

The Liberal Arts at New College: A Primer for New Students

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It is often said that a liberal arts education prepares you for many careers and countless life options. The reasons for this are that a liberal arts education broadens the perspective, sharpens analytical abilities, produces intellectual self-reliance, and inculcates a love of learning for learning's sake. Working together, these results encourage a lifetime of learning and personal growth, which, in turn, will enable you to respond creatively to countless career opportunities and not merely one. In short, a liberal arts education never ends, and a good liberal arts college views itself as the first station on a lifelong journey. For the liberally-educated person, not only is the career path filled with limitless possibilities, but life itself is more interesting.

The New College faculty combines this traditional appreciation of the liberal arts and sciences with an emphasis on active learning and individual responsibility. Even liberal learning is not learning if you are a passive spectator. Consequently, your instructors strive to generate engagement, active participation, and persistence in learning on your part – much like the experience of being so wrapped up in a good book that you cannot put it down. This philosophy of learning accounts for the considerable degree of freedom and flexibility associated with the New College academic program, exemplified by the academic contract. New College offers you tremendous freedom to explore and define the liberal arts experience in your own way, always with the help and advice of faculty mentors who are, after all, more experienced learners on the same educational journey.

What should you be considering when making your educational choices and designing your contracts? You should of course be considering your own interests – indeed, the freedom to pursue your own interests, without the pressure of numerous course requirements, is one of the most attractive features of New College. But you should also consider pursuing fields of study and experiential opportunities unfamiliar to you or even difficult and unpleasant for you. After all, one thing a genuinely “liberal” education does is to “liberate” you from your provincialism, your fears, and your ignorance. In so doing, a liberal arts education helps you to deal constructively with ambiguity and to enter more sympathetically into the experience of people unlike yourself – precisely the qualities that will be most needed in the twenty-first century. This result is less likely to occur if you always gravitate toward what is most familiar and easy for you.

As you discuss these matters with the New College faculty, you will find that there are differences of emphasis and nuance in the ways in which your instructors view a liberal arts education. However, there is considerable consensus on some basic characteristics of such an education and you should bear these in mind as you develop and grow at New College. A liberal arts education typically promotes:

- the ability to think critically and analytically, which includes the capacity to distinguish between a good and a bad argument
- facility with written and oral communication
- the ability to read and interpret written texts with sophistication and insight
- mastery of quantitative skills and methods of analysis
- an appreciation of the natural world and of the methods characteristic of the natural sciences
- a sense of aesthetic appreciation, including the capacity to respond to creative works of literature, drama, fine arts, and music
- a sense of historical perspective, inculcating the capacity to deal with complexity, ambiguity, and social change
- an expanded and sympathetic awareness of the wide range of human experience, including the ability to communicate in a foreign language and the appreciation of a cultural or ethnic setting other than your own
- ecological literacy
- the capacity to make informed ethical judgments and to fashion a framework of values.

Obviously, there is no single route to these educational results, which is one more reason why a liberal arts education should be viewed as an ongoing process. The interplay between the “content” of a liberal arts education, and its methods of “skills” is rich, subtle, and at the very center of the New College experience. That is, sometimes the proper educational choice involves the mastery of a certain subject matter, a body of knowledge that all liberally educated people might be expected to know, such as the history of your own country. At other times, the proper choice involves exposure to a methodology or a way of thinking, such as quantitative analysis, that becomes an intellectual tool employable in many different contexts. This difference is one of several reasons why the question of a standard or average contract “load” is a tricky one. While most faculty view the average contract load to be about four activities, this number can vary depending on your educational goals for the semester. The important thing is to develop the habit of reflecting on your contract choices within the wider context of the

aims of the liberal arts experience. Moreover, you should also develop the habit of regularly talking these issues over with your sponsor, who will be a ready dialogue partner. In this matter, as in many others at New College, the initiative rests with you.

Your instructors believe that a New College education will help you to live a life that is free, full, and productive. In the words of one veteran faculty member, the New College approach to liberal arts education will ideally make you a “freedom artist,” filling you with wonder about the world in which you live, helping you to realize your full potential, and enabling you to be genuinely useful to the wider community in which you live. The difference your New College education will make is the difference of a lifetime.



For New College we sought a timeless symbol that would be representative of New College and yet would express an eternal truth. The sun which dominates the landscape becomes the central pivot, symbolizing the light of knowledge and the source of life and energy. The gentle and continuously moving lines represent the sea and the wind, the controlled waxing and waning of the four seasons, and the four points of the compass. We know that for at least 2,500 years the flowing movement of this design has had symbolic meanings of continuity and variety; so it does for New College. For us these never ending forms imply that New College will always move forward; that it will forever be what its name was chosen to portray; the constant newness of the searching for knowledge and truth.

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