



In Defense of a Liberal Education

Zakaria, Fareed
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Book Review

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The argument of Fareed Zakaria's book is precisely what the title indicates: a liberal education is worth defending. Zakaria begins by describing the oft heard opinion that studying the liberal arts, especially in an age of technology and global business, is a waste of time, and how in India, a skills-based education is valued much more than one centered on the study of history or philosophy. He himself intended to focus upon maths and sciences, but wound up a history major because of an elective course.

The book provides a brief but helpful history of liberal arts education, focused upon the United States, then turns to what Zakaria thinks is the "central virtue" (72) of such an education: it teaches one how to write, which in turn teaches one how to think. The other two main advantages of such an education are that one learns how to speak, and how to learn. Zakaria elaborates on how such abilities are requisite for obtaining a job, and important for the modern economy. He also maintains that education should be much more accessible and affordable, and that university education, at least in the United States, should be more rigorous. Thus, while extolling the importance of a liberal education, he recognizes that it is currently deeply flawed in its implementation. We need more, and better, liberal education (105).

Subsequent chapters further discuss the need for greater accessibility to higher education (Zakaria believes MOOCs can make a contribution here), and the significance of knowledge for power, especially political power. Zakaria thinks the liberal arts are crucial if we want more just societies and a fairer distribution of wealth. His final chapter is a defense of today's youth. There have been several recent books lamenting the lack of curiosity and selfishness of young people. However, Zakaria cites surveys that indicate that concerns about being a community leader and helping others have risen among students in university, and education, poverty, and

the environment are their top concerns. However, at the close of the book he grants that all of us need to spend more time thinking about the meaning of life, which is precisely what a liberal arts education encourages us to do.

Zakaria's book is informative and engaging, and I appreciate his call to make education more accessible for those facing economic hardship. Some might find that the examples and citations from capitalist icons who endorse the liberal arts undermine other aspects of Zakaria's argument given that one hopes (and Zakaria appears to share this hope) a liberal arts education would encourage a more reflective critique of economic systems in which people are able to amass so much wealth, often at the expense of others. Such examples might also reinforce the notion that success is measured primarily by wealth, which many dimensions of a liberal arts course of study would challenge. But those interested in a history of higher education in the United States will find this a good introduction. The more positive, or at least, sympathetic, attitude towards contemporary young people evident in the last chapter is welcome in light of how anxious and debt-ridden so many of our students are.

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