



## A Liberal Arts Education For The 21st Century

By James F. Birge, Ph.D.

President, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

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Earlier this month I had the honor of presiding over the 117th commencement exercises of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) where more than 400 students received their degrees. Although I have presided over commencements at other institutions, this one was especially meaningful for me.

After a 30-year career in higher education, having worked and studied across the United States, I have returned to a familiar place in Berkshire County. I was raised and educated in Lee, after which I studied at Westfield State University, a sibling institution to MCLA in the state university system. So to be president of MCLA feels very much like a homecoming for me, and to confer degrees upon this year's graduates was quite special.

It is also the case that I have been impressed with the quality of education MCLA offers, adding to the special meaning of this year's commencement. The students' performances in dance and theater, their use of technology to create social media applications, their collaborative research with faculty, and their enthusiasm for community service reflect a commitment from faculty and staff to help students accomplish their academic goals.

The students' post-graduation plans are no less impressive: A number are heading off to graduate studies at institutions including Cornell University, Trinity College Dublin, and the University of Oxford in England. Some are moving into careers at General Dynamics, the U.S. Navy, the Clark Art Institute, and school districts around the commonwealth, while others have committed to a year of service with AmeriCorps, City Year-Boston, and the Peace Corps.

Although I have only been at MCLA since March 1, I can say with certainty this is a vibrant academic community producing graduates who are problem solvers and will help ameliorate society's most thorny social and economic issues.

### A SOLID FOUNDATION

Combine a broad and deep liberal arts education with the commitment and skill of enthusiastic faculty and the result is well-educated graduates. Our graduates excel in their careers because of the education they received at MCLA. Here they learned an appreciation for art and the importance of its expression.

Here they learned to write well so they could draft important policies for their organizations or to draft legislation to improve lives in the commonwealth. Here our students learned how to read critically so they could compare documents and see if one vendor contract was better than another for their employer.

Here they learned how to resolve complex mathematical formulas and to write computer code to generate accurate outcomes for audit statements or defense guidance systems. Here they learned how to work effectively in groups or in one-on-one situations so they could work well with their professional colleagues or clients.

A contracts administrator at General Dynamics, a director of trusts and estate administration at Williams College, an internationally known photographer, a community relations director at Berkshire Health Systems, a loan operations specialist at MountainOne Financial, and a number of Massachusetts state legislators all have one thing in common — they graduated from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.

What puzzles me, in light of the positive outcomes of a strong liberal arts education, is an increasing lack of appreciation for the liberal arts. Often parents of prospective college students tell me they want their children to earn a degree in a field that offers the most promise of getting a job.

It is certainly reasonable for parents to hope their child's education leads to a productive career. The troubling thought, however, is that parents and students often don't understand it is not the degree that gets the job offer, but the education that positions the student to be the most competitive in the labor market.

A quick review of any job posting will reveal the requirement for a certain degree. But it is what the degree represents that is of greater interest to the prospective employer and often revealed in the qualifications for the job.

## PREPARE FOR LONG RUN

More often than not, prospective employers seek candidates with strong writing skills, the abilities to read critically and compare and contrast information, to identify and resolve problems, and to work independently and in collaboration with others — all skills developed as the result of a liberal arts foundation. People with these skills, which fulfill an employer's desired qualifications, are the ones who get the job offers.

Such an education does not mean a student can't select a major course of study that will help to prepare her or him for a desired career. In fact, MCLA offers 19 different undergraduate majors including athletic training, business, communications, computer science, and education, to name a few. But all majors at MCLA have a foundation in the liberal arts — and that allows students to have successful careers. We don't just prepare students for their first job out of college, we prepare students with an education that allows them to be agile enough to have jobs throughout their careers and in changing labor markets.

So when people ask me about a Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts education, I am happy to share with them the benefits, values, and outcomes of this important educational institution. Those dialogues are what make my role so exciting and especially rewarding to be counted among the great faculty and staff that educate students at MCLA.