Eight Hundred Years of University Learning:
Two Pictures of the Liberal Arts

Stephen T. Davis
Claremont McKenna College

I
My job at this conference is to assess the liberal arts at the present moment in time. I will take that to mean the liberal arts as they are taught and learned at colleges and universities in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To tip my hand, I am going to argue that small liberal arts colleges, and especially those like Westmont with a religious orientation, are in a particularly strong position to achieve excellence in liberal arts teaching and learning.

Let me provide a brief roadmap of where we will be going. First, I will lay out my own views on the purpose of liberal arts education. I will mention eight desiderata of a college education, that is, eight characteristics that we ought to hope our graduates possess. Then I will paint two brief and impressionistic pictures for you. The first is of liberal arts learning at the medieval university. The second is of liberal arts learning at the contemporary university. Finally, I am going to ask what lessons we can learn from our two pictures. That is where I will make my argument about faith-related colleges.

II
Let me now move to the first point. What is the purpose of higher education? What should be the goal or aim of a liberal education? Here let me mention eight characteristics that I believe we should want our college graduates to have. I stress that these are my own opinions. In the interest of time, I am merely going to state them, rather than argue for them. Some of the points are self-evident; others might be controversial (1).

The first four have to do primarily with learning and character.

- Intellectual breadth. Our graduates should be broadly educated persons; we should try to achieve breadth of learning through a coherent, diversified, and well-balanced curriculum in the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, mathematics, and the arts.
- Intellectual depth. Our graduates should be especially well educated in at least one major field of study; indeed, at a minimum, they should graduate with a level of mastery of that field that is appropriate for a bachelor’s degree.
- Sensitivity to diversity. Our graduates should be aware of and sensitive to the diversity that is characteristic of America and the world today, diversity in gender, race, language, national origin, culture, religion, and socio-economic status.
- Character and integrity. Our graduates should be persons of integrity, aware of and influenced by the ethical and moral issues that arise in human situations, both those of a personal and those of a public nature.

The other four are skills more than items of learning:

- Critical thinking skills. Our graduates should be able to think clearly, critically, and constructively about intellectual and practical problems, and thus be able to reach rational conclusions.
• Communication skills. Our graduates should be able to read and listen carefully and to express themselves clearly, coherently, and convincingly, both orally and in writing.
• Technological Literacy. Our graduates should be capable of using the appropriate information technology tools that are relevant to their fields of study and careers.
• Leadership and interpersonal skills. Our graduates should be able to exercise responsible leadership in all areas of life, and especially in their chosen careers, as well as be able to work effectively with others as members of a team.

My own view, then, is that colleges and universities can use these eight points as templates against which to measure success or failure. Are we turning out graduates who possess these characteristics? This is the question we can ask ourselves.

III

Now let me move to my first picture. In what I am going to say about the medieval university I will focus on the thirteenth century and on the University of Paris. At least in the Arts and in Theology Paris was at that time Europe’s foremost educational institution. (Sadly, that was far from the case in Canon Law, Civil Law, and Medicine, the other three great disciplines of medieval academia).

There are many aspects of the University of Paris in the thirteenth century that we today would recognize and embrace. One is the idea that a university is essentially an association of students and teachers for the purpose of learning. Another is the idea that young scholars of the liberal arts learn primarily from teachers and from books, and that a student learns best when supervised by a skilled and dedicated teacher. Another is the idea that universities work optimally when the knowledge to be imparted is divided into departments or schools based on disciplines, and when professors specialize in a certain discipline or even sub-discipline. Another is the idea that learning occurs in small increments, and that deep and lasting learning takes years of study. Another is the idea of a definite and established curriculum, with courses in certain subjects being taught at announced times and places. Another is the idea that some courses and degrees are less advanced than others and accordingly count as prerequisites for them. Another is the idea that liberal learning ought to be open to anyone who has the ability and interest to pursue it, whether rich or poor, noble or low-born. Recognizing that some students were poor, fees at thirteenth century Paris were figured on a graduated basis, with poorer students paying less. Another is the idea that exams, tests, and trials of students must be incorruptibly fair, with no allowances made for bribery, threats, or favoritism. Another is the idea that education culminates in a certain certification called a degree, and that the teachers themselves are the ones who decide who receives the degree.

