

Bringing Light into the Darkness:
Analyzing the Rhetoric of Liberal Arts

Over the years, many rhetors have concocted their own rhetoric on whether or not liberal arts should be considered as an obtainable degree. In fact, most degrees that are classified in the liberal arts category have lost much respect and, instead, have been replaced by science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects (STEM). For authors Fareed Zakaria and Mark McNutt, both of their articles represent a need for liberal arts whether for personal, academic, or professional stability and therefore, through their usage of symbolic action, both rhetors are able to give a complete explanation to how valuable liberal arts degrees are.

In Fareed Zakaria's article, "What is the Earthly Use of a Liberal Arts Education?", the author not only expresses the *importance* of a liberal arts education but what one can *achieve* with a liberal arts education. Furthermore, through this article, Zakaria ultimately explains the value that a liberal arts degree can offer. By divulging in these thoughts, the rhetor is not only developing his **persona** but, through this, he is possessing **rhetorical agency**. *Rhetoric in Civic Life* defines **persona** as, "the character, role, identity, authority, and image a rhetor constructs and performs during a rhetorical act" (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch 150). **Rhetorical agency** is also, "the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one's community" (187). The **persona** created by the rhetor is that of someone who can voice their opinion on the liberal arts without degrading anyone outside the spectrum. By creating this **persona**, the rhetor has **rhetorical agency** because this article is being presented to a specific audience and therefore, the audience members heed this message especially if select audience members majored in the liberal arts.

The rhetor has to ultimately understand the audience in which he is speaking to and his article sparks emotions inside recent college graduates who want nothing more than to feel good

about the degree they received and to finally start their lives. The audience can be considered a **cyberpublic** which is a public “formed or strengthened through the use of the Internet and social media” (257). The readers who come across this article are part of a **cyberpublic** because not only are they reading the article online but they can come together and reach an understanding on the topic as well as fully grasping the value that a liberal arts degree can offer. Zakaria is able to help his readers with understanding by explaining, “The second great advantage of a liberal education is that it teaches you how to speak your mind. This emphasis on being articulate is reinforced in the many extra-curricular activities that surround every liberal arts college. You have to get people’s attention and convince them of your cause” (Zakaria). Through him saying this, he is leading the initiative of his readers to join together and make a change when regarding liberal arts.

While sparking emotions with his readers, the rhetor uses an overwhelming amount of **pathos** which “leads the audience ‘to feel emotion’” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch 12). He uses **pathos** to further engage the audience and throughout the article, he keeps the audience focused by not only explaining that most people in society find liberal arts degrees useless but how, at the same time, these people are wrong. He consistently makes connections between STEM and liberal arts degrees by explaining how important both are to society and how one does not outweigh the other. However, with this being said, he does speak directly to liberal arts majors at the end of the article to further calm the uneasiness that ensnares the minds of students across the country. He explains, “Ultimately, a liberal education is about being human...It is in our nature that ‘we are all drawn to the pursuit of knowledge.’ It is what separates us from animals” (Zakaria).

The rhetor further discloses why liberal arts are as important as STEM majors by using **epideictic discourse** which are, “speeches of praise or blame, usually delivered to audiences assembled during ceremonial occasions, and oriented to the present moment, while calling on the past to inform the future” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch 202). The rhetor uses this discourse by first explaining that liberal arts degrees today are not considered “cool” anymore when they used to be a priority. Furthermore, Zakaria is able to inform his audience of their future by calling on the past and expressing the criticism and admiration for liberal arts. He explains, “Technical skills don’t have to be praised at the expense of humanities” (Zakaria). He continues on to quote Steve Jobs to back up this claim: “It is in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough. It’s technology married with liberal arts – married to the humanities that yields us the result that makes our hearts sing” (Zakaria). In other words, this “marriage” is visible everywhere and the rhetor uses this information to further inform the audience that their future is waiting for them.

Zakaria is claiming that liberal arts are valuable and *Rhetoric in Civic Life* explains that a **claim of value** is, “a claim that advances a statement about what is worthy” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch 100). The text also explains, “Such claims are not empirically verifiable; instead they are based on the judgments of the audience” (100). What this is ultimately addressing is that even though Zakaria is claiming liberal arts are valuable, it does not mean that every person who reads his article will feel the same.

It also seems that hiring managers are starting to look at the value of a liberal arts degree as well. In the article, “There Is Value In Liberal Arts Education, Employers Say”, the rhetor, Mark McNutt, explains that even though computer science, engineering, and finance are considered career-ready degrees, “at the same time, employers really identify the creative,

communicative, and problem-solving acumen traditionally associated with liberal arts majors as the most valuable attributes of new hires” (McNutt). Further, McNutt also explains:

The more obvious career tracks for liberal arts grads – visual and performing arts and communications – gained nearly 25 percent in 2014 over 2013, which is good news for those seeking jobs in public relations and entertainment. But it still leaves many liberal arts grads unemployed and questioning if a liberal arts degree was worth the investment (McNutt).

This quote further leads into the language that the rhetor uses to appease the audience while further providing meaningful information. The rhetor uses **inflated language** which is, “language designed to make the ordinary seem extraordinary; to make everyday things seem impressive; to give an air of importance to people, situations, or things that would not normally be considered important; to make the simple seem complex” (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch 51). With this being said, the rhetor uses **inflated language** by giving hope to liberal arts majors. He provides statistics in the article that thoroughly show that liberal arts have escalated in the past few years even if just by a little.

The rhetor also uses **presence** to further amplify the message he is trying to create. The chart expressed in the article explains that within the past year, Mathematics have increased by 6.8%, Environmental Science has increased by 7.5%, Communications increased by 9.5%, Education increased by 11.5%, and Visual and Performing Arts increased by 15.4%. Through this, the rhetor represents a **presence** which is “the creation of something in the front of an audience’s consciousness” (62). This term concludes that the chart is able to impact the reader of the article in a much more intense way because the reader is viewing that Visual and Performing Arts increased by 15.4% whereas what is considered a much more prominent degree like

Environmental Science only increased by 7.5% in a year. This strikes the reader as important because not only does the reader wonder why Arts have a much more dominant increase but it provides hope for liberal arts majors because they know that the job market is increasing.

However, the term **negotiated reading** further changes the spectrum of this case.

Negotiated reading is, “a reading in which the viewer accepts some of the hegemonic meanings, but also recognizes some exceptions” (65). The chart only expresses the increase for Visual and Performing Arts which means that there are many more liberal art categories that were not mentioned such as English, History, Philosophy, etc. This article does not provide a clear notion as to what the increase for these majors have been. Therefore, the question addressed is whether or not these particular majors have increased or plummeted in the past year.

But, regardless, both articles have a sense of **vivacity** to them which is, “a sense of immediacy or presence created through the use of descriptions, imagery, and colorful language that make an idea come alive” (127). Zakaria and McNutt both have a sense of immediacy to their language when speaking about the liberal arts. In fact, both want to equally represent the value of the arts whether through rhetorical strategies or personal beliefs. Their colorful language also provides a spark of hope within readers who may be looking for a career in the liberal arts and even if they’re not, they may know someone who is.

Both rhetors ultimately express the value of liberal arts even if they don’t express the value in the same way. Their rhetorical strategies are increasingly different since Zakaria defends liberal arts as a necessity and an overall learning experience for students whereas McNutt only focuses on the professional and financial stability that a liberal arts degree can offer. But together, and through their **vivacity** on the subject, they address that it is okay to further pursue

one's passion and that we are in fact learning a lot more than we think we are. We just don't know it yet.

Works Cited

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