Chapter 1 : Mathematics, a Liberal Arts Approach

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Posted on December 19, by Priscilla Bremser By Priscilla Bremser, Contributing Editor , Middlebury College Somehow, over the last years or so, mathematics has moved from the core of the liberal arts disciplines to entirely outside. The reasons for this shift are interesting to ponder see [1] and [2] , but in this post I suggest that we consider some of its unfortunate present-day implications. From early on, then, the liberal arts ideal goes beyond eschewing the vocational; it values sustained engagement with abstract concepts as central to the capacity to live a good life. Although I have bristled at a smorgasbord interpretation of liberal arts, which misses the point in its focus on breadth with little attention to depth, equally concerning is the suggestion that some areas of study are more worthy of inclusion. The Practice Standards are key. Analogously, our understandings of the liberal arts are about content and practice. Both are important, and they work in concert. Jessica Lahey wrote about his course for The Atlantic. For this audience, figuring out how to produce a scalene triangle with one cut of the scissors is an exercise in plane geometry, a foundational topic. The authenticity is evident in both the geometric content and the exploratory approach. What does it mean for our mathematics majors if we insist that mathematics is still one of the liberal arts? For one thing, it is one way I remind myself, and my students, that too much emphasis on coverage risks losing the longer-lasting lessons of careful, detailed analysis. Those lessons go beyond the specifics of any particular course. What have your mathematics classes had in common? When have you noticed advances in your capacity to think abstractly? How have your upper-level math courses changed your thinking about the earlier ones? Asking students to look for coherence and connection will, I believe, make it more likely that their mathematical studies will have a lasting impact on them as members of society, not just as workers. We mathematicians understand that our discipline involves creativity, beauty, and abstraction as well as precision and utility. An education worthy of a free person should include active, meaningful experience with all of those elements. At the same time, I will affirm the value of mathematical practice to intellectual development for all present-day students, not just those majoring in mathematics and the sciences. Finally, and most important, I want every course I teach to reflect the centrality and the value of mathematics, content and practice, to a modern liberal education. Mathematics and the Liberal Arts. The College Mathematics Journal, 30, No.

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