

[Transcript: Changing Higher Ed Podcast 156 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Jeff Scheuer](#)

[Preserving Democracy: The Vital Role of Liberal Arts in Higher Education](#)

Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at changinghighered.com. And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

Drumm McNaughton

Thank you, David.

Our guest today is Jeff Scheuer, a writer and independent scholar based in New York. Jeff's background is in philosophy, political theory, and journalism. After graduating from the London School of Economics and Political Science and the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, he worked briefly as a reporter before deciding to take on more significant issues.

Thus far, Jeff's written three books. His first book, *The Sound Bite Society: How Television Helps the Right and Hurts the Left*, was named a Choice Outstanding Academic title in 2000. His second book, *The Big Picture*, explored why democracies need journalistic excellence. Jeff recently published his third book, *Inside the Liberal Arts: Critical Thinking and Citizenship*. It's about how liberal learning, critical thinking, and citizenship form a golden triangle essential to a healthy democracy. Jeff joins us today to talk about how higher education abandoning a liberal education is doing a disservice to its students and the country. Jeff, welcome to the program.

Jeff Scheuer 01:46

Hey, Drumm. Great to be with you.

Drumm McNaughton 01:47

Great to have you on the program. You just came out with a new book, *Inside the Liberal Arts: Critical Thinking and Citizenship*. I was fascinated when I read the background on it. It's a great piece of work, and you dig down into the key areas that, frankly, I think all college graduates should have. Before we get into that, please give our audience a little background on who you are and what drove you to write this book because I know this isn't your first one.

Jeff Scheuer 02:24

Sure. I came out of philosophy and political theory in school and then went to journalism school and worked briefly as a reporter before I realized I wasn't meant for that line of work. I needed something broader and more significant to get my head around. So I started freelance writing, mainly reviewing books, some commentary, op-ed pieces, and essays. I ultimately wrote a book on media and politics called *The Sound Bite Society*, which argued that television and electronic media generally helped the right and hurt the left, and that sound bites are a particular problem for progressive ideas and values. That got an interesting response.

I went on to write another book on journalism called *The Big Picture: Why Democracies Need Journalistic Excellence*, which is self-explanatory as a follow-up to the first book. But then, I was casting around for something new, and social media was coming into the picture. It was confusing me and everyone else. I felt like I was losing my grip on what journalism and news were and needed to look at it in a new direction.

So, ultimately, I returned to my roots in philosophy, although there's a tie-in to media, which I'll get to. But I heard people saying, "Critical thinking is important for the liberal arts, and the liberal arts promote critical thinking." I was thinking, "What does that mean?" As Mark Twain said about the weather, everyone complains about it, but no one ever does anything about it. So I decided to do something about it; I decided to look into what critical thinking is, what the liberal arts are, how they connect, and how they promote citizenship in a democracy. That took a few years.

Drumm McNaughton 04:29

Very good. I'm glad you're able to join us. This is timely because Marymount University in Virginia is eliminating nine liberal arts majors for undergraduates, including English, history, math, and economics. I don't see how they can say math is liberal arts or economics, but they're eliminating them.

Jeff Scheuer 04:53

In a broad sense, they are. Economics is part of the social sciences. I wouldn't say liberal arts is limited to the humanities, although they're often linked to them. The social sciences, and even natural science, can be considered part of the liberal arts because you can't get a balanced critical education by leaving nature out of the equation. It's too important. We live in it, and we need to understand it. As citizens, we need to understand complex technology and climate change issues. So we need a little science, too.

Drumm McNaughton 05:27

Interestingly, you bring up the concept of citizenship. When we were speaking before, you were referring to economic citizenship, which is the focus of where higher ed and the business community are in the US versus actual citizenship that's necessary to run a democracy.

Jeff Scheuer 05:52

Right. I wouldn't say "versus," but maybe "along with." What I'm arguing in *Inside the Liberal Arts* is that there are three main areas of citizenship that all interact with and affect each other. One is economic, another is civic, and the third is cultural. The core of my argument in this part of the book is that we need STEM, vocational education, free professional development, and everything we can get. But if we leave out the liberal arts, we only get the economic part of citizenship, which is how to produce, consume, and be part of the economy. We don't get all the rest, the cultural and civic, that we need to be full citizens.

Drumm McNaughton 06:41

To set things up for the audience, let's talk a little bit about the Civic domain.

Jeff Scheuer 06:51

The most obvious part is voting, serving on juries, signing petitions, and anything we do in the civic arena that gives us input. Citizenship is any transaction between the individual and society that includes both give and take. We give taxes and take services, for example. But there are many ways to do that in the civic arena. We can write postcards, try to change laws, and try to keep laws. It's not about change, per se. It's about change versus preventing change. It's not Left or Right. It's just citizenship. It's being part of the world you live in.

