learning information and then simply being tested on the memorized retention of that information. Knowledge is the *conversation* of students, mentor, and other voices of the past and present about discussed, digested, and deliberated knowledge a process that ultimately redounds to the acquisition of even deeper meaning and more knowledge. The classroom, the library, the lecture hall—or whatever place might be set apart for this conversation becomes *holy—i.e.*, the Hebrew word *kadosh* means *set apart* or *holy*; the sacred space where the intellectual exchange happens and truth is uncovered is, indeed, a special place. The English proverb “Education begins a gentleman, conversation completes him” expresses the relationship between intellectual development and active participation in discourse.

Truly educated people love learning and knowledge, but they love wisdom more,

for wisdom is the quality for being wise: That is, wisdom is the possession of knowledge and the capacity to make due use of it; wisdom is related to practical life and human behavior. Liberal learners are versed in logic and dialectic, so that they can appreciate the tight, ironclad well-reasoned argument which they take as a matter of course; speculatively, it is beautiful; theoretically, it delights. However, they know that the speculative touches the practical, that knowledge and values come together where human behavior is judged either morally good or morally evil: Liberal learners understand that knowledge always serves values; values, in turn, are not theoretical but always practically related to life and to the human intellect's practical judgment about the moral value of a human act—namely, conscience. The liberal learner strives to put knowledge and values into constant dialogue with each other. “The ability to recognize true rigor is one of the most important achievements in any education, but it is worthless, even dangerous, if it is not placed also in the service of some larger vision that renders it also humane” (Cronon, 1998, para. 12).

Medicine by itself and without a vision and purpose of health, knowledge of disease, and attention to wellness, easily becomes destructive of the very ends that they seek to serve. German Nazi doctors were, in their day, more technologically advanced in medicine than the doctors of any other nation on the face of the earth; they used their knowledge to make the most efficient of poisonous gases known to mankind. That gas was used to kill as quickly and most efficiently as possible naked Jews waiting to bathe as that wonderfully efficient gas wafted from the shower nozzles of their death chambers. Medicine without a vision of health, and knowledge of disease without attention to wellness, all too easily become destructive of the very ends that they seek to serve.

Practiced in Humility, Tolerance, and Self-Criticism.

Well-educated products of a liberal education who are psychologically sound and compassionate souls can understand the love, the fear, the disappointment, the rage, and the entire gamut of human feelings experienced by other human beings. This capability allows them, from earliest of years, psychologically to role-play, learning to identify with the positive and negative emotions of other human beings. Cronon (1998) expressed this phenomenon in this way:

They can understand the power of other people's dreams and nightmares as well as their own. They have the intellectual range and emotional generosity to step outside their own experiences and prejudices, thereby opening themselves to perspectives different from their own. From this commitment to tolerance flow all those aspects of a liberal education that oppose parochialism and celebrate the wider world: studying foreign languages, learning about the cultures of distant peoples, exploring the history of longago times, discovering the many ways in which men and women have known the sacred and given names to their gods. Without such encounters, we cannot learn how much people differ—and how much they have in common. (Cronon, 1998, para. 13)

The ability to identify intellectually and emotionally with other human beings in the most joyful and most sorrowful moments of their existence along with the capacity to endorse their delight and repudiate their sadness represents an intellectual and emotional openness and tolerance which is the basis of universal brotherhood and the common family of humankind. This sense of universal family is among the most important values associated with liberal education. From a deep encounter with the study of history,

geography, culture and theology, comes a vivid sense of how different individuals and peoples may be; yet, from these same studies and others, liberal education moves human beings to marvel at how much they also share in common.

Know-How for Getting Things Done in the World

Individuals well-practiced intellectually and practically in the virtuous life of a healthy classical liberal education see the world as their laboratory; truth and virtue become their instruments and tools. The liberally educated do not live in theoretical ivory towers, but bring their speculative insights to bear upon the best of ends and means as they strive for goodness and truth; they strive to restore a disfigured world to its former beauty. Cronon (1998) considered how this work might be done, offering a remedy:

In describing the goal of his Rhodes Scholarships, Cecil Rhodes spoke of trying to identify young people who would spend their lives engaged in what he called “the world’s fight,” by which he meant the struggle to leave the world a better place than they had found it. Learning how to get things done in the world in order to leave it a better place is surely one of the most practical and important lessons we can take from our education. It is fraught with peril because the power to act in the world can so easily be abused—but we fool ourselves if we think we can avoid acting, avoid exercising power, avoid joining the world’s fight. And so we study power and struggle to use it wisely and well. (Cronon, 1998, para. 14)

To refuse to act when there is need for action is to put responsibility in the hands of an unknown that may, or may not, bring the world to justice. Not to act is to sin against self and integrity, leaving the future unconscionably in hands unknown. The liberally educated struggle to do good and avoid evil. They deploy their power making straight

warped ways, while encouraging the good to enter the fray.

Ability to Nurture and Empower Others

The liberally educated rejoice to see others grow in truth and justice that they contribute, in turn, to the good of neighbor and community. True leaders are generous; they work to empower others both to grow and to share. A veritable leader not only knows how to achieve goals but also knows how to help others achieve their goals.

William Cronon expressed this nurturing and empowering in these words:

Nothing is more important in tempering the exercise of power and shaping right action than the recognition that no one ever acts alone. Liberally educated people understand that they belong to a community whose prosperity and well-being are crucial to their own, and they help that community flourish by making the success of others possible. If we speak of education for freedom, then one of the crucial insights of a liberal education must be that the freedom of the individual is possible only in a free community, and vice versa. It is the community that empowers the free individual, just as it is free individuals who lead and empower the community. The fulfillment of high talent, the just exercise of power, the celebration of human diversity: nothing so redeems these things as the recognition that what seem like personal triumphs are in fact the achievements of our common humanity. (Cronon, 1998, para. 15)

Acquisition of the habit of seeing and understanding relationships. Liberal learners have, at times, developed the intellectual habit of seeing relationships; they see, almost intuitively, how one thing relates to another, constructively or destructively. This allows those humble learners to become, unwittingly and unawares, prophetic voices

either abounding with hope or threatening with gloom. Their insightful gifts, more often than not, become for them a scourge, not a charism, for they are accounted, not as prophets, but as pollyannas or killjoys. William Cronon expressed this gift with affirmation and hope:

More than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways. Every one of the qualities I have described here—listening, reading, talking, writing, puzzle solving, truth seeking, seeing through other people’s eyes, leading, working in a community—is finally about connecting. A liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect. (Cronon, 1998, para. 16)

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