

In the state of Washington, it is estimated that more than 20,000 people are homeless on any given night. Families make up almost half of those individuals. While homelessness can result from a single issue, like broken families, domestic violence, unemployment, or a legal system that works against individuals, more often than not it is a combination of these incredibly complex issues that lead people to the streets. Likewise, there is no simple way to combat this problem. We need to recognize the complexities of the underlying issues, and become more flexible in our problem-solving methods to effectively address this epidemic. We are moving toward that goal in many ways, one avenue through which is the liberal arts college.

A liberal arts education is designed to educate the whole person, giving graduates the foundation they need to enter many fields, and the flexibility to survive in a constantly changing environment. Because such an education requires students to take classes from a variety of fields, it encourages them to examine complex issues from various viewpoints, to think critically, and to come to reasoned conclusions. Values like compassion and the understanding of right and wrong are enhanced, allowing students to empathize with others. Those studying with the intention of pursuing a specific career--for example, in accounting, nursing, or economics--are still required to study other subjects. For instance, humanities and social sciences are taken simultaneously with classes in engineering or anatomy, providing a much needed balance in perspective. The ability to critically examine problems is a core outcome of a liberal arts university.

Homelessness is not an easily defeated issue. In order to combat it, we must approach it with well-developed critical thinking skills and a comprehensive world view. Sociology, economics, psychology, history, biology, and political science all factor in to understanding homelessness, since contributing causes include public policies, personal attitudes, social prejudice, physical addiction, and historical realities. Liberally educated citizens working through the government, social service providers, humanitarian organizations and the church can provide the perspective needed to overcome this daunting social problem.

Liberal arts colleges are a vital part of our society, empowering citizens who can integrate diverse lines of thought and think in innovative ways. Broad, values-based education can provide the holistic perspective needed to make a crucial difference in the problems Washingtonians face. We must be lifted from weak thinking to empathy, clear analysis, and effective action.