NOTES FROM THE KENDALL CENTER

The Seven Liberal Arts . . . and Counting

by Barbara Fister

Will Freiert, professor of classics and the Hanson-Peterson Professor of Liberal Studies, organized a liberal arts symposium in March 2010 with support from the Kendall Center. Five Gustavus scholars reflected on the meaning of the college's new tagline, "Make your life count." The following are excerpts from their remarks, which can be found in their entirety at gustavus.edu/kendallcenter/symposium2010.pdf.

Brian Johnson, Chaplain

Do the liberal arts count? There was a time when a response to this question could have been more directly and easily answered. It was a time when education in the West was wedded to a meta-narrative that assumed learning's place in the larger society, and this notion of education was undergirded by a larger and more systemic project . . . There were no tag lines.

But we have passed the days when the world had a story that was assumed. As we full well know, liberal arts study is no longer a primary way of coming to know—it is just one of many schools of learning. And in our post-modern milieu (which, ironically, was the culmination, in some ways, of this very free thinking), the market has become the definer of what is valued and therefore branded . . .

Of course the liberal arts count and, yes, the tradition has changed and responded to the times, but it's this notion that it's *not the outer form*, but *the idea, the essence of things*, that we are about. And that's what counts.

Doug Huff, Professor of Philosophy

The temptation here is to quickly identify what makes a life *not* count and then do whatever we can to avoid doing that. Now in Socrates' case, what makes a life not count is relatively straightforward. If, as he argues repeatedly, your actions and ideas do not accord with reality, if your life is based on falsehoods, then your life is obviously meaningless, worthless, and doesn't count for anything in any context or in any environment where truth still remains a value . . .

Although Socrates' way of approaching the problem is extremely valuable—if we realize we don't know what we thought we knew, we at least can begin to search for the truth, we can begin to purify our souls of falsehoods. Still, there is another way. The art of living well may also require us to change our attitude toward life. Rather than thinking that life is something to be used up and grabbed with gusto, as when we say "he lived his life to the fullest, or "she got the most out of life," or when failure and disappointment strike, "I have nothing to expect from life anymore," we should instead think of existence as expecting something from us. Perhaps we should think we owe something to life.

Lisa Heldke, Professor of Philosophy

Exhibit A among the ambiguities and tensions coiled inside this four-word command is the question "What does it *mean* for a life to count?" For me, the power of the tagline lies in the fact that, even as it gives the appearance of flat-footedly telling students what to do, it flings them into the deep end of one of the most important and open-ended questions they will likely encounter . . .

"Liberal arts" isn't some property that a discipline has, or doesn't have, by nature. It is an approach to a subject matter; a way of thinking that *liberates*. I submit that Gustavus is a liberal arts college not because it has departments of classics and philosophy and literature, but because it teaches those subjects—and *also* subjects such as communication studies, nursing, and health fitness—in *ways* that encourage students to understand themselves as interpreters of, and transformers of, the world in which they find themselves.

Max Hailperin, Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science

When we tell a student, "Make your life count," there is a risk we will be misheard as suggesting that the student form a clear picture of a life that counts, reason out a chain of steps that would lead to that life, and then start executing those steps. But life doesn't work that way; we don't program ourselves like computers. Life is fundamentally improvisational.

So should the student turn away from planning? Not at all; going into the rapids with no plan is as foolish as going in with no paddle. We just need to convey our understanding that the plan cannot be expected to determine what follows any more than the paddle does. When we listen to stories of real lives, we recognize that life can be wholly unexpected, bringing us not merely to unexpected forks in the road, but to areas with no tracks at all.

Deborah Goodwin, Associate Professor of Religion

At least one Golden Age—the one that gave us academic regalia and a great drinking song (*Vivat academia! Vivant professores!*)—was in fact a time of ruthless competition and all-out careerism. I speak of Paris in the twelfth century. Scholars from all over Europe sat at the feet of Parisian masters in the hopes of networking their ways into good jobs. The situation was so woeful that the scholar Hugh of the Abbey of Saint Victor wrote a treatise prescribing an ideal course of study in the liberal arts. In it, he castigated those scholars who tried to *make their lives count* by seeking profit, and not the transformation of the human person.

Hugh shows the liberal arts for what they are: not the cachet of a certain social class, nor the adjuncts to a gentleman's wardrobe. The *artes liberales* are the arts of freedom—the skills, the disciplines of a free person. From the seven arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, music, geometry, astronomy, and philosophy), Hugh elaborated a whole system of human learning. Not for him the dichotomy between head and hand: if we are to be restored to our whole humanity, no skill, no practice is excluded. ▨

Barbara Fister, professor and head librarian at Gustavus, has served as director of the Kendall Center for Engaged Learning, an endowed faculty development program, for the past year.