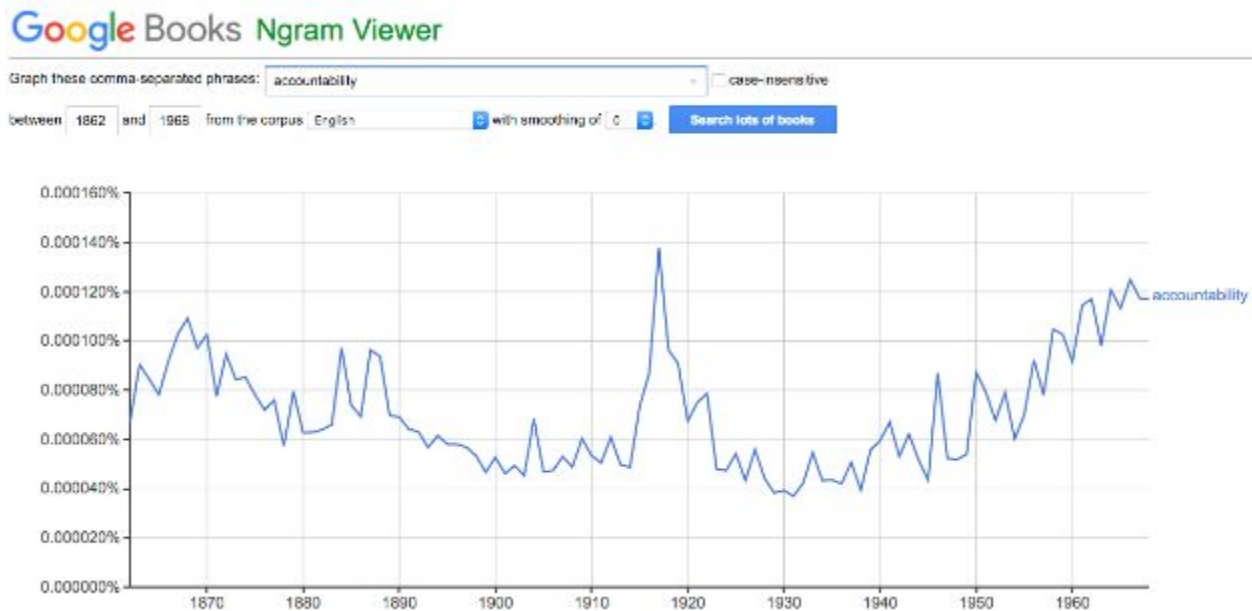


# Liberal Arts Education in the Age of Accountability

## The Age of Accountability

As you can tell from my title, “Liberal Arts Education in the Age of Accountability,” I am at least implicitly making the claim that we presently live in the age of accountability. Let me begin with some evidence in support of that claim—the only claim I’m going to support.

We can turn to a dataset that Google has provided us, which is that they’ve got lots of books they’ve digitized from libraries, and you can use that to see how the popularity of different words or phrases has evolved over time. Let’s take a look at the word “accountability,” and rather than starting with the present age, let’s begin with a time period from the founding of Gustavus in 1862 up until the end of Edgar Carlson’s administration in 1968.



What this is showing is out of all the words that are in all the books that were digitized from the libraries and that are published in each year, what fraction of those words are the word accountability. You can see that there was a big surge in publishing about accountability during the years of World War I, and for a couple years afterward it tailed off back to where it had been. Aside from that big surge during World War I, there are little ups and downs from year to year that may or may not mean anything, that may just reflect the particular books that happen to have been published and happen to have been digitized out of the libraries, rather than any big cultural phenomena. Beyond that, if we look for broader trends, I would divide this roughly century-long period into three pieces.

There's an initial roughly third of it, which includes Matthias Wahlstrom's time as president, where the incidence of the word accountability is broadly trending downward,

although with some ups and downs. The slope is fairly gentle, but the change is still substantial—from the 1860s to the beginning of the 20th century, there's perhaps a twofold decrease in the use of the word accountability. The middle third, with the exception of the World War I period, is a more or less flat interval, running from 1900 up to about World War II, and then at that point we see an upward trend start for the third portion. That upward trend, which runs through Edgar Carlson's time as president, 1944–1968, is rather substantial. It more than compensates for the initial downward trend with about a two and a half fold increase, and we wind up in 1968 with more discourse about accountability than when the College was founded. These are really substantial changes in how much of the published language was about accountability.

Now let's zoom out, and instead of stopping in 1968 get as close to the present as we can, which is 2004. The reason I stop there is because that's when Google made a change and instead of retrospectively digitizing books out of libraries, they started asking publishers to submit newly published books in digital form. That changed the character of the collection so that we don't have comparable data beyond 2004.

