

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE: LIBERAL ARTS AS A DEFINING TRADITION

By Eric Eliason

Gustavus understands itself as the inheritor of a liberal arts tradition, which it also seeks to pass on. This tradition educates students to fulfill their full potential as free humans. This tradition is not limited to a canonical set of “liberal arts subjects,” nor is it embodied exclusively in general education. Rather, the College aims to live out the liberal arts tradition in all of its educational programs, including those leading to professional credentials and those not bearing academic credit.

The College’s liberal arts orientation leads students to learn about themselves and others. They come to understand the cultural, natural, religious, and social environments and processes which have shaped a wide variety of human lives and to see the ways in which those environments and processes have changed and continue to change. They develop the ability to think reasonably, to communicate persuasively, and to act confidently in order to participate in public life. And they cultivate concern for others that reaches beyond their own circle of family and friends.

This form of learning enhances human freedom both by encouraging independence in thought and action and by encouraging commitment to specific communities. When students learn to think critically about their own lives and origins they are freed from habits, prejudices, and attitudes that restrict their ability to receive new truths and perspectives. When students become open to the experiences and viewpoints held by people from other times, places, and social situations, they are freed to imagine a world outside the limitations of their individuality. And when students develop the knowledge and skills they need to work effectively within community, they are freed for the fulfillment of service to others and with others.

The liberal arts orientation preserves a valued place for knowledge and skills that are not immediately useful; makes space for times of reflection; and encourages a pursuit of truth for its own sake. This same orientation encourages students to participate in arts, athletics, and advocacy apart from professional considerations. The College’s liberal arts orientation is compatible with preprofessional education when that education emphasizes the human wholeness of professional practitioners and those they serve. In all, the liberal arts orientation equips graduates to understand the changing world in which they live and to thrive in adapting to that change. It understands that the pursuit of a vocation is an activity distinct from qualifying for a job.

The College aims not only to live out the liberal arts, but to articulate effectively and publicly the values that undergird them and the value of this education for individuals of all social and economic backgrounds and their communities. As it communicates with its publics — those who would attend, support, work for, or evaluate it — the College works to promote an informed and sympathetic understanding of its liberal arts mission and to secure a wider base of support for that mission.



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