

In Defense of the Liberal Arts
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Response on Behalf of the Initiates, Phi Beta Kappa Alpha of Virginia
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Good evening. I want to begin by congratulating my fellow Phi Beta Kappa Alpha Chapter initiates on this significant achievement. On behalf of myself and my fellow initiates, I also want to express the utmost gratitude to the faculty of the Phi Beta Kappa Society Alpha Chapter, our professors at the College, our families, our friends, and William and Mary for making this recognition possible. Thank you.

On this very night 243 years ago and less than a mile down the road, five William and Mary students gathered in the warm Raleigh Tavern not to drink ale and get rowdy with their peers, but to fill a need they felt was lacking at the College. At the time, William and Mary had two student societies, the most popular of which was the Flat Hat Club or “FHC.” The secretive FHC was known to host drunken parties and according to Thomas Jefferson, “had no useful object.” These five William and Mary students craved more than the existing societies could provide. They desired a more academically enriching society where they could debate pressing issues at the time of America’s birth. So that night five students led by pupil John Heath convened to establish Phi Beta Kappa, a secret society free from the “Scholastic Laws” and where students could freely debate any subject. To mark this occasion, the founders created a square silver medal,

engraved on one side with the letters S.P., initials which stand for Philosophical Society,” and whose other side contained the Greek initials Phi Beta Kappa, which translates to “love of wisdom, the guide to life.” Today, the Phi Beta Kappa Society continues to recognize students who harbor a deep love of wisdom. The society emphasizes its’ mission to “foster the freedom of thought, to recognize academic excellence, and above all, to champion an education in the liberal arts and sciences.”

The society’s goal to promote the liberal arts and sciences brings me to the central question of this address: why is an education from a liberal arts institution like William and Mary critical now, more than ever before?

To answer this question, it is important to first define the liberal arts themselves. During Classical Antiquity, Ancient Greeks and Romans recognized the 7 liberal arts as necessary prerequisites for a person to participate in civic life and live free from tyranny. In fact, the very word “liberal” comes from *liber*, the Latin word meaning the bark of a tree and freedom; the Romans associated bark with freedom because they employed it to make the pages of books brimming with ideas about liberty. To ensure that ideas about liberty continued to flourish, the ancients devised a system of education based on the liberal arts and divided into 2 categories. The first category was the *trivium*, the Latin word for three ways, and which involves the three literary disciplines: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The

second category quadrivium, the Latin term for four ways, and involves the four mathematical arts: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The *trivium and quadrivium* came to form the basis of the medieval Western University and saw a rebirth during the Renaissance, when Italian humanists reconfigured the old trivium by stressing the importance of ethics, history, Greek, and poetry along with grammar and logic.

Hundreds of years later, we students at William and Mary are lucky to have the liberal arts as the underpinnings of our education. This education has been lauded by the greatest thinkers. Thomas Jefferson wanted to create a “University so broad & liberal & modern [that would be a] a temptation to the youth... to come, and drink of the cup of knowledge” Albert Einstein stressed the importance of liberal arts for “training the mind to think.” Former President of Yale University Alfred Griswold called the liberal arts the “wellsprings of a free society.” Steve Jobs said that technology alone is not enough but “technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities... [that] yields results that make our hearts sing.” And yet the liberal arts are coming under attack. Headlines warn that “Shrinking Liberal Arts Programs Raise Alarms Among Faculty” and “The Liberal Arts Might Not Survive the 21st Century and A Tech-Hungry Economy.” As technology undergoes a sea-change and the demand for jobs in this industry proliferates, the focus of the college education has shifted from the liberal arts to “useful” and

vocational majors which supposedly translate more easily into jobs immediately after graduation. Indeed it has become normal to hear this from news outlets like CNBC, who recently proclaimed that old-world jobs are rapidly becoming automated and that there is a dire need for STEM majors to fill 2.4 million STEM-related jobs—and counting.

The ever-increasing presence of technology and artificial intelligence in our lives reminds me of a text I read for an American Studies class I took with Professor Susan Donaldson. We read Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World*, a dystopian novel published in 1932. It's set in a futuristic World State, where an intelligence-based social hierarchy made up of genetically modified citizens self-medicate with Soma, a drug used to elicit feelings of satisfaction and happiness within the population. (I think I heard an ad for this followed with 30 seconds of disclaimers!) I jest, but really. Is this where we are headed? To a brave new world like the one conjured by a writer in 1932? If I think about it while I'm biting into my GMO corn and talking with Siri and Alexa, I get a shiver down my spine.

According to Statista, "Americans aged 18 and older spend roughly ten and a half hours a day watching TV, listening to the radio or using their smartphones and other electronic devices." Solstice, A Chicago-based technology consulting firm noted that "As companies across industries plan for 2018, many look to increase market share by capturing the growing hype

surrounding Artificial Intelligence, with 70% of enterprises expecting to implement AI in 2018.” As we are constantly inundated with information, whether it be a barrage of facts or thousands of social media posts, it is easy to become information rich, but knowledge poor.

How do we survive the rapid inclusion of technology and Artificial Intelligence in our lives? Will we, as the author Neil Postman wrote in his 1985 book “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” (And this was long before our beloved smart phones) that “people will come to love their oppression, and adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.” Chilling! But we have been gifted with the answer to our survival: our grounding in a Liberal Arts education. Our capacity to think has been well entrenched in our minds. Fortunately for us, at William and Mary we have been able to navigate an information-rich world and gain knowledge through four years of reading, researching, interpreting, and experimenting in our liberal arts courses. We have become deep and broad thinkers. Here at William and Mary, I have been able to research a variety of subjects including Child Witches of the Spanish Inquisition, Joke Books in Marie Antoinette’s Library, the UNESCO Slave Route Project in Guadeloupe, and the democratization of credit for borrowers in the U.S seeking to obtain loans. These research endeavors have taken me everywhere from my professor’s office hours in Blair Hall to Spain and Guadeloupe in the French

Carribbean. The inductees present tonight have likewise delved into rich and wonderful studies. Some of us in this room have studied important political issues in history such as how Prime Minister Terence O'Neill attempted to unify Northern Ireland during the 1960s. Some have dedicated themselves to exploring the impact of sleep patterns on financial decisions. Others have devoted themselves to examining agency and femininity in British Renaissance models of Helen of Troy. Like the 5 William and Mary students who gathered in Raleigh Tavern to find a way to engage in meaningful debate in a raucous world, we have found a way to take substantial time to focus our minds, to think deeply and engage in meaningful debate on a wide range of subjects even in the face of a tsunami of technological changes. Our training in the liberal arts provides us not with a single skill, but a toolbox of crucial transferrable skills including creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability, all of which will enable us to excel in any career path, even in jobs that do not yet exist. Beyond preparing us for successful careers, our liberal arts education has armed us with the skills to become citizens who can meaningfully participate in civic life and ride the waves of change that lie ahead for our generation. I am certain we, as Phi Beta Kappans, will take our liberated minds beyond the storied brick walls of our alma mater and use our education to, as Steve Jobs articulated, "yield results that make our hearts sing." Thank you.