## Google Books Ngram Viewer

Graph these comma-separated phrases:   case-insensitive  
between  and  from the corpus  with smoothing of  [Search lots of books](#)



What you can see is that huge surge in the World War I era doesn't look so huge any more, and the rather profound downward trend, flattening out, and then upward trend that we saw—that's all still here; the upward trend we were looking at ended in 1968, but that all is quite minor compared with what happened after that point.

There's a continuation of the upward trend, but at a greatly increased rate. In just a few years' time from 1968 into the early 1970s, the use of the word accountability exploded. Then there was another flattening out period, another period of relative stability, from the

mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, which would have been my formative years. We could say people of my generation grew up in the early age of accountability.

That stability ended not the way the early 20th century stability ended, with a restoration back in the direction things had come from, but rather with a renewal of the upward trend—a renewal of the *rapid* upward trend. Admittedly the post-plateau upward trend was not as rapid as in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it was still substantially more rapid than it had been during the Edgar Carlson years. Moreover, this time the rapid upward trend was sustained for perhaps fifteen years or so, so that by the time we get to the early 21st century, “accountability” is being used in our published language at about ten times the rate it was during the entire century-long period from the founding of the college up into the 1960s.

That's my evidence for the claim that our present age is an age of accountability. I still have to talk about why that matters—what accountability is and why I see it as a profound challenge to liberal arts education—but I think if you take a look at this, you can see something *big* has happened. Also looking at this graph, I would particularly like you to focus on where our students' lives fall relative to this timeline. That's a topic I'll return to.

### **Accountability and Coercion**

But first to accountability itself. I *do* see accountability as profoundly challenging to liberal arts education, but I want to make sure I'm not misunderstood as thinking accountability is a bad thing.

Accountability is a very *good* thing; it's one of the foundations of human civilization. I would probably rank it second after agriculture in terms of foundations of civilization. From a personal perspective as someone looking forward to retirement, I think all of us who have our retirement savings in annuities and mutual funds rather than in huge stockpiles of canned goods recognize that we are only able to do that because of a remarkably sophisticated web of accountability.

But it's all a question of in what proportion and in what context. Accountability is not the only value, and the question is, is it right for us as a society to be focusing on it to this degree? What consequences does that have for all of us, and in particular for liberal arts education?

One point of perspective is to think about the role that accountability plays in personal responsibility. I would posit that personal responsibility is a compound of two elements. One is accountability to others, but the other is self-agency: the taking of initiative, the deciding what to do.

To be a responsible individual, you have to make choices as well as meet the expectations of others. And if accountability grows to the present extent, it tends to strangle out the room for self-agency. Instead of a society of free individuals making choices what the right thing to do is, we can wind up with a culture that's very coercive, where we live in a perpetually fearful state of being held accountable for doing the wrong thing.

If you don't buy my equation of overemphasis on accountability with a punitive, coercive culture, just consider what image comes your mind if you hear so-and-so has been held accountable. You probably don't have a picture of their boss handing them a bonus check. More likely it's a pink slip.

### **Accountability Natives**

With this background, let's return to the topic I raised while looking at the graph of Google's statistics: Where do our students fall in relation to the age of accountability? I focus on the students because that's the direction from which I'm really concerned about accountability hitting us. I'm not *so* concerned about it coming from the direction of accreditation agencies and the demand for assessment or from the President of the United States talking about return on investment. I'm more concerned about what it means for us that our entering students are "accountability natives." I use that phrase by analogy with "digital natives," which refers to those who grew up taking digital technology for granted.

Our current students were born in the late 1990s, by and large, and so they've lived their entire lives with accountability at the high level it reached in the early 21st century. Perhaps more importantly, more tellingly, the adults who shaped their lives—their parents, their teachers, their school principals, their legislators—those people might be from my generation, so their formative years were in the early age of accountability, the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. Some, particularly the parents and younger teachers, might be a little younger than me, in which case they formed their identities even during the initial upsurge from that plateau, the upsurge that has continued through to practically the present.

This means our accountability-native students have not merely known only a world in which accountability is held as a huge value. They've also been surrounded, they've been shaped, the kinds of parenting they've experienced, the kinds of education they've experienced, have been dictated by people who were themselves very much products of the age of accountability.

I think that is extremely important for the attitudes our students then bring into our classrooms. Many of my colleagues on the faculty would probably agree with me that we tend to encounter students today who are not so motivated by opportunities as by requirements. They are not worried so much about "What can I do? What great new achievement can I accomplish?" as they are about "Oh boy, I better not fail, I better not fall

short, I better not fail to live up to somebody else's expectation of me." They are coming in with exactly the attitude you would expect for those who grew up in the age of accountability.