But there are also marked differences between then and now. For example, the process of application and admittance to the university was not nearly so elaborate as it is today. No SAT, no ACT, no essays to write or complicated forms to fill out. All you had to do was show up at the rector’s office, prove that you could read and write in Latin (usually by making a speech to him), pay your matriculation fee, take the oath of obedience to the University’s laws and customs, and you were in. Another major difference is that all instruction was in Latin. Also, paper was scarce and expensive in northern Europe in the
thirteenth century, and books were very expensive; accordingly, many students had to rent their textbooks. So students had to prove their learning by replicating it orally and defending it in debate. Another difference is that until the second half of the thirteenth century the university owned no buildings. There was no “campus.” Wherever the masters were, there was the university. Lectures were held either in the rooms of a master or else in a room rented by him for the purpose of teaching.

Let me turn to curricular and liberal arts matters. There were four “schools” at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, the School of Arts (the one and only undergraduate school), and the three graduate or “superior” schools of Theology, Medicine, and Law. You could not study Theology, Medicine, or Law without first having earned the Arts degree.

The School of Arts degree program was a five or six year course. But since students at Paris usually started at about age fifteen, they finished at about the same age as our students normally do. But what exactly did the Arts students—i.e., the undergraduates—study? The answer is: the seven liberal arts. They were divided into the “Trivium,” which included grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the “Quadrivium,” which included arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. A great deal of this course of study amounted to what we today would call philosophy, with heavy doses of Aristotle. The other great emphasis of medieval higher education was logic. Indeed, it is difficult to overemphasize the importance that was placed on arriving at precise definitions, applying careful distinctions, synthesizing proven conclusions, and producing convincing arguments, which almost always had to be in the form of syllogisms. Students not only had to possess these analytic skills—they had to demonstrate them in informal debates and formal “disputations.” (A “disputation” was an organized public debate, where a person had to defend a thesis against attack by an opponent or series of opponents.)

A student in the School of Arts had to spend his first four years mainly attending courses and lectures. Another difference from today is that it was quite common to repeat the same course, often up to three times. At the end of four years, if the student’s master agreed that he was ready, he could make a “determination” (or “be determined”). This involved his engaging in a series of disputations under the master’s supervision. Having been determined, the student then had to teach for two more years, as a kind of teaching assistant or lecturer, until he was ready for the public oral examination, with the examiners being various masters.

Having passed that exam, he graduated as a Bachelor of Arts. Many Arts graduates, or “bachelors” (as they were called—baccalaureus or “beginner” in Latin) stayed on at Paris to pursue an advanced degree. But most of them left, bachelor’s degree in hand, and found employment elsewhere. In thirteenth century Europe, both in the church and in civil government, there was a great need for “clerks” or “notaries,” people who could read, speak, and especially write in fluent Latin. Many bachelors took up such careers. Others became teachers at what we would call grammar schools or high schools. So most students who earned the Bachelor of Arts degree, then as now, entered the job market.
Looking back on it from the vantage point of eight hundred years, there is no doubt that the medieval university was a success. Our colleges and universities are its direct descendants, and the best of the medieval universities—Paris, Bologna, Oxford, Cambridge, and others—survive as centers of academic excellence to this day. The longevity of the institution known as the university is testimony to the fact that the medievals were doing something right.

Of course, there are many aspects of medieval higher education that we today have no wish to emulate. Let me mention four of them.

