* Liberal arts education seeks to promote the intellectual, social, and emotional growth of the student as a whole person, by providing a vibrant learning environment rich in a diversity of disciplines, experiential opportunities, and thought.
* A liberal arts education can mean so many things, and have so many kinds of significance to a student, that I find it difficult to address my thoughts to either of those catch-all terms. The more useful concept for me is the value of a liberal arts education.
* The value of a liberal arts education lies in the intellectual range it encourages young people to develop. Our traditional curricular diversity harkens back to 19th and early 20th century ideas about what one needed to know to be a well-educated citizen, which meant reading in many subject areas and, more recently, learning a number of methodological approaches to the discovery and testing of knowledge. Today, the intellectual range we encourage students to develop includes more practical and social skills: how to think collectively, how to solve complex problems that require more than one frame of analysis or theoretical reference, how to apply academic learning to every-day life and policy. These goals are still focused, generally, on preparing students to be well-educated citizens. They also extend the other chief value I see in a liberal arts education, which is that, when exploited well, this kind of college education produces venturesome thinkers. You could call it intellectual courage. The students I have admired most at Middlebury (and at [Other College], where I worked previously) have had that quality. They have dared to take courses in unfamiliar areas, have let themselves get carried away with challenging research, have grabbed ahold of their own education before they graduate. One can see the intellectual muscle growing in such people. Because that kind of development is unpredictable, for it is connected to a students’ innate abilities and the interests they discover in the classroom, intellectual venturing for most requires the involvement, at some stage, of an experienced guide. That’s us.

This point of view has developed through my various experiences working with students on research – class research assignments, independent studies, theses, and my own research. I have come to see research as the most valuable thing we do as faculty and the most valuable thing we ask students to do. The more research they can do, the more they grow. Research can be so many things – it is as unlimited as thought.

* The educational historian Bruce Kimball has argued that the idea of a liberal arts education has been a contested concept for 2,000 years—there has never been a static understanding of the **the meaning and significance of a liberal arts education.**  It all depends on where and when you dig.  His most recent argument is that most liberal arts colleges are embodying Pragmatist ideals as expressed by William James and John Dewey---meaning that most colleges are looking for ways to show the relevancy of what students are studying to solving problems in the world.  The reality of the cost demands more than "trust us"--colleges have to "show" by giving evidence that students engage and solve problems in creative and dynamic ways.

There is also the marvelous thinking of Louis Menand who has argued that we learn three important things:

1. Protocols of Inquiry—ways of asking questions and making meaning.  For example, statistics is one and hermeneutics is another.
2. How to think philosophically.
3. How to think historically.

Menand's argument is that no matter what our content, these three things matter and we should be consciously and explicitly (meaning that students know we are doing this together)  working on them.  These are the ways of thinking that are prerequisites to solving any problem.  Maybe, rather than showing haw relevant it is , work on maiking more clear the kinds of thinking you are fostering.

Then, you have Evan Brann who has written an intriguing essay on the the "American College as THE place for Liberal Education."  She links the pursuit of happiness— no mere 'desideratum' as she puts it, but a founding ideal of this republic—with the fundamental purpose of a liberal arts education.  What is the good life and how do I live it?--If you have a more thoughtful answer to that question after four years, then you have probably gotten your money's worth.  She argues that they very isolation of liberal arts colleges make them a poor place for worrying about how to solve the world's problems—that you can do after graduation.  Meanwhile, why not take a few years to learn how to think carefully before trying to save the world from itself.

There are so man more who have written on this. To keep it somewhat simple, I think all three are right:

1. The cultural context of the USA matters—which is to say that Brann's emphasis on thinking critically about what the heck the pursuit of happiness means is important.  Without the larger democratic framework there would be no independent colleges—only state ones.  Thus/But, I would argue, as a result, we must examine the national and cultural context in which we are swimming and foster an interest in engaging public life. Thus/But, we want ENLIGHTENED political engagement, not just political engagement. I think she is wrong in thinking that you should or can avoid critiquing the very water you are swimming in. We should ask what affects who gets to pursue what kind of good life/happiness.
2. Dewey and the Pragmatists are also correct-the line between 'useless' and 'useful' information is chimerical.  One can study boat building because boats are beautiful, but that does not mean it has to sink when you put it in the water.
3. Menand is right too.
* I think that a liberal arts education should be focused on the acquisition of knowledge from a range of disciplines, without sacrificing an in-depth command of a particular (or major) discipline.  Most important is the acquisition of critical thinking skills, whatever the discipline or material.  On the PBS Newshour last night, there was an interview with an author named Ivey who just wrote a book about the culture of American values.  His take on education is interesting: he said that education should be less concerned with job skills and more concerned with producing citizens.  I couldn’t agree more.
* You go to a great school not for knowledge as much as for arts and habits;