Drumm McNaughton 07:35

That makes perfect sense. I assume cultural is the arts.

Jeff Scheuer 07:43

People think of it as the arts. But I would include religion, religious institutions, and sports institutions because they are all public areas in which we have some impact and conversations with others. They are the coral beds on which we form communities as little citizen fish. So they're just as important.

As I said before, the cultural things we do and the cultural conversations we have, whether over a ballgame or a Cézanne painting, will ultimately connect to the civic and the economic. I describe in the book exactly how they connect and why it's a complicated system. But that's why we need all three and why STEM education doesn't do the whole job.

Drumm McNaughton 08:35

It sounds like you're bringing up the concept of higher education and the public good, not just the economic good.

Jeff Scheuer 08:43

That's correct, and I'm certainly not the first to do so. The great philosopher John Dewey was all about civic education, as was Robert Maynard Hutchins at the University of Chicago. But if you go back to the founding of the Republic when Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia, he put that on his gravestone instead of being president, which he didn't mention. That was important to him. He didn't found the Agricultural School of Virginia or the Technical School of Virginia. He founded it to produce not just business people or ministers like some of the small religious colleges that started springing up around New England at that time did, but citizens generally. That was his vision. Although it's debated and disputed, the Jeffersonian vision for American education is to produce citizenship, and that's what liberal arts is all about.

Drumm McNaughton 09:42

It reminds me, too, of Clark Kerr and the California experiment of how higher education was for the public good and how citizenship requires, some will say, a liberal education. Unfortunately, that's not what we're hearing nowadays.

Jeff Scheuer 10:01

It's not, and maybe I'm out of step with the times because I think Clark Kurt was right. I think Jefferson was right. I think one of the greatest pieces of legislation in American history was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which we know as the GI Bill, which produced the mass prosperity of the 1950s and early '60s. Unfortunately, that vision of the beneficial impact of investing in education has been lost, of how it raises all boats. It doesn't just make a few people smarter or more interesting. It raises all boats, and it raised the American boat in the '50s and '60s.

In fact, a great book, not mine, came out by a writer named Will Bunch called *After the Ivory Tower Falls*, a history of how we lost that vision after the GI Bill. It's a beautiful book and a nice complement to mine.

Drumm McNaughton 11:01

But you're not arguing that everything needs to be liberal education.

Jeff Scheuer 11:08

No, absolutely not. There are many people who are incapable, uninterested for whatever reason, or not suited for a liberal education. But as many people who can should be able to have it. And the more who can, the better our democracy will be because we'll have broader and fuller citizenship. If we only had STEM, technical, and skill-oriented education, we would live in a bad way and a bad place in the long run. There's no way a democracy can function based on people with only technical knowledge and no citizenship skills.

Drumm McNaughton 11:45

So what I'm hearing you say is, from a higher education perspective, we need to step back a little and look at the purpose of higher education. It's not only training people to be job-ready and to create good citizens.

Jeff Scheuer 12:06

Absolutely, and personally, I put citizenship first. It's not always clear that being job-ready is what's best for someone in the long run. When he was president at Kenyon College, Sean Decatur said that philosophers out-earned business majors in the long run. And that may be true. But, more importantly, we need more civic education, not just at universities and colleges but in high schools. For example, we need a civics section on SATs and ACTs. We need to have it taught so people have some sense of the society they're entering and how they can affect it themselves.

Drumm McNaughton 12:44

Many people would argue that because society has become so technical and technology is driving things, we need far more STEM graduates. What I'm hearing you say is that STEM is important. But liberal education must be infused into STEM to create job-ready graduates and, more importantly, good citizens.

Jeff Scheuer 13:16

Absolutely. Maybe "supplemented" rather than "infused" would better describe the balance I'm looking for and the necessity for some civic and cultural education for STEM students. There has to be some better balance than simply assuming people like Governor DeSantis believe that all we need is to get people into jobs that aren't necessarily going to pay great but are getting them through. I think that's a very bleaker vision for America.

Drumm McNaughton 13:49

I would tend to agree with you on that. As you said before, democracies cannot flourish without liberal arts. The STEM needs to be supplemented with this. Now, there are many challenges with this. Students are graduating with a significant amount of debt. There's \$1.7 trillion in student debt. Part of this is driven because higher education costs have increased. Although I recently read that that's a misnomer and that it really hasn't gone up. Part of the challenge is a lack of public funding for higher education, which has put the burden on the student going through.