First, one gaping lacuna in medieval education, from our point of view, is the almost total absence of what we would call science. There were no laboratories, there was almost no tradition of learning by observation and experience, and the degree of scientific ignorance was startling. (One medical master at Paris was famous for his defense of the view that the more pus the body developed in and around a wound, the better.) Second, much learning at medieval universities was memorization, sheer rote learning. Although students had to be able to think for themselves in defending various propositions in disputations, there was almost no room or desire for original thinking from students. Third, medieval students were allowed virtually no electives. There was a one-size-fits all curriculum. Fourth, we today obviously reject the idea—sadly, few people in medieval Europe even questioned it—that university education ought to be restricted to men.

Still, there are aspects of medieval higher education that we today should admire. First, there is the fact that provisions were made for an international student body and for poor students. There have been times in European and American history when higher education was an opportunity that was available only to the children of the rich or well-connected. At the University of Paris in the thirteenth century that was not true. This is not to say that students with money or influential supporters had no advantages; but the medieval university was about as much of a meritocracy as was possible at the time.

Second, we can admire the rigor of the education and the seriousness with which the medievals took it. Two of their notions stand out: (a) the idea that the best way to teach a young man something is to place him under the tutelage of somebody who knows it and cares about teaching it to others; and (b) the idea that knowledge of a subject is not complete until one can teach that subject to others and defend its crucial claims against all comers. In other words, to the medievals, you prove your learning by showing that you can communicate it and defend it (2).

**IV**

Now let me offer an equally impressionistic picture of liberal arts education today. Unlike the medieval scene, I do not need to describe the university today because it is something with which those of us in this room are intimately familiar. I take it as a given, as virtual common ground among Americans in higher education today, that delivering a coherent liberal arts education is extremely difficult, and that many of our colleges and universities do a poor job of it. On that score, the curriculum at many of our institutions is pretty much hit-or-miss. Rigor and curricular structure are sadly lacking. Ideas that in fifty or
perhaps even ten years will seem perfectly silly command assent. That is to say, at many institutions, we are doing poorly in satisfying the aims or goals of liberal education listed earlier. My picture, in this case, will amount to a discussion of why this is so.

Before listing what I take to be the reasons that liberal education today is difficult, I need to point out some other frequently mentioned factors that in my view do not belong on the list. First, I do not think our problems have much to do with the fact that we are trying to provide a university education for a much higher percentage of the population than the medievals were. The figure often cited is that sixty-five percent of American high school graduates enroll in college at some time between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. That is indeed a high percentage, perhaps too high; but is not in my view a central reason for our problems. If we knew how to deliver an excellent liberal arts education to the few, it would be a mere technical or logistical problem to deliver it to the many.

Second, I do not think our problems have much to do with the related fact that we are trying to educate a much more diverse student body that the medievals were. (I mean diversity in ethnicity, national origin, socio-economic status, level of preparation for college, purpose of seeking higher education, etc.) This is an important characteristic of academia today, but again is not our main problem.

Third, I do not think our real problem is the expansion of knowledge. It is often said that knowledge now doubles every seven years. Now I have no idea how figures like that are arrived at—maybe you just count the number of professional journals in existence, and see how often that number doubles—but there is no denying the vast growth in knowledge. Nor do I think the problem is the consequent fact of increasing specialization in scholarly research. Especially in the sciences, but even in the humanities and social sciences, scholars nowadays become experts in very narrow areas. It becomes difficult for people in even closely related sub-fields to communicate with each other about their research. This is all true. But our real problems, in my opinion, lie elsewhere.

What then are the real problems? Let me list the three that I think are most important.

1. Loss of educational consensus. There is little agreement in academia today as to what is the purpose of higher education, what college graduates should know or what texts or topics they should study, or how to go about producing graduates who are liberally educated people. The lack of consensus on these and other matters in part explains the many recent controversies over curricular issues at American colleges and universities. Recent culture wars in academia, e.g., about identity politics, about “Western Civilization” courses, and about race, class, gender, and sexual identification as lenses through which everything else is seen, illustrate this point. So does the fact that the humanities no longer play the central, integrating role in higher educational curricula as they once did. The fact is that academia today—unlike medieval academia—has no unifying worldview. In its place is a kind of intellectual anarchy, which has the effect of making ideological disagreement the defining aspect of all academic debates. If I may be so bold as to say so, it seems to me that the single most crucial need of academia today is
a worldview, a well-reasoned philosophy of life that entails a well-reasoned philosophy of higher education.