for the habit of attention,

for the art of expression,

for the art of assuming at a moment's notice new intellectual postures,

for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts,

for the habits of submitting to censure and refutation,

for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms,

for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy,

for the habit of working out what is possible in a given time,

for taste,

for discrimination,

for mental courage and mental soberness.

Above all,

You go to a great school for self knowledge.

-- William Cory, Master of Eton

* One of the great attributes of the phrase “Liberal Arts” is that no two people seem to give it exactly the same definition.  This in itself is the one of the major sources of vitality in the liberal arts education.  So, what is my definition?  I think the ultimate goal of a liberal arts education is to make one sound erudite at cocktail parties.  As an extension of that idea, I have decided that the highest form of the cocktail party is the art opening, which in turn makes the Art History major the most useful program of study in a liberal arts college.
* I prefer this definition of *liberal arts* from my dictionary:

“the studies (as language, philosophy, history, literature, abstract science) in a college or university intended to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop the general intellectual capacities (as reason and judgment) as opposed to professional or vocational skills”

In my view, the liberal arts are NOT about interdisciplinary studies or distribution requirements (the smorgasbord of courses).  A liberal arts approach doesn’t preclude these things, but it doesn’t require them, either.  The strength of the liberal arts approach is in depth rather than breadth.  We best  “engage students' capacity for rigorous  analysis and independent thought” (from our mission statement)  by requiring each of them to choose a major and explore it over several years in order to strengthen her or his “intellectual capacities (as reason and judgment).”  (Hence my strong support for required senior work.)  These capacities will serve our students — and, by extension, the societies in which they live -- in all facets of their lives, not just their first jobs.
* Interconnections
* The charge that liberal arts is just an anachronistic leftover of historical elitism misses the deeper significance of what a liberal arts education can and should do: produce engaged citizens who can think critically about the world around them. The point of a liberal arts education is not to produce practical skills, but the incredibly important skill of being an analytical thinker.

If liberal arts is a disappearing breed, it is not because it is no longer relevant or necessary, but because critical consciousness and analytical thinking are somehow threatening the order of things.

In order to survive, liberal arts institutions cannot accept their disappearance as a fait accompli, but rather ask who wins and who loses when critical thinking disappears.

* The significance of a liberal arts education:

It is an important step, and an important time, in one’s life towards furthering one’s understanding of oneself, one’s communities and one’s world.  It is a time, and in a sense a place, where multiple perspectives confront each other in a kind of shared joint endeavor that asks us to reexamine what we know and our relationships to each other and the world.  The Molecular Biologist can talk to the Philosopher.  The Ancient Greeks can talk to Us now, the Catholic to the Atheist, Samuel Beckett to the Musician.   In this examining and reexamining, if successful, new goals are formed and knowledge is gained.  Sometimes it is a new idea of power or justice or maybe just a new appreciation for what life was like back then or if one had been born differently situated, if only a few circumstances were changed.  This shared, joint endeavor, though sometimes forceful, at its heart gives us a voice – meaningful ways to communicate with ourselves and with others. It also then presents us with opportunities to reshape ourselves and communities.  It gives us the tools that help us do so for the better.  Though not all can afford it, who would miss it if they could afford it?
* The Humpties and Dumpties, Spring, Winter, and Fall,

Each shout "LIBERAL ARTS!" to justify all.

So now the King's counsellors, subjects, and Deans

Have two hundred choices of what those words mean.

I think it's much more important to know what something IS, than to decide what to call it.  I hope that as the EAC (and the rest of us) address the very important (and very interesting) question of what a Middlebury undergraduate experience should be, we don't get constrained by needing to call it "**a liberal arts education**"  (emphasis original).  When I look up "liberal arts" in a dictionary, I almost always find two definitions, and often in this order (I'm copying these from my ancient—1989—Webster's Ninth New Collegiate):

The medieval studies comprising the trivium and quadrivium.

