

Zakaria, Fareed. *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2015. 204 pp. \$23.95 hardcover (ISBN 978-0-393-24786-8)

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Liberal arts education is under siege and that should be of serious concern not only for those involved in higher education but also to society as a whole. Although there is not a standard definition of what a liberal arts education is, it is generally defined in academia as anything that is not categorized as a professional school. That is why any subject that falls in the areas of the natural sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, and even the visual and performing arts is considered as part of a liberal arts and sciences education and that is why they are the disciplines taught at liberal arts colleges.

In the last few years such an education has suffered from criticism—sometimes spiteful—based on a stereotype that a degree in many of those disciplines, particularly in the humanities and the arts, rarely leads to a good job. Yet, such an assertion is not true because, among other things, the training in liberal arts provide people with skills that go beyond of what they can learn within those disciplines.

Take, for example, graduates in the visual and performing arts. According to a 2013 survey conducted by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project among 92,113 individuals with a degree in those areas, 75 percent of them have been self-employed at some point of their careers. This shows that such a degree has allowed them not only to get a job but, more importantly, to become entrepreneurs.

Also there is a consensus that an education in the liberal arts provide a series of skills that are valuable no matter what particular professional path you follow: critical thinking, problem-solving, communication skills, and team-work, the kind of abilities employers seek in their employees regardless of the profession.

Yet, despite all these arguments governors from states such as Florida, Texas, and Wisconsin have recently said that they do not intend to keep financing humanities in particular and liberal arts studies in general in their state university systems. Some leaders of postsecondary institutions have also voiced the opinion

that state universities should become little more than trade schools that concentrate on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines.

Sometimes support for these ideas has come from unexpected places. On January 30, 2014, President Barack Obama, during a visit to a General Electric plant in Wisconsin, stated that “folks can make a lot more potentially with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.” He later apologized and called his remark “glib.”¹

Therefore it is not surprising that some people from the academic world have written books defending the value of a liberal arts education.² Now a non-professional academician, Fareed Zakaria, has written a new book with a similar objective. He is a well-known media personality as a host of CNN’s *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, editor-at-large for *Time* magazine, and as a columnist for the *Washington Post*. His articles and books are usually on topics related to foreign affairs. Therefore, his new book on the liberal arts promises to offer a new voice on the topic and you will not be disappointed that such is the case.

This rather small book (204 pages in a small format and rather larger-than-usual font and double spaced) is divided into six chapters. The first one titled “Coming to America” is rather autobiographical and deals with Zakaria’s experiences and impressions which are quite similar to those that many international students face when coming to the United States to pursue a higher education degree. His tales and remembrances will find resonance among the readers within that demographic while providing Americans who grew up in the United States with a perspective on U.S. higher education system that is less familiar to them.

Chapter two (“A Brief History of Liberal Education”) is an attempt to provide a historical background on the idea of liberal education in the United States and to demonstrate that since the time of the founding fathers liberal education was considered an important part of creating a solid and skillful citizenry. Although what Zakaria has to say about it is true, he could have used

1. Aamer Madhani, “Obama Apologizes for Joking about Art History Majors,” *USA Today*, February 19, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2014/02/19/obama-apologizes-to-texas-art-history-professor/5609089/>; Aldemaro Romero Jr., “Claims of Demise of Humanities Greatly Exaggerated,” *Edwardsville Intelligencer*, May 4, 2015.

2. See, for example, Victor E. Ferrall, *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Mark William Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

more material about Thomas Jefferson and the creation of his brainchild, the University of Virginia, as a prime example of how those ideals were important at that junction of American history. Jefferson not only founded that university—the first public, non-sectarian one in this country—but he also helped design the curriculum, including features such as elective courses that constitute one of the pillars of a liberal education in this country today.³ In chapter two the author also discusses new experiments in liberal arts education such as Yale-NUS, a liberal arts school in Singapore created in 2013 as a joint initiative between Yale University and the University of Singapore. This school has a different structure without the typical disciplinary departments emphasizing interdisciplinary approaches to problems with strong emphasis on global issues.

Chapter three (“Learning to Think”) gravitates around the importance of the skills—mentioned earlier in this review—that make a liberal arts education so important to employers. He cites a statistic that is quite reveling in this regard: in a 2013 survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, 74 percent of employers thought that a good liberal arts education was the best way to prepare students for today’s global economy.

Chapter four (“The Natural Aristocracy”) is one of the most interesting and compelling arguments I have read about the need to generate intellectual elites for the formation of national leadership. I found his argument very important because part of the political discourse in this country these days is against “the elites” as part of the anti-intellectual rhetoric that is becoming common in many political circles. People tend to forget that we need those elites to show us the way to go, particularly in times of crises. The best argument we can use is that the founding fathers themselves were an elite of well-educated individuals who had the intellectual background and vision that allowed the formation of this country. Unfortunately the second part of this chapter is part of the hype about MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) based on the promise of this approach to make higher education free to everybody. Zakaria, like many others, is trapped in these disquisitions and does not refer to the many studies that have cast serious doubts on the effectiveness of these platforms as a better alternative to face-to-face higher education for all.⁴

3. For more details on this see Aldemaro Romero Jr., “Vision of Founding Fathers Becomes Blurred,” *Edwardsville Intelligencer*, March 16, 2015.

4. For a discussion on this see Aldemaro Romero Jr., “Higher Education Faces Quagmire with Distance Education,” *Edwardsville Intelligencer*, May 11, 2015.

Chapter five (“Knowledge and Power”) is a rather unexpected one not because of Zakaria’s crusade to demonstrate the value of a liberal arts education in history and public policy but because of the arguments he uses, particularly given his strong background in international affairs. He correctly says that human nature is plagued with vices, such as jealousy, fear, and anger, which can bring out the worst in people regardless of their level of education. Yet, when talking about World War II, he contends that “free societies like America prevailed in large part because they had greater staying power, because their organizing ideas were superior.” He then adds that the Nazis were beaten because of “the ability of the U.S economy to outproduce the Nazi and Soviet economies.” Unfortunately history is more complicated than that. It was the oppressive conditions of the Treaty of Versailles together with the market crash of 1929 that created the economic and social conditions for Nazism to rise to power in Germany in 1933 despite the fact that Germany was one of the most educated and advanced countries in the world at that time. Part of Hitler’s support from Germans once he was in power came because he was credited with the economic and nationalistic revival of Germany. The liberal democracies of England, France, and the United States did almost nothing to stop German aggression or anti-Semitic policies until it was too late to avoid war and genocide. There were many military and political blunders by Hitler that facilitated the defeat of Nazi Germany and it was another totalitarian and ruthless state—the Soviet Union—that played a major role in the defeat of Hitler. And these are just examples of the many instances in history in which barbarians of all types defeated societies with superior ideas.

In contrast the last chapter, chapter six (“In Defense of Today’s Youth”), is probably the best in the book. Not only does it have a great beginning but it also successfully argues that the future can be much better than we think based on the younger generations of Americans. This is a very optimistic appraisal of the things to come based on a number of studies that show that far from the cries of a corrupt and indifferent younger generation, these kids have been raised under intense pressure to succeed, that they are ambitious, advocate common causes such as voluntarism in education, poverty, and the environment and if they do not seem so involved in ideological arguments it is because the Cold War is over and there are no debates today such as those of capitalism versus communism. Zakaria truly believes that a liberal arts education can only reinforce those attitudes.

In summary, despite some of its shortcomings the general reader, particularly outside the academy, will find this book an interesting reading and a strongly different voice in support of a liberal arts education.