2. Vocationalism. There exists a powerful impulse among college students today (as well as their parents) toward courses and majors that are “vocational” or “professional” in the sense of contributing directly toward future employment skills and marketability. Traditionally required classes that were once considered essential parts of a liberal arts curriculum—especially courses in the humanities, foreign languages, and (for future non-scientists) science—are often considered old-fashioned and irrelevant. Students who are genuinely intellectually curious seem to be getting rarer and rarer. For those who see higher education primarily as a ticket to a financially secure future (and of course there is nothing wrong with students wanting financial security), there is little appreciation of the personal and professional value of a broad liberal arts education. Thus the temptation for colleges and universities to teach mainly what their customers want to learn. The desire to credential themselves for future employment causes many of our students to want to graduate with double majors, dual majors, multiple minors, etc. This is fine, except that intellectual breadth is reduced, since there is room for fewer and fewer electives (3).

3. Tight Budgets. Both at the private and public institutions, it has been many years since schools have been able to offer the full compliment of courses deemed necessary for students to be liberally educated and for them to progress, at a steady pace, toward graduation. Budgets have been shrinking, everything is seen as a zero-sum game, and students are the victims.

These factors and others have produced the kind of curricular chaos and incoherence that many faculty-members today complain about. It is possible at many schools for students to get a degree by putting together an unconnected smattering of fragments of knowledge. That is, it is possible for students to graduate with very little in the way of a liberal education. Each student in effect supplies her own definition of higher education. Courses are selected not for principled reasons, but on the basis of considerations like the reputation of the instructor, parental pressures, sleeping habits, and whim.

V

Finally, let me turn to lessons that I believe we can learn from our two pictures. Earlier on I made reference to Christian liberal arts colleges. Such institutions are below the radar screen of many interpreters of higher education today. To the extent that such folk are aware of the faith-related institutions at all, they are sometimes dismissed as obscurantist vestiges of yesteryear. In such institutions, Christian teaching plays a central and substantive role in what is taught and learned. My own view is that these colleges can speak prophetically to secular academia about liberal arts learning.

Now the fact that American higher education is at present aimless and floundering cannot, in my opinion, be gainsaid. But I am not recommending that we try to return to the medieval past. Even if we wanted to do so we could not go back to those simpler times. One way of seeing why is obvious. When you look at the eight desired characteristics of liberal arts graduates that I listed earlier on, several of them were not
even imaginable eight hundred years ago. Academics in those days would probably not have mentioned leadership skills or sensitivity to diversity, for example, and certainly not computer skills. Moreover, no one religion plays the integrating role in social and intellectual life that Christianity once did. Our world is now religiously pluralistic.

Nevertheless, I believe there are three areas where today’s Christian liberal arts colleges, small and sometimes overlooked as they are, can provide leadership for academia as a whole.

The first area is ethics. It is clear that today’s university has abdicated any authority, or even any desire, for telling right from wrong. Moral teachings cannot be quantified, measured, tested, or reconciled with naturalism, so they are outside the university’s pale. Apart from a rather amorphous and selective recommendation of multicultural tolerance, accompanied usually by a poorly thought through moral relativism, the university no longer sees itself as a moral teacher. I say amorphous because the official doctrine of the university is that we are to be tolerant of the views and practices of any and every group, except that almost everybody in academia believes—as I do—that the Nazi and the terrorists, for example, are not fit objects of tolerance. I say selective because just in the area of religion, items like Native American religion, New Age spirituality, and goddess worship are apparently honored and celebrated at the university, but not evangelical Christianity or conservative Catholicism. Many Christian faculty and students sense a genuine degree of intolerance for them and their views. So it is anything but clear what exactly the contemporary university’s commitment to diversity and tolerance amounts to. Perhaps it is simply incoherent.

