Charting your Course

Resolutional Nuances

by Breanna Vincent

The late artist, Cy Twombly, once explained, “I used to change things in my early painting to get the nuance or feeling I wanted, but now I plan everything in my head before I do it.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Debaters should follow Twombly’s example when building their cases and when preparing to provide counterpoints to the cases they encounter in debate rounds.

The debate resolution is as follows: *“In formal education liberal arts ought to be valued above practical skills.”* Thinking through the potential nuances allowed for by this debate resolution will help debaters formulate their own cases (AFF and NEG) and also be quick to recognize and combat the subtleties of their opponents’ cases. This essay identifies some key elements of the resolution and some important nuances you will want to consider.

# “In Formal Education”

How did the writers of the resolution intend for “formal education” to be understood? Given the language of the whole resolution, one might think that post-high-school education is in mind. One could certainly go this way and make the debate entirely about post-high-school undergraduate education. However, the resolution does not say, “in post-high-school education” or, “in college education.” The resolution simply says, “in formal education,” which by definition is very broad. Why did the resolution writers merely say, “formal education,” and not some other expression that limits the scope to college education?

As you research various definitions of “formal education,” you probably won’t find any definitions that limit the expression only to college education. Instead, you will find that “formal education” is actually broad enough to include Kindergarten through College. Hence, a debater can legitimately identify the field of debate as encompassing the full span of formal education, including high school and even pre-high school.

Competitors arguing NEG might prefer to confine the debate to post-high school education, but they will have to carry the burden of demonstrating why the resolution should be limited to this educational time frame.

Keep in mind that the real-world debate between liberal arts and practical skills is not a college-only debate. Visionary educators across the nation are grappling earnestly with the place of practical skill training and liberal arts courses at the high school level. For example, Marc Tucker, the CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy, suggests that high schools be viewed as a new home for the liberal arts curriculum. He recommends that educators “reconceive the last two years of high school as serving the same purpose that we used to allocate to the first two years of college: providing a solid base of knowledge and skill that can be used throughout one’s life, no matter what path that life takes over the years.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

A nationally ranked high school in Texas is called the Liberal Arts and Science Academy, and it seeks to “produce graduates with exceptional knowledge and skills in English, other languages, mathematics, science, social studies and technology” in order to equip their students to “make a significant contribution to community, state, and nation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, there are sixty-four “Middle College High Schools” in California that offer programs that allow the potential for a student to graduate from high school with the equivalent of an Associate of Arts degree.[[4]](#footnote-4) Other such schools are found across the country. Clearly, high school educators are wrestling with the very issues raised by this debate resolution.

# “Liberal Arts”

Keep in mind that at liberal arts colleges there is such a thing as a Liberal Arts major. Some competitors might decide that this is where the debate lies, and they might seek to argue that students should value a liberal arts major above other majors that focus on practical skills needed for specific occupations.

You will want to quantify the meaning of “liberal arts” in terms of class subjects. What makes a curriculum liberal arts rather than practical skills? You will also want to quantify liberal arts in terms of its purpose. Practical skill training seems to be occupationally specific in its orientation, but liberal arts education is designed to prepare students for life as a whole, teaching them to be good citizens both on and off the job.

As you work through such issues, you will want to gain a thorough understanding of the history of liberal arts education. Study the ancient trivium. Look at the subjects included in the trivium and study the trivium’s purposes in ancient Greece. Examine the Medieval forms of the quadrivium and the purpose of liberal arts education at that time. Read purpose statements of modern colleges that explain the purpose of their liberal arts program.

# “Practical Skills”

You will need to arrive at a definition of “practical skills” that is inclusive of both its content and its purpose. What is a “skill” and what does “practical” mean? Does whatever definition you choose imply that liberal arts classes are impractical? Does “practical skills” have to refer to skills that are practical only for an occupation? Why can’t “practical skills” also refer to skills that are practical for citizenship and all of life? If you define “practical skills” in a way that makes it specific to occupations, be prepared to defend that limitation.

