

2013 KENAN MORAL PURPOSE AWARD

On Open-Mindedness, Elizabeth Henderson, UNC-CH '13

I always considered myself an open-minded person: until I came to college. If you asked my peers of four years ago, they would probably even tell you that I was the most open-minded person among our friends. But as it turns out, being the most open-minded kid in a group of predominately white, middle class students in Charlotte, North Carolina doesn't mean much. (I was shocked, too.) Throughout the past four years, I've come to realize that having some friends who are of different races and eclectic taste in music actually doesn't constitute "open-mindedness."

It's not that I was ever unreceptive to alternative modes of thinking, but I lacked exposure to the experiences necessary to truly understand the viewpoints of others. My time at UNC has given me those experiences. While attending a large liberal arts university, I feel as though I've finally started to *think*. I don't mean thinking as in *using* my mind, but rather *opening* it—literally expanding my brain cells beyond their initial comfort zone to question why things are the way they are, and to seek answers beyond those that I previously perceived to be established certainties.

I have a distinct memory of about a year ago, when a friend asked me which immersion track in the Journalism school I was pursuing. When I told her the diversity track, she responded with laughter and a dismissive flick of the hand. "You *would!*" she exclaimed. I remember thinking: what does that even mean? When history and current affairs have taught us that ignorance begets discrimination—ranging from civil injustices to genocide—why would we *not* all strive to understand the lives and experiences of others?

I feel that the only way to challenge any assumptions that might be biologically or environmentally engrained in us—the assumptions that lead to discrimination and hatred—is to educate ourselves. To truly erase ignorance requires the kind of education that forces you to think deeply and open your mind: it requires a liberal arts education.

While I'm certain there are many students—and policy makers, for that matter—who disagree with me, deeming liberal arts

courses superfluous and a gratuitous luxury, the awareness I have gained through my liberal arts courses has been more significant to my personal and intellectual development than the knowledge I've acquired in any other courses. This is not to discredit the more skills-based classes I have taken in the Journalism school; these courses have been necessary, but not sufficient. It is the classes that I have engaged in truly deep and expansive thinking—philosophy, history, ethics, global studies—that have taught me how to be a better *human*. And while there is no place to fill in "genuinely good person" on a resume, I am still somehow convinced that the concept is not completely devoid of value.

Many people often pin liberal arts courses as dichotomous to courses that develop "skill sets." Yet, I feel that my liberal arts education has equipped me with numerous skills. For one, these courses have taught me the skill of how to consider topics from moral, ethical and cross-cultural perspectives—something which I have found to be extremely valuable. I can recall certain moments throughout my time at UNC when I was able to take a step back from my current environment, remove myself from my physical and cultural stance, and think about questions from an objective perspective: questions such as, "I know everyone hates Communism because it's bad and all, but *why?*" Or, "I grew up believing in God because that's what I learned about in church every Sunday. But what if I was born in Cambodia and everyone around me practiced Buddhism? Would I still believe in my God then?" Or, "Are there *actually* different countries in Africa, or are we sure it's not just one giant entity?" (I ask this last question in jest, though you'd be surprised.)

My experience at UNC has offered me experiences that have expanded my mind in ways that I never could have fathomed four years ago. I've sipped fine wine in Italy and sipped sachet water bags in Ghana; I've heard people speak about their experiences on Saturday Night Live and their experiences spending 11 years in jail for a crime they did not commit. I've attended countless world-class performances for \$10 and attended *Rite of Spring* lectures

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that drew connections between Nietzsche and Isadora Duncan. Through each of these enriching experiences, I have learned about the lives of others, and in doing so, learned more about myself.

Many universities boast having a diverse population, where students from “all walks of life” come together and unite. These taglines always seemed like hackneyed recruitment strategies to me, but I can honestly say that at UNC, it’s true. I have met and learned from countless people who have grown up with a thousand different experiences different from my own, and there is a certain something associated with this diverse population—this constant state feeling different, yet the same—that I find completely exhilarating.

I don’t know where I’ll be in 10 years—I hardly know where I’ll be in 10 days. But I know that because of my experience at UNC, I am equipped with not just the skills, but the *understanding* to get through whatever challenges life throws at me. Now that I’ve come to understand the invigoration and value derived from learning from people who are different from me, I never want to stop. I never want to stop learning new perspectives, new schools of thought, new stories. I never want to stop opening my mind.

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