the starry dynamo in the machinery of night:

LIBERAL ARTS (AND LIBRARIES) IN A DIGITAL WORLD

The Ancient Heavenly Connection

I saw the best minds of my generation
destroyed by madness, starving hysterical
naked,

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient
heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in
the machinery of night…

-A. Ginsberg, Howl

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History of Liberal Arts

- Subjects appropriate for free men and
  women, rather than tradesmen
  - Medieval European university: Seven liberal
    arts were grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the
    trivium) and geometry, arithmetic, music,
    and astronomy (the quadrivium)
  - “Liberation” from need to labor

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Liberal Arts Today

(ideally)

- Literature, languages, philosophy, history,
  mathematics, and science
- Cultivate democratic freedoms
- Libraries: A place for scholarly discourse;
  “town square” of the campus
- Helps students understand their relationship
to the world

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Liberal Arts Emphasis

“How Only Connect” - E.M. Forster

- Intensive interactions between students
  and faculty
- Holistic student development
- Challenging
- Integrated
- Residential experience
- Extracurricular involvement
- Peer interaction

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A Roundtable Discussion with:
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Dublin, Ireland: June 23-26, 2008
What’s really happening to the Liberal Arts?

- Homogenous products
- “One size fits all” learning
- Minimum standard of quality
- Decreased interaction with faculty
- Workload quantified by credit hours instead of knowledge created
- “Teaching machines”

Students as “Paying Customers”

“Students of a consumerist bent are unlikely to be interested in studying or working at anything which has no clear connection with their grades or future employment prospects…”

(Kayes et al, 2006)

Do the Liberal Arts matter?

- Higher Education Report (2005) suggests that a strong liberal arts emphasis during the first year results in:
  - Higher critical thinking abilities
  - Positive attitudes towards literacy
  - Positive results in reading comprehension

To Read or Not to Read

- 2006 study by National Endowment for the Arts concludes that Americans are reading less (and less well)
  - Among 17 year olds, percentage of non-readers doubled over a 20 year period (9% to 19%)
  - 15-24 year olds spend 7 minutes a day on leisure reading (online or print)
  - 2 ½ hours of TV

Do Libraries (and librarians) matter?

- Librarians are often the one “constant” faculty member… present for the student’s entire undergraduate experience.
- Libraries can be the “stabilizing force” which connects students to the community.
- How can physical Libraries remain relevant in a virtual world?

Brick and Mortar Libraries

- “Information Commons” Community
- Personalized assistance: research, writing, advisement, computer help, counseling referrals...
- Social Activities: “Rooftop Poetry Club”
- Creativity Showcase/ “Town Square”
- http://www.buffalostate.edu/library/

References


