

Tampa Bay Times

Column: What the liberal arts hope to teach

By William Felice, special to the Times

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The Dia: Beacon, a minimalist modern art museum in upstate New York, features two artists whose work embodies the challenges of becoming a liberally educated person.

The first artist, Fred Sandback, fills rooms with "sculptures" made out of simple twine and pieces of string. Walking into a Sandback room, these "sculptures" appear as "walls" and "barriers" that one must carefully move around. Yet, it is all an illusion. There are no actual structures blocking the path, only the skewed, destabilizing perception that one can't move freely forward — and it is all created by pieces of string.

The second artist, Richard Serra, goes in the opposite direction and creates huge, rolled-steel plate "sculptures" that are thick and weigh more than 20 tons. A person walking through Serra's "Double-Torqued Ellipses" is always in close proximity to the steel skins of the pieces. This creates a dramatic tension between one's bodily awareness and one's vision.

How one responds to Serra's work is not based on "looking and seeing" but rather on the impact of one's bodily awareness of the intimate surroundings that these huge pieces create. Serra thus gives us a whole new way of "looking" at the world.

Part of the challenge for those of us who are professors of the liberal arts is to help our students move beyond illusive walls and barriers and open themselves up to new ways of "looking" at the world. Sandback and Serra exemplify the types of questions we pursue with students, including:

- What are the limitations of our own perceptions of the world?
- How do our individual biases and world views limit our understanding by creating illusive "walls" and "barriers?"
- How do we break out of tradition and appreciate multiple frameworks for understanding and learning?



At its core, becoming "liberally educated" entails a process of opening up to new ways of "looking and seeing" the world around us.

A strong liberal arts curriculum also engages students with enduring questions of purpose and meaning asked by citizens in all the world's civilizations. These "big questions" include:

- What is justice?
- What is freedom?
- What is sacred?

Some first-year college students enter thinking that they already know the answers to these questions. Others view these discussions as an expensive diversion from the in-depth discipline training they need for future employment. To overcome this diffidence teachers must use their creative energy and imaginative pedagogy to help students appreciate the value of a liberal arts education.

For example, linking Langston Hughes' vision of American patriotism and justice in his classic poem *Let America Be America Again* to then-Sen. Barack Obama's 2008 Berlin speech, where the future president described himself as "a fellow citizen of the world," can create a dynamic classroom. Students recognize the ways Obama adds a global dimension to Hughes' vision of American citizenship. Does being an American patriot today also mean accepting global duties and global responsibilities?

Student conversations of justice today also inevitably gravitate toward environmental issues. To facilitate discussions of environmental justice, one of my former students came up with an intriguing classroom exercise. Students are divided into four groups based on their response to the following question: How does global warming make you feel? Happy? Sad? Angry? Depressed?

Most students are either angry or depressed about climate change. But others express the belief that the environmental consequences of global warming will force us to develop new and necessary technologies for survival — and it is survival that makes them happy. Through this exercise all views are freely expressed. Students are pushed to defend their positions based on scholarly research rather than opinion pieces and demagoguery.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York sponsored a remarkable exhibit this summer titled "Rain Room." Inside a structure built in a lot directly adjacent to the museum, visitors literally walked into a room full of falling water. One entered with trepidation, as it seemed impossible to walk through the room without getting drenched. Yet, through the visitors' interaction with the exhibit, the rain paused whenever a human body was detected. You could thus create your own path through this choreographed downpour.

The best professors of the liberal arts help each student find an individual pathway through the academic downpour of information and competing approaches to knowledge. The exhilaration of teaching every fall semester lies in being able to help a brand-new group of young students discover the value and joy of a liberal arts education.

William Felice, associate dean of general education at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, can be reached via his website: williamfelice.com. After a six-year faculty review, Eckerd College will launch an improved and fortified liberal arts program when the autumn term begins Sept. 2. He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.

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