Jeff Scheuer 14:41

That's true, Drumm. I would submit that retiring that debt would have an immense effect on our economy and culture that the GI Bill had in 1945 through the end of the '50s. It would be a new enormous move, not just to present-day students who are in debt, but to their children, their communities, and everybody. These things ramify across communities, allowing people to get educated, buy a home, and not be prevented from doing so because they have too much debt. We want people to be consumers. We don't want them to come out of college paupers.

Drumm McNaughton 15:27

It's interesting that you say that. Not so long ago, I had a guest on the podcast who talked about the debt students are coming out with and their ability to get higher-paid jobs to pay that off. It's delaying them from buying homes and making major purchases. It's impacting the economy in a major way.

Jeff Scheuer 15:52

Starting families. Exactly.

Drumm McNaughton 15:59

Let's swap horses. I could continue talking about this for quite a bit. It's fascinating to me. But let's talk about job readiness and skills. AAC&U came out with a study in 2018 and again in 2020, talking about what businesses need in graduates. The top three in the 2018 report were oral communications, the ability to work in teams, ethical judgment, and decision-making. In 2020, it was the ability to work in teams, think critically, and analyze and interpret data. How do you get this from a pure STEM education?

Jeff Scheuer 16:43

You don't fully get it from a pure STEM education, Drumm. It makes my case, or I make their case, because businesses are looking for liberal arts grads. They're not necessarily looking for people who studied business as their undergraduate degree. Similarly, editors are not looking for journalism majors. They're looking for liberal arts majors because they have broader educations. The same is true for culinary schools. From personal experience, military academies have reemphasized the liberal arts in the last decade or so. West Point has, certainly. They understand the complexity and the system-based thinking necessary to be a good soldier in the 21st century. The cooperation and communication it requires all come from a liberal education, not a STEM education.

Drumm McNaughton 17:43

This makes perfect sense. The ability to think holistically (i.e., systems thinking) doesn't necessarily come from a STEM education, although it certainly can. But STEM is becoming so focused and so deep. You get an inch

wide of information and go four feet deep. You're becoming very specialized. Liberal education tends to be broader and more inclusive. You have to think of large concepts versus specific, small technical details.

Jeff Scheuer 18:24

We don't want to be a society of citizens in our individual silos. The whole point of citizenship is connection.

Drumm McNaughton

Except there are many folks out there who have learned to connect via their electronic devices instead of face-to-face.

Jeff Scheuer

It's not necessarily the healthiest or best way to connect, but we're stuck with it for now.

Drumm McNaughton

We're both a couple of boomers, and we're used to connecting in that way versus Gen X, Y, and Z. We're talking alphabet soup here.

Jeff Scheuer 19:02

We also have AI coming down on us like a locomotive. I don't want to open the can of worms that this involves, but we all know it's something we're going to have to reckon with at all levels in higher education and K-12 education.

Drumm McNaughton 19:17

Maybe that's your next book. Perhaps you can get AI to write it for you.

Jeff Scheuer 19:22

If I'm smart enough. I did have an interesting experience with AI. I stuck my toe in the AI water recently. I asked it to write a little essay on liberal arts and democracy in 500 words. It did so in about five seconds and did pretty well. I was astonished. But when I asked it to talk about me, Jeffrey Scheuer and *Inside the Liberal Arts*, it got a lot of its facts hilariously wrong. For example, it credited me with writing five or six wonderful essays that I didn't write. So the jury's still out on AI, especially on how we rein in its bad consequences. But I don't want to get too off the subject on that.

Drumm McNaughton 20:10

Yeah. We could spend a lot of time on that one. So backing up, critics of higher education have come out and said that we can't afford as a society to take four years off for undergraduates to socialize, etc. They need to be focused and come out ready to join the workforce, etc. In our conversations, neither of us agree with that completely. Higher ed needs to be a place for students to find themselves.

Jeff Scheuer 20:52

If you follow that argument too far, you end up endorsing child labor and taking kids out of school after sixth grade. I totally disagree with the premise of that argument. Historically, we've had colleges and universities since before we were a country. In the early days, they mostly studied the classics like Latin and Greek. Then

they broadened it out. These sectarian religious institutions became beacons of liberal education. I went to a Quaker school that developed into a great college.

So, no, we've become a superpower in the last 170 years since the Civil War, with primarily a liberal arts model of higher education. Not to the exclusion of STEM, we've always had technical and scientific education, too, but in tandem with it. That's going to have to be the way we continue if we want our democracy to succeed. It doesn't work on a non-liberal arts basis. It just doesn't work.