But the Christian colleges today unashamedly try to teach right and wrong. I do not say that secular academia can simply start embracing the values of the Christian colleges. That would be quite out of the question. But I do think secular academia can work harder to give its students a sense of personal, civic, social, and global moral responsibility, much as the Christian colleges try to do. Indeed, I think that is badly needed.

The second area has to do with a shared worldview. This is something that the medieval educators and students had. They knew who they were—children of God. They knew where they came from—God had created them. They knew their purpose in life—it was to serve and honor God. And they knew where they were hoping to go—to the Kingdom of God. Now secular academia today has lost its belief in God. (Individual professors, administrators, and students are certainly allowed to believe in God, but only on the condition that they keep quiet about it and accept that it must remain at the level of private experience.) And no coherent worldview has replaced belief in God. Many philosophies and viewpoints have been tried in academia since the eclipse of God. Enlightenment rationalism, Americanism, pragmatism, existentialism, postmodernism—but all fail to command assent. All that is left is a kind of intellectual anarchy tied to naturalism and a kind of inchoate “me first-ism.”

This is where the Christian colleges can lead the way. Secular academia is not about to buy into Christian assumptions, but the faith-related colleges do that very thing. They are
in a position to provide for their students a coherent worldview, as well as a coherent philosophy of higher education that flows from it. In some ways, these are heady days at the Christian colleges in this country. In general, enrollments are up, endowments are rising, faculty morale is improving, and student satisfaction is high. Even some who do not call themselves Christians are beginning to recognize the serious contribution to American higher education that the faith-related colleges are making. (I’m sure you saw this documented in Alan Wolfe’s recent series of articles in the Atlantic Monthly.) I truly believe the Christian liberal arts colleges are in a position to exercise a certain degree of leadership in academia. With their shared Christian worldview, they can show the rest of academia what a good liberal arts education looks like.

The third area is integration of what we know. Today knowledge comes in tiny, discrete packages. We learn a little from here and a little from there. The items remain quite unrelated to each other. The integration I am talking about was practiced by the medievals; they called it composito (the Greeks had called it synthesis). It is the process of thoroughly and courageously asking what one knows or believes in one area has to do with what one knows or believes in other areas. For Christian scholars, it means relating their faith to their secular learning.

Small colleges are in a unique position of being able to promote integration, in my opinion. Being small, their physicists can easily talk to their psychologists, and their historians to their mathematicians. They often have a nice sense of community among faculty, students, and administrators, and so it can be easier for them to do the kind of searching self-assessment that is necessary for curricular improvement. With their tightly-focused missions and clearly-structured curricula designed to fit those missions, they are uniquely well suited to weave together the various parts of a liberal education into a coherent whole. Many of them are already doing that very thing.

VI
In any case, let me express my gratitude to President Winter and the other relevant people at Westmont for inviting me—a son of Whitworth—to speak at this fine Conversation on the Liberal Arts. I know I speak for all the visitors here in congratulating Westmont on its status as one of the very finest Christian liberal arts colleges in the country. We also join in your joy at the founding of your new Institute for the Liberal Arts. I am convinced that the Center will be a great benefit for the students and faculty of Westmont College. I also very much hope it will promote dialogue with people at secular institutions. We wish both the college and the institute well.

Notes
1. Most of the points I list are quite similar to points made in a Claremont McKenna College document entitled, “Report of the Strategic Planning Committee on the Curriculum,” December 18, 2000. But since I am the chair of that committee and principal author of the Report, I am pretty much quoting myself here.

2. In writing Section III of the present paper, I was assisted by such works as Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, The University World: A Synoptic View of Higher Education in the

3. When I first taught at Claremont McKenna College in 1970 (it was then called Claremont Men’s College), students were told that the curriculum consisted of about one third graduation requirements, one third courses in the student’s major, and one third elective courses. It has been a long time since anything like that has been anywhere near true.

4. I would like to thank my friends William Ascher and Stan Madsen for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.