The studies (as language, philosophy, history, literature, abstract science) in a college or university intended to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop the general intellectual capacities (as reason and judgment) as opposed to professional or vocational skills.

It's very clear that many constituencies of the College wish to increase, in the Middlebury undergraduate experience, the opportunity for development of, or at least exposure to, (lets be honest about it) "professional or vocational skills."  Please, let us not refer to these valuable experiences as "academic," nor as part of the "liberal arts."  It may be that there are some among us who feel that Middlebury College can create a new definition of "liberal arts," and while I obviously agree with this two-hundred-fold, I think it would be better not to facilitate increased humpty-dumptyism anywhere in academia.

* The ultimate goal of liberal arts education is to uplift humanity.

To be able to think critically,

to be able to feel deeply,

to be able to discover the beauty of life and nature,

through cultivating human hearts and minds.

* Through liberal education students develop capabilities (habits of mind, critical thinking skills, communication abilities, problem solving, learning to learn, ethical reasoning, facility with thinking quantitatively) that are achieved through deep engagement with the subject matter of their courses and their major. The hard part of this is that while the outcomes seem to be 'content neutral' and suggest that content doesn't matter, the reality is that these capabilities can only be developed through engagement with the questions within the academic disciplines that we teach.
* I would also like to add that most valuable within Middlebury’s long-standing education proposal are the opportunities it affords to address complexity, to integrate innovation, but most important, to graduate students that are empowered to envision questions and responses that our generation may not have yet conceived, for the problems of tomorrow.
* […] of my children attended small liberal arts colleges.  […] worked hard and did well but were unemployable in their fields upon graduation, and […]had to attend graduate school in order to be able to land "real" jobs (i.e. Jobs with medical benefits) in their fields.  Not taking into account scholarships and the (very welcome!) College tuition benefit, the costs of their combined liberal arts educations was well over a quarter of a million dollars.  There is something radically wrong with this picture.  In retrospect, I would not have encouraged them to attend liberal arts colleges.
* The liberal arts are fundamentally about scholars inculcating undergraduates with the values of the academic community. Chief among these values is that opinions ought to be endorsed only by means of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves surveying the range of viable positions on a given issue, recognizing the relative strengths and weaknesses of these positions, and, on the basis of rigorous reasoning, forming a clear and cogent stance as to which of these positions ought to be accepted or implemented, and which ought to be revised or rejected. Different disciplines in the liberal arts provide opportunities for students to broaden, apply, and refine their critical thinking skills.
* The essence of a liberal arts education is to teach students knowledge, creativity, and skills that are of timeless value, and to do so with breadth, depth, and rigor.
* The liberal arts are those subjects and skills necessary to pursue an active life and be informed in public discourse (responsibilities of good citizenship). The aim of studying the liberal arts is to produce a good, knowledgeable, and thoughtful person. Flexibility, innovation, and benevolence should derive from that study.

To some extent we have failed our students by not evolving appropriately as the responsibilities of citizenship have evolved. Globalization, the expansion of digital information, and the development of horrible weapons of mass destruction are but a few of the challenges facing today’s citizens that were not nearly as important during the first three millennia of training in the liberal arts.

* The liberal arts should be considered a form of conceptual world travel, whereby an individual strives to broaden the intellectual, moral, spiritual, and physical framework of her awareness of the immense complexity of the universe we inhabit. Study in the liberal arts is the most effective way to expand the parameters by which the human mind encounters the world.  Liberal arts study is fundamentally opposed to mental provincialism; it has the potential to transform any individual into a more evolved, connected member of the global community. This community can be conceived post-Renaissance humanistic terms, i.e. through liberal study we become more closely tied to our fellow humans. The global community can also be conceived in terms of all life: through liberal study we become more highly evolved participants in the biosphere, and as such acquire great power to do good. Liberal arts institutions, thus, resemble certain forms of organized religion in their ability to promote empathy—between humans and other humans as well as between humans and the non-human world. Unlike organized religions, liberal arts institutions do not—should not and must not—exclude people whose world-views do not conform to the normative community (be it institutional, local, or national). In other words, a liberal arts institution such as Middlebury College must be committed to liberation, that is, to emancipatory politics of all kinds. This means continually striving to expand the community of liberal learning. The liberal arts are fundamentally about universal enfranchisement.
* *Broad Education*

*In all Disciplines*

*Happy Life Follows*