Drumm McNaughton 21:59

I agree. As we said earlier, we need to supplement STEM with liberal education. I remember my time at the Naval Academy; we had all the technical classes. I was a physics major. So I had my physics major. I had all my naval science courses. But we were required to take liberal education courses.

Jeff Scheuer 22:24

They teach philosophy there. They teach history there. They teach everything that a great university teaches. So you had what I would guess was a fairly ideal balance of STEM and non-STEM education.

Drumm McNaughton 22:38

I suspect you're right. When I think back, my physics courses come to mind. But I also think about courses on Chaucer, where we read *The Canterbury Tales* and studied Middle English. There were law courses on torts and naval law, etc. There was plenty of "liberal arts education" that helped round us out to assume leadership roles once we graduated from the Naval Academy.

Jeff Scheuer 23:11

By the way, you mentioned law. Why shouldn't law be taught? Everyone needs to take at least one law course. Everyone who is affected by the law and who lives under the law needs to have some sense of what it is. That's part of a civic education. Also, reading great history gives us perspective on what we do in our decisions. Literature, including English and other languages, is what we use to communicate and write. I certainly became a better writer through reading novels and philosophy. So there it is. You can't ignore the values of those things.

Drumm McNaughton 23:51

No, I don't think you can. It's like that old saying. Those people who are not familiar with history are destined to repeat it.

Jeff Scheuer

Right. George Santayana said that.

Drumm McNaughton

Oh, that's who that was?

Jeff Scheuer

Yes, it was.

Drumm McNaughton 24:06

I didn't know that. I guess my liberal education wasn't that good.

Jeff Scheuer 24:11

I struggle to get the exact quote right myself. But it was something like that.

Drumm McNaughton 24:19

Well, Jeff, this has been a great conversation. Thank you. As we always do, we wrap up with two questions. So, if you would please, what are three takeaways for university presidents and boards?

Jeff Scheuer 24:31

First, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Liberal education is a ticket to higher economic, civic, and cultural rewards than STEM and vocational education. It's that simple. That's not to disparage STEM or vocational. I support what President Biden is trying to do to get more and better jobs for people who are high school graduates. But that shouldn't prevent us from trying to get as many people in and through college as possible for a culturally, civically, and economically prosperous society.

The second point is that, as I mentioned earlier, the schism between liberal learning and practical learning or between knowledge and skills is as old as our Republic. Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, who founded the precursor to the University of Pennsylvania, had a different vision of education as being more than just a pre-professional exercise. And I think they were right.

John Dewey and many other people have followed in that tradition. There was a dispute, for example, between WB Dubois, the great black sociologist, and others around the turn of the 20th century about how to educate African-Americans. Dubois said they should be given liberal arts education. Others like Booker T. Washington said they should just learn skills. Well, if they just learned skills, you wouldn't have the Hampton Institute. You wouldn't have the HBCUs. If the skills-oriented folks had won that case, you would lose enormous cultural capital in the black community.

Although I'm somewhat of an outsider as an independent scholar, I'm very interested in and very passionate about learning. Educators need a broad, robust vision of education that begins with citizenship, period. It needs to include skill-based learning but also recognizes that the skills of citizens, which the Romans called *liberalis ares*, or the liberal arts, are the most important skills for any free society.

Drumm McNaughton 26:50

Those are great takeaways. Thank you. So what's next for you? Another book on the horizon?

26:57

Possibly, Drumm. I don't know for sure. It's too soon to say. This one just came off the press. It's available at roman.com. But as a writer, I basically see my role as being to inform, provoke, stimulate, and hopefully broaden people's horizons and leave them not dumber than they were before, without having any pretense of anything more than that. When I think about what is to be informed, provoked, stimulated, and broadened, it comes down to two things: primarily philosophy and baseball. So we'll see what happens and whether there's another book.

Drumm McNaughton 27:38

Very good. Let's hope you're not on the pitch clock.

Jeff Scheuer 27:42

Oh, please. Don't get me started on that.

Drumm McNaughton 27:48

Jeff, thank you. It's been wonderful having you on the show. I greatly appreciate it.

Jeff Scheuer 27:52

Thank you, Drumm. I greatly appreciate being on with you. Take care.

Drumm McNaughton 27:59

Thanks for listening today. I want to give a special thank you to Jeff Scheuer for sharing with us his perspectives on the importance of liberal education and what university presidents can do to ensure they are graduating job-ready citizens, not just job-ready graduates. Join us next week when we welcome Zach Mabel and Kathryn Peltier Campbell from the Georgetown University Center on Education in the Workforce. Zach and Kathryn will join us to discuss their recent report entitled *10 Education, Training, and Work-based Pathway Changes that Lead to Good Jobs*. Until next time.

28:40

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