# “Liberal Arts” vs. “Practical Skills”

There are significant opportunities for confusion due to the real-world overlap of liberal arts and practical skills. Some clever debaters will exploit this overlap in order to keep their opponents on their heels and knock them off their game. Is it not true that liberal arts classes provide training in skills that are immensely “practical”? Is not grammar a “skill” and is it not “practical”? Is not speech a skill that is practical? Is not writing or math a practical skill? Obviously, yes. So how will you make the distinction between liberal arts and practical skills? For example, if a person wants to be a philosophy professor, then his philosophy, literature, and rhetoric classes would prove to be very helpful in developing the practical skills necessary in his vocation as a philosophy professor. Yet such classes are rightly classified as liberal arts classes. How would you explain this overlap while at the same time making a clear distinction between liberal arts and practical skills?

Perhaps you will want to define “practical skills” as technical or professional skills. But why did the resolution writers not choose to use the words “technical” or “professional”? How would you defend your definition?

Also, keep in mind that even in liberal arts institutions, practical skills are a part of the education plan for their students, with each successive year increasingly honing in on training for a particular profession.  For example, a student can receive a liberal arts education at a university, with his chosen major being Accounting and his chosen minor being Economics. His freshman and sophomore years are loaded up with liberal arts courses, with each successive year featuring fewer liberal arts courses and more courses that are specific to Accounting and Economics. Because of this fact, liberal arts training and practical skill training are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Most liberal arts schools provide a nice balance between liberal arts courses and practical skill courses.

Therefore, you will need to think through how you define “liberal arts” and “practical skills” and how you frame the debate between the two options. Is the debate about which subjects should be valued above the other? If so, how do you have that debate without getting tangled in the overlap of classes that are arguably both liberal arts and practical skills?

Perhaps you could understand “liberal arts” and “practical skills” as representing two *approaches* to education (which is what I have done in my AFF case in this book). Understood in this way, the debate is between the “liberal arts approach” to education (which includes some practical skill training) and the “practical-skill-only approach” offered by vocational schools. This provides cleanly distinct options to compare and debate.

# “Ought To Be Valued”

The language used here raises several questions. First, who is doing the valuing? Is it the educators framing an educational system who should value liberal arts over practical skills in the education they provide for their students? Is it the employers looking to hire someone who should value liberal arts education over practical-skill-only education? Or is it the student himself who should value liberal arts over practical skills as he makes choices regarding which type of education will best prepare him for the future? Do the resolution writers have in mind the student who is trying to decide between a liberal arts school and a vocational school? Or do they have in mind the student at a liberal arts school who is trying to make a choice between a Liberal Arts major and an Accounting major?

Also, what does valuing liberal arts above practical skills actually look like? Does it mean that the student has to choose liberal arts over practical skill training for his own education? Is it possible for a student to value liberal arts above practical skill training, yet still choose practical skill training at a vocational school because it is the only affordable option for him? Some might say yes. In fact, there are surely some vocational school students who would tell you that they personally value liberal arts training over practical skill training, but they are simply unable to afford a liberal arts education.

Let me illustrate my point by using cars. I personally value a 2016 Mercedes-Benz above a 1998 Toyota Camry. I could argue with conviction that the Mercedes is a far more valuable car than the Camry. If I turn around after presenting my case and purchase a ’98 Camry for myself, does that prove that I value the Camry over the Mercedes? Not necessarily. It may simply mean that I lack the money to purchase the more valuable car. All my purchase of the ’98 Camry may really prove is that I value financial solvency (or money for college) more than having the 2016 Mercedes. Lack of funds, valuing financial solvency, and wanting money for college conspired to influence me to choose the vehicle of less value.

As you debate the AFF side of the resolution, understand that you are arguing that liberal arts should be valued above only one other thing: practical skills. You can argue this point, while at the same time recognizing that real-world factors might insert themselves into the picture, factors which might cause a person to end up choosing for himself the option that he actually values less. Your argument still stands, given the fact that only two things are being compared in the resolution.