This observation about the accountability natives is a broad truth, not particular to liberal arts education. The coercive aspect of accountability affects any kind of education, even technical education, and even applies outside of education. Think, for example, of employment relationships. Most employers would recognize that an overemphasis on accountability that leaves them with timid, fearful employees is a bad thing. They want a degree of initiative, they want self-directed employees, maybe a little bit of entrepreneurial spirit even if in the context of employment by a firm rather than true entrepreneurship. Likewise for technical education, that works better if you've got self-directed learners who can show initiative and take responsibility for their own learning. But with liberal arts education, the challenge posed by the age of accountability strikes deeper.

### **Freedom and the Liberal Arts**

An employer might prefer self-starters, but if need be, they can engage in a coercive relationship with their employees, telling them exactly what to do and making sure they do it. Somebody in technical education, perhaps running a barber college, might prefer self-directed learners, but if need be they can coerce their students into learning how to cut hair. But we in liberal arts education *can't* give in to that. There's no such thing as coercively teaching someone how to be free, and that's really what a liberal arts education is about. In my first term seminar, I tell the students that the words "liberal arts" come from an old-fashioned English. In modern English, we would speak of learning the skills to be free.

Skillful freedom is something that we cannot choose to teach coercively, even if that's what our students have come to expect. On the whole, that's a good thing. I wouldn't *want* to teach coercively. Coercive relationships are corrosive to both the coercer and the coerced. But again, remember, our students have a certain expectation, and that's what's challenging.

So what does it mean to learn to be skillfully free? I come at this from the perspective of John Dewey. (Thanks to Lisa Heldke for making sure I'm so familiar with his work.) The skills of the free person divide into two categories. There's skillfully choosing what the right thing to do is in each situation, and then there's skillfully actually doing it, carrying out the course of action you've chosen. So freedom includes both ethical skills and practical skills. The ethical skills are used to decide in each situation what the appropriate ends are to strive toward together with the appropriate means for achieving those ends. The practical skills are used to carry out those chosen means toward the chosen ends.

The practical skills include many very classic liberal arts skills: finding sources of information, assessing them, constructing arguments, considering the arguments of others, and using quantitative means of analysis and communication when that's appropriate. All of those make you effective carrying out actions through your words, through your communication, through your deliberation with others.

I think Dewey would remind us that there are other practical skills of carrying out courses of action that are not through the word but through the hands—the manual as well as the verbal. Manual activity is not the province of the slave; a free person can do things with their hands every bit as much as with their words. What makes someone a free person is that that they've chosen the appropriate course of action. It's the ethical component, and that's something we have to keep in mind as we think about where we stand as liberal arts educators in the age of accountability. We need to consider which component we emphasize.

### **Fiduciary Effectiveness as a Side Effect and Trap**

Unfortunately, up until the present our predominant response has been to try to give the market what it's looking for. We haven't necessarily held fast to our liberal arts ideals. Instead we've repackaged and sold what we do as something that makes our students effective not only as self-agents, carrying out their own goals, but also as fiduciary agents, working on behalf of someone else.

Employers want employees who can find information and assess it, who can construct arguments, communicate persuasively and clearly, and so forth. All those same skills that make you effective towards your own ends make you effective towards your employer's ends. So a liberal arts education makes you a better engineer, makes you a better businessperson, whatever it is. That's been our sales pitch, and it's true—it's valid as far as it goes—but I see it as having two big shortcomings.

One is that it misdirects our efforts or at least inappropriately narrows our focus. It makes us concentrate on the practical skills of carrying out a course of action and not on the ethical skills of choosing what course of action is appropriate in each situation. At most, it calls for skillfully choosing appropriate means toward a given end, but not the more profound skill of choosing an appropriate end.

The second problem is that we sell ourselves short when we market the liberal arts education based on its side effect rather than on its intended purpose. I think that has a lot to do with why we see declining net tuition revenue. We're saying, in effect, you can come here and as a side effect of something else that you don't really want, you might become a better engineer or you might become a better business person. Meanwhile down the road there's another institution that's saying, we could teach you to be a business person or an

engineer, that's what we do here, it's our purpose. That makes it pretty hard for us to compete.

We're in the position of a wine merchant in a period of temperance when culture is dominated by teetotalers, and we say, "Oh that's all right, you can pour the wine out and use the bottle as a candle holder." Well, it's an expensive candle holder. It's not real clear that that's the best way to sell anything.

The students and their parents are justly saying, if what I want is to learn to write product specifications, it's all well and good for you to tell me that as a side effect of writing about Latin American history, I'll write better product specifications, but why shouldn't I go to that institution down the street that's got a course on writing product specifications?

I think part of why we made this miscalculation is because we have clung to some rather outdated prejudices about what goes on in engineering schools and business schools. I know I've heard from many of my liberal arts colleagues rather old-fashioned stories about engineers who can't communicate. Well, I'm sorry to break the news to you, but for decades now the engineering schools have been putting an awful lot of focus on communication skills. They're really, really serious about making sure engineers can write, making sure engineers can communicate orally, work in teams, and think in interdisciplinary fashion—the kinds of things we used to think of as our exclusive province in the liberal arts.

