



Will a Liberal Arts Education Pay Off in Japan?

(summary)

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In recent years, we have increasingly heard the term "liberal arts" not only in academic contexts but also in the business world. I have seen liberal arts featured in business magazines several times. However, I suspect the real value of a liberal arts education is not fully understood in Japan.

Prominent figures educated in the liberal arts

There is a long list of prominent Japanese and foreigners who have received a liberal arts education. Some early examples related to Japan are Joseph Neesima, who founded Doshisha University (Amherst College), Umeko Tsuda, founder of Tsuda University (Bryn Mawr College); William Clark, founder of Hokkaido University (Amherst College); the Japanese Christian leader Kanzo Uchimura (Amherst College); and the author Kafu Nagai (Kalamazoo College). A more recent example is SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son, a graduate of [Holy Names University](#).

Overseas figures include Robert Noyce (Grinnell College), co-founder of Intel, and former Apple CEO Steve Jobs (Reed College). Many American presidents also graduated from liberal arts colleges.

Unlike large universities that produce thousands of graduates each year, small liberal arts colleges graduate only hundreds annually. While these colleges do not provide advanced education specific to the professions, their alumni often turn out to be outstanding professional figures in many fields.

Principles of a Liberal Arts education: broad, balanced, connected

The history of American tertiary education began with private liberal arts colleges run by English Puritan colonists along the eastern seaboard in the 17th century.

Today, only 6.4% of liberal arts colleges have more than 3,000 students, while 87% have 1,000 to 3,000 students. In contrast, the average student body in the eight Ivy League universities is almost 8,000. In many liberal arts colleges, the student-teacher ratio is less than 10:1.

Students who have not yet decided upon a career path in the sciences or arts often find a solution in liberal arts colleges, which provide a broad liberal education. The standard pedagogy at these colleges is to offer courses in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and arts so that their students, in close consultation with professors, can discover the path they wish to pursue.

Overlooked goal in Japanese liberal arts departments

One of the failures of liberal arts education in Japanese universities has been the inability of students to develop independent thinking or to interrelate the diverse subject matter and viewpoints they have acquired in a well-balanced study.

The left hemisphere of the brain organizes information logically and linearly, while the right hemisphere is connected to intuition and creativity. Today, we tend to use our left hemisphere more effectively. This is apparent in the current list of preferred professions: lawyers, accountants, doctors, researchers, and other occupations that require diligent desk work. However, left-brain tasks are also the greatest strength of AI, which may soon be assuming many of those professional functions.

Steve Jobs outlined the role of the liberal arts beautifully: "The reason that Apple is able to create products like the iPad is because we've always tried to be at the intersection of technology and the liberal arts." Jobs added that Apple was able "to make extremely advanced products from a technology point of view, but also have them be intuitive, easy-to-use, fun-to-use, so that they really fit the users."

The ability to be inspired thereafter by seemingly unimportant experiences associated with irrelevant events and ideas, to maintain positivity during detours, and to develop mental and physical perseverance in pursuit of these skills: this is the core of a liberal arts education.

Principles of a liberal arts education

Curricula at top American liberal arts colleges

Academic programs in liberal arts schools are generally categorized into three fields, from each of which the students must take courses.

- 1) Natural and Formal sciences (biology, mathematics, etc.)
- 2) Social sciences (economics, history, etc.)
- 3) Fine arts and Humanities (literature, languages, music, theater, etc.)

Students study a broad range of these subjects and are not allowed to remain cloistered in their rooms. Those with no artistic background, for instance, can learn those subjects from scratch. This method gives students diverse perspectives and opportunities to consider how new technologies and knowledge can affect other areas of society, unlike the education of specialized scholars and business executives, who often focus solely on their own set goals.

Another important method for interrelating diverse, balanced studies is rigorous training in writing skills. Students are required to compose papers in good English for most courses. This strict approach chastens many students, but it strengthens their mentality over time. Without realizing, they learn how to organize and present their outcomes and opinions, which is as important as their gain in knowledge per se.

Extracurricular activities

Liberal arts colleges encourage their students to devote themselves not only to academics but also to sports and workshops. Some colleges offer winter study programs in January, between their fall and spring semesters, during which students focus on a single course outside their regular curriculum of four or more courses per semester.

Acquiring good habits in the residence system

Another principle of a liberal arts education is a residence system that trains students to continually reinforce the essential intellectually passionate lifestyle until they are habituated to it.

Major difference from universities: quality of school life

Liberal arts colleges admit only about 500 students each year and limit classes to small groups of five to fifteen. Not offering graduate programs, they are small, intimate schools. Professors usually know the nicknames of all of their students and are available for counseling whenever they have concerns, for example, as to whether to pursue a particular career after graduation.

Liberal arts colleges are also excellent places to make friends. Students with diverse academic interests live together, and they frequently exchange information on the pleasures and problems of their studies. They develop presentation skills in asking for advice, communication skills as a reliable listener, and analytical skills in processing these exchanges. Residential schools typically offer friendly competitions.

Similarity to pre-1950 Japanese high schools (now universities)

Japan once had small residential schools that provided a broad education not directly linked to professional training

Challenges for liberal arts schools

Liberal arts colleges generally do not offer graduate courses, admit large numbers of students, or allow their professors to prioritize research over teaching. One challenge of these small-scale colleges with low student-teacher ratios is their limited social dynamics in every aspect. Nevertheless, because more students go to graduate schools for specialized education, undergraduate courses are in increasing demand to provide a broad liberal arts education, whose value is again being appreciated worldwide, with programs now being developed in Europe and Asia.

Goals of a liberal arts education

In a liberal arts education, students must consider the arts and sciences as ingredients of their full intellectual development, study both areas equally, and ultimately acquire the skills to listen, read, understand, and present to others. These skills are critical to developing one's writing ability.

However, the ultimate goal for liberal arts students is to encounter new and exciting worlds, train themselves physically and mentally, and acquire the habit of lifelong learning.



Author profile is on the following page.

Author Profile

Takaaki Takeuchi

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Mr. Takeuchi was born in 1961 in Osaka. His family moved to the Philippines for his father's work when he was in elementary school. He graduated from junior and senior high school back in Tokyo.

After graduating from Williams College in Massachusetts, he began his career at the Global Research Division of Nomura Securities. After advancing his career at the Boston headquarters of Wellington Management, the Asset Management Division of Goldman Sachs in Tokyo, and UBS Global Asset Management, he served as Vice President of Zurich Scudder Investments and President of Prudential Financial Advisors Securities.

Mr. Takeuchi started his own business in 2003. While managing a Tokyo investment company, he lived in Shanghai from 2006 and started a business consultancy firm. After returning to Japan in 2012, he made a major career change to education, joining the NPO Teach For Japan and contributing to the foundation of the International College of Liberal Arts (iCAL) at Yamanashi Gakuin University. His life work is spreading liberal arts education in Asia, especially Japan.

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