Affirmative Case: Adaptability

Bibles are now available in every conceivable translation and font and size. You can even download free Bible apps. But it wasn’t always that way. For hundreds of years, the Bible was passed down from generation to generation using painstaking hand transcription. Bibles were kept in churches chained to the wall because they were so rare and valuable.

This was a world in which most people were born to farmers, became farmers themselves spent their whole lives as farmers, and eventually died as farmers, surrounded by family and friends who were also farmers. To them, even reading a book—let alone owning one—was mind-boggling.

Things have changed, and we need an education that can keep up with that change. That’s why I am *Resolved: In formal education, liberal arts ought to be valued over practical skills*.

# Value: Adaptability

“Adaptable” is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as: “Able to be modified for a new use or purpose: ‘*a workforce with adaptable skills*’”[[1]](#footnote-2)

The example given is exactly what we should be trying for in education. Here are four reasons why Adaptability is a good way to measure education.

## Value Link 1: Constant Change

Workers don’t pick a single field and stay in it indefinitely, as they did in the medieval ages. Instead, they evolve constantly and change careers constantly. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers change jobs every 4.6 years – enough for them to have many different careers during their lifetime.

It takes four years for most students to earn a bachelor’s degree. If they only use that degree for 4.6 years, then have to transition to a new field in which it is worthless, that degree was a big waste. Education only makes sense if you can carry it with you for the rest of your life.

## Value Link 2: New Opportunities

Humanity is transitioning into the information age, an exciting time driven by an information—instead of commodity—based economy. It’s a world of interconnectedness and sharing and awareness. As the first wave of inventions, like the Internet and smart phones, transform our world, we’re beginning to get a taste of what people will be capable of in the information era.

In this new era of possibility, people don’t just have to change careers, they often choose to. They can pursue dreams that would never have been possible even a few decades ago. They can operate side businesses or even build whole new careers from their own homes. To participate in this new world, an education that can keep up with change is essential.

## Value Link 3: Obsolescence

The opportunities of the information age and the high churn rate in the workplace aren’t the only factors to consider. Technology is quickly changing how we do business – making new jobs possible, but also making old jobs disappear.

Just as the market for blacksmiths and wagon makers declined during the industrial revolution, entire fields are being transformed by automation. Print media is shriveling, and with it, advertising is being turned on its head. Secretaries, travel agents, lumberjacks, typists, film processors, toll booth collectors, and people in hundreds of other jobs are feeling the pressure of technology on their jobs.

Experts expect many more jobs, like mail carrier and flight attendant and farmer, to be changed or replaced by automation in the near future. Self-driving cars will render many driver jobs obsolete, from freight truck to Uber.

This doesn’t have to be bad news. New jobs are appearing as well, but only those with an adaptable education will be able to keep up. We need an education that lets us see social changes and then get out in front of them.

## Value Link 4: Beyond Career

Education is not exclusively focused on career. There are other important factors that teachers need to consider. They want students to be responsible, to have strong integrity, to have a good work ethic, to be creative, to be solution-oriented, to have a vision of what they can do to make the world better. All of these things can and should be taught in education. Adaptability means education can follow a student wherever he or she goes—both in career and in the rest of life.

# Contention 1: Liberal Arts Are Adaptable

Liberal Arts teach students skills that apply to every part of life. They’re focused on creating a well-rounded person who can contribute in any context. Subjects like literature and philosophy and mathematics help us understand the world and our place in it; allow us to interact with people better; make us fast learners.

Liberal Arts cannot be automated and they transfer well to new fields. For example, the people skills you learn in psychology are useful in sales, in management, and as personal trainers. The study of economics is useful in homemaking, in negotiating, in voting, and in many other contexts.

You can’t look back on a liberal arts education and say, “That was a waste of my time.” Like a good wine, it only becomes better as time goes on.

# Contention 2: Practical Skills Are Not Adaptable

Remember the yellow pages? Remember video rental stores? The folks working in those fields are gone now. Some of them had liberal arts educations and adapted to new careers. Others didn’t. Think about the economic catastrophe in Detroit when the car factories were automated. Most of the workers there had highly specific educations that didn’t apply to anything else.

If you went to school to study machining sheets of metal, then spent 4.6 years machining sheets of metal, then showed up at an advertising agency looking for work, you’d have nothing to offer your prospective employer. A practical-skills education made sense hundreds of years ago when people became whatever their parents were, but modern societies always switch to liberal arts educations as they develop because they see the incredible value in it. America did so in the late 1800s and early 1900s, fueling a century of growth and innovation and progress.

We don’t have to painstakingly transcribe the Bible anymore. We don’t need 90% of our population to be farmers. And we don’t need an education focused primarily on practical skills.

Whatever we wind up doing with our lives, whether it be in a practical career or something else, liberal arts are the foundation to success because they empower you to be great at whatever you do. With a liberal arts education, the future doesn’t have to be scary. It can be full of hope and excitement. I hope you’ll vote for that. Thank you.

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*This case was written by Travis Herche.*

1. Oxford Dictionaries, “adaptable” <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/adaptable#adaptable> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)