So it isn't necessarily an effective sales pitch to say that at Gustavus, you can learn to communicate and think critically, if a more technical education can also include those components. The solution, difficult though it is, may be for us to start speaking again more forthrightly about our purpose—about the fact that we are helping our students learn to be skillfully free.

### **Entrepreneurship, Arts, and Other Choices**

That's also going to have great value because it opens up a range of options, a range of possible ends that our students can strive towards, all depending on whether they are interested in just being skillfully free in their private lives and working for someone else as a job, or whether perhaps they want to think about freedom as encompassing also their work life and be entrepreneurs, for example.

Entrepreneurship is one particular subspecies of freedom, one that has retained its cultural appreciation when other kinds of freedom are rather out of fashion. Perhaps that's because there's money in it. However, it's a really important subspecies, certainly important for students who come from marginalized communities, such as new Americans. Those students recognize that in starting a business they can not only meet their own needs but

also provide employment opportunities for family members who may not have entrée into the broader employment market. So if we're saying this is an education that lets you choose appropriate ends for your situation, a student in that situation, who needs to lift their family up, might choose entrepreneurship.

There's room for other choices. A student might choose an artistic end if they think that the right thing for them to be doing is to be bringing more art into the world, or more of a particular kind of art, more of *their* art. If we're thinking in this broad sense about skillfully being free, that allows room for art as much as for entrepreneurship, employment, or public service. Those all are legitimate choices that a student could make about what the right thing for them to be doing is.

Those possibilities make clear that a rededication to the liberal arts is a promising direction. However, this same diversity of possibilities also makes clear that we would need to once again put a great deal of focus on the ethical component, on the question of how you skillfully make those choices.

### **Ethics and Narrative**

So how *do* people become skillful at choosing a course of action? They gain that skill through experience. Seeing how lots of different courses of action have turned out cultivates a kind of imagination, the ability to imagine what some possible outcomes might be for different courses of action.

To say that it's a matter of experience isn't to say that there's nothing to do but wait for time to elapse. We have a responsibility as educators to make sure that our students get as much experience as possible in the given number of years. We do that in part by giving them opportunities for real experiences with internships, community-based learning, project-based learning, and so forth. However, we also quite importantly provide vicarious experience through narratives.

I think that's why narratives have always been an important part of a liberal arts education. When you read the stories of how courses of action have turned out—either factual ones in biography and history, or fictional ones in literature—you pack a great deal of experience into a very limited amount of time. It's a very efficient way to start cultivating the ethical sense, and so I think if we take seriously the idea that we're helping students learn the skills to be free, narratives need to be part of our development of those skills.

### **From Challenge to Opportunity**

The time has come for me to end on a positive note. I certainly have no illusion that a trend back toward the Liberal Arts is an easy one in an age where accountability is at such a high cultural value and where our students have been bludgeoned to death with it their whole



lives long. On the other hand, an age where the liberal arts are so challenged by accountability is also an age where the liberal arts are so desperately needed. The fact that they are countercultural indicates a strong need.

Beyond that, there's some plausible argument that the graph of accountability's cultural prominence isn't going to just keep going up, and it isn't even going to stay plateaued at a high level forever. Things that go up usually eventually turn around and come back down. So, rather than being carried along on the tide of rising accountability-speak that we've seen for several decades, we could swim the other way and get ahead of the tide before it turns, or as it turns, and be the vanguard.

In that context, I'm pleased to see indications we may take up that vanguard role. The work the strategic planning task force and the curriculum committee have been doing is incredibly encouraging. For the first time in decades, we're talking seriously about a curriculum that isn't based around requirements but around opportunities; that is based around attracting a student body that wants to accomplish things rather than live in fearful, coercive relationships; and that is offering them the opportunity to take on projects of their own and make things happen of their choice. All of that bodes very well for how we could have a liberal arts education that might bring society as a whole a little out of the age of over-accountability, rather than merely being shaped by it.

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*Professor Max Hailperin delivered these remarks on April 15, 2016, as the second annual Matthias Wahlstrom Lecture at Gustavus Adolphus College. The Matthias Wahlstrom Lecture, supported by an anonymous donor, is intended to be an annual lecture by a Gustavus faculty member on the possibilities of the liberal arts in the 21st century. The lecture's namesake served as the College's fifth president from 1881 to 1904 and helped transform Gustavus from an academy to a degree-granting college. During his presidency, Wahlstrom expanded and improved the College's facilities, which transformed the campus and helped cement its future. Wahlstrom also turned the campus into a place where male and female students were equally welcome by allowing female students to live on campus for the first time.*