Financial limitations and other pressing circumstances make it such that the option people value most does not always translate into the same choice for everyone. Hence, the AFF is not arguing that vocational schools should be eliminated or that no one should ever choose that option. The argument is that liberal arts should be valued above practical skills *when these are the only things being compared*.

# “Above”

You will want to pay attention to the word “above” in the resolution. Why does the resolution say “above” and not “rather than” or “instead of”? The use of the word “above” means that the debate is not about valuing only one option and not the other. The writers of the resolution seem to recognize that both liberal arts and practical skills have value. They simply assert that liberal arts should be valued “above” practical skills.

To capture the idea conveyed by “above,” consider the following example. I value my Bible, and I also value C.S. Lewis’ book *The Abolition of Man*. I could make a good case as to why you should value Lewis’ book also. However, though I value both the Bible and *The Abolition of Man*, I value the Bible “above” Lewis’ book, and I could give you many reasons why you should also. If I were to make such a case to you, I would not need to demean *The Abolition of Man*, nor would I need to argue that it has no value at all. I would simply need to show you why you ought to place a higher value on the Bible than the legitimate value you should place on *The Abolition of Man.* You could respond to my arguments by purchasing and treasuring both books, yet valuing the Bible above Lewis’ book.

My point is that when debating the resolution on the AFF side, you do not have to prove that practical skills have no value. You simply have to prove that liberal arts should be valued “above” the value that one might rightly attach to practical skills. If you are arguing NEG, you don’t have to prove that liberal arts training has no value. You simply have to prove that it is not true that liberal arts should be valued “above” practical skills. You can either argue that practical skills should be valued above liberal arts, or you can argue that practical skills should be valued on an equal level with liberal arts. My hunch is that a balanced NEG would be most effective, wherein you argue that liberal arts and practical skills should be valued equally. If you run a balanced NEG in this way, you can point to liberal arts universities that provide a variety of majors and minors (practical skills) along with their basic liberal arts curriculum. You could also point to the Liberal Arts and Science Academy in Texas as a high school that is seeking to place similar value on both liberal arts and practical skill training.[[5]](#footnote-5)

# Conclusion

The writers of the resolution seem to have chosen their words carefully. The wording they chose provides ample flexibility for you and your opponents to frame the debate in various ways, which should make for some interesting and enlightening rounds this year. Whatever you do, follow Cy Twombly’s example and plan everything in your head before you do it. Do the work necessary to crystalize the nuances of your own case and prepare yourself to interact intelligently with your opponents’ cases. In the process of thinking through these issues and debating this resolution, you just might find some clarity for yourself as you make your own education choices for college and beyond, and you might help your opponents as they ponder their own future. That’s a win for everyone.

1. Serota, Nicholas. *The Guardian.*  The Guardian News and Media, 2015. Web. 12 July 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/june/03/art1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tucker, Marc. "High School: A New Home for the Liberal Arts Curriculum? "Education Week. Education Week, 10 July 2012. Web. 15 June 2015. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top\_performers/2012/07/high\_school\_a\_new\_home\_for\_the\_liberal\_arts\_curriculum.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Mission Statement.” *Liberal Arts and Science Academy.* lasaonline.org, n.d. Web. 12 July 2015. <http://www.lasaonline.org/about/mission.jsp>. URL is changing and new domain is currently under construction. You may contact Fred Cutler, the school’s IT Director at (512) 414-1900 or [fred.cutler@austinisd.org](mailto:fred.cutler@austinisd.org) for current URL. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “CCEMC.” *CCEMC.org.* California Coalition of Early and Middle Colleges, 2015. Web. 12 July 2015. www.ccemc.org [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Mission Statement.” *Liberal Arts and Science Academy.* lasaonline.org, n.d. Web. 12 July 2015. <http://www.lasaonline.org/about/mission.jsp>, URL is changing and new domain is currently under construction. You may contact Fred Cutler, the school’s IT Director at (512) 414-1900 or [fred.cutler@austinisd.org](mailto:fred.cutler@austinisd.org) for current URL. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)