

Liberal Arts in the Parks

As a seasonal national park ranger, I am constantly answering questions. One of my favorites was from a junior ranger asking how I got my job: “Is there a Smokey-the-Bear major at your college or something?” While I haven’t found such a degree at any college, I have discovered that the liberal arts education at Whitworth has been something roughly equivalent.

I first saw the value of interdisciplinary education in high school, where the logical reasoning skills I gained from Calculus became valuable when writing my history papers. Conversely, the creativity and problem solving required for writing gave me a better ability to approach math problems. By developing different kinds of knowledge and critical thinking in each class, I understood all of them more fully—and I also simply enjoyed the variety and challenge. Accordingly, when I began to apply to colleges I looked for institutions that stressed liberal arts.

My freshman year as a Chemistry major was wonderfully intellectually stimulating. I studied the history of western thought in my Core 150 class, then went to Plant Biology where I examined microscope slides of moss archegonia and liverwort elators. I contemplated themes of identity in my literature course after teaching high school students about valence electrons in the Community Chemistry Outreach program.

I saw the value of liberal arts mostly in the intrinsic worth of intellectual stimulation. That summer, however, I found exactly how applicable such an education could be. I took a detail to Olympic National Park to work as an assistant for a conference on the removal of two century-old dams and the ensuing ecosystem restoration. In the process, I met many scientific researchers and graduate students examining what was happening on the ground level. I began to see a disconnect. The graduate students, while highly knowledgeable about fluvial flumes and

LIDAR, had difficulties communicating their findings. The rangers working in education, on the other hand, didn't have the training to understand what they were supposed to communicate. As a science major I had taken enough courses to understand the science, but in addition my general education classes had given me the communication skills to explain these concepts to a general audience. I found myself working in between the two groups, bridging the communication and understanding gaps in an area of great scientific and cultural importance.

Specialized education is certainly effective for developing isolated skill sets, but our economy and society asks for citizens with varied and dynamic abilities. Moreover, we need to have the ability to think well in whatever subject we choose as the focus of our education. Taking classes outside of our specialties takes us out of our intellectual comfort zones, exactly what we need to develop the skills necessary for success in the modern world. While Whitworth may not offer a "Park Ranger" degree, the liberal education it provides has done well to prepare me for the interdisciplinary challenges of world outside of campus.