

THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION:

USA & Japanese Perspectives PART I

Q&A

Q1: At a time of rising nationalism and turning inward, how can liberal arts institutions support international education, international exchange, and study abroad? To what extent are these things important for a liberal arts education?

Professor Iwakiri:

Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile*, notes that most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home, while arguing that possessing a perspective that views the entire world as a foreign land gives rise to an originality of vision. From this "plurality of vision," he suggests, emerges an awareness of simultaneous dimensions.

This remark explains well how our liberal education can work for international education. Liberal arts provide the 'plurality of vision' that will lead, based on critical thinking, to the mutual understanding of nations and people.

Dr. Fulcomer:

International exchange and study abroad are pillars of a 21st-century liberal education. In an interconnected world, preparing students for responsible citizenship requires an understanding of other countries and cultures. As I have seen firsthand leading student programs abroad, immersing oneself in another culture is often the single most effective way to truly understand one's own. Likewise, welcoming international students to our campuses fosters a genuine exchange of ideas and global perspectives. Liberal arts colleges will serve their students well by integrating global requirements directly into general education because solving global challenges requires graduates equipped with cross-cultural understanding and the capacity to lead across borders.

Q2: My question is about the K-12 system that supports these systems. I am based in the US and so I am asking from this point of view. How do the K-12 systems in each place help support and feed into the systems? Or are they failing to feed into the systems?

Professor Iwakiri:

In Japan, the education system follows a structure of six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of high school, with education being compulsory through junior high school. However, because the high school enrollment rate exceeds 98%, high school is practically equivalent to compulsory education.

The issue in Japan is that while there is little difference between boys and girls in their liking for or academic performance in subjects like math (arithmetic) and science during elementary school, a divide occurs—particularly in high school—because university entrance exam subjects are split into "science/math" and "humanities/social sciences" tracks. This creates an imbalance in fields of study, making it difficult to foster an environment where students learn broadly through critical thinking and discussion.

The step-by-step learning progression—elementary school education, where children grow while learning social norms; junior high school education, where they learn the foundations of viewing the world through intellectual curiosity; and high school education, where they acquire the groundwork to learn new things more analytically—is highly logical. In my view, the problem in Japan is that this natural progression is distorted by the university entrance examination system.

Dr. Fulcomer:

The K-12 system and higher education share a symbiotic relationship, but there can be a disconnect. At the extreme, when K–12 curricula are reduced solely to narrow vocational tracks, students arrive unprepared for the ambiguity, synthesis, and critical inquiry required in college. Higher education leaders can help bridge the divide by building institutional partnerships with our neighboring school districts and offering dual enrollment and other curricular support.

Q3: I am an Amherst College graduate and a faculty member at Wesleyan University, and I often say to students and colleagues that what I'm really doing is "training students for jobs that don't yet exist". As Eric so eloquently put it, it isn't training for their first job; it is training that enables students to create new fields. Most of my students who come back to their 10-year reunions have job titles that didn't exist at the time that they graduated. - I'd love to have the panelists comment on the value of cross-cultural education as a way of making students' brains and capacities for change and innovation larger. How do US-Japan exchanges contribute to those goals?

Professor Iwakiri:

I think that is a very insightful point. Indeed, predicting what professions will exist ten years from now to teach specific professional skills is nearly impossible. Liberal arts education, at its core, embodies the concept of "learning how to learn." Even if an education helps students acquire skills that are currently in demand by cultivating the ability to adapt flexibly to unforeseen situations, its fundamental essence lies in fostering a mind skill—an innate capacity to creatively adapt to changing circumstances on one's own, even when those specific skills are eventually replaced by others.

Dr. Fulcomer:

This is a great argument for why a liberal arts education is the ultimate safeguard against obsolescence. If we merely train students for today's jobs, their skills will expire as industries evolve. Cross-cultural exchanges, such as US–Japan programs, expand cognitive flexibility and innovation precisely because they force students outside of the familiar. Experiencing an entirely different cultural, ethical, and organizational framework

cultivates what McKinsey called the essential modern "C": the capacity for change. When students learn to navigate cultural ambiguity and synthesize contrasting viewpoints, they develop the creative agility needed to pioneer new fields and invent jobs that do not yet exist.

Q4: One hallmark of a liberal arts education is a vibrant campus and student life. I'd love to hear the panelists view about the importance of student life, from living together in dormitories, extracurricular activities, and community and civic engagement.

Professor Iwakiri:

What is taught in university classes pertains to the intellect and academic inquiry. However, as long as that education aims for the good, it is essential to consider not only what can be intellectually grasped, but also two other elements that condition human existence: an awareness of the sensory(sensibility) and an awareness of the transcendent. I believe that campus life contributes to nurturing within individuals this sensory aspect and an openness to the transcendent domain—elements that are generally excluded from academic education.

International Christian University (ICU), where I serve as president, has a spacious campus rich in nature located in the suburbs of Tokyo, which has been designated as a "Nationally Certified Sustainable Site" by the Ministry of the Environment. And the entire university is operated under an ecumenical Christian spirit. Although it is not fully residential, 25% of our students live in dormitories on campus, providing an environment where students from diverse backgrounds learn while deepening their human experience. We also engage in service learning that emphasizes human interaction through partnerships with neighboring local governments, as well as local governments and communities in regional Japan and abroad.

Dr. Fulcomer:

A liberal arts education is inherently communal and holistic because it is designed to develop the whole person. Living in residence halls, participating in student organizations, and engaging with the local community serve as excellent laboratories for democracy. In these shared spaces, students must negotiate differences, practice active listening, develop moral character, and build interpersonal skills. This residential and civic engagement is where the classicist ideal (i.e., harmonizing the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral dimensions of life) moves from the classroom into daily practice, ensuring that our graduates are prepared for life and responsible citizenship, not just the workplace.

Q5: As we face increasingly complex global challenges, how can liberal arts education foster not only critical thinking, but also empathy, ethical responsibility, and global citizenship? And how might stronger partnerships between liberal arts colleges and specialized graduate institutions help students translate their education into meaningful action?

Professor Iwakiri:

ICU is a college of liberal arts, but at the same time, it also houses a Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. In Japan, it typically takes four years of undergraduate study and two years of a master's program to earn a master's degree, but ICU offers a program that allows high-achieving students to complete both their undergraduate and master's degrees in five years. Many students choose to pursue graduate studies at institutions other than ICU, with a particularly high proportion of students majoring in Natural Sciences continuing on to graduate school. Furthermore, among students who enter the workforce directly after graduating, a significant number choose to attend graduate school mid-career. In general, I believe it is important for students to enhance their expertise through graduate education at whatever stage of life is right for them.

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Q6: After 40 years in technology, I've come to believe that it may be easier to teach a liberal-arts graduate to program than to teach an engineer to think like a liberal-arts graduate. With AI now making programming skills much easier to acquire, are we entering an era in which the liberal arts—imagination, curiosity, literature, music, culture, and understanding people—may become more valuable to technology companies rather than less?

Professor Iwakiri:

As I emphasized in my dialogue with Eric, the essence of a liberal education is to lead a person out of the known world into an unknown, new world filled with wonder—and in doing so, to liberate them from themselves. Emotions such as “wonder” or “joy” are things that AI will never possess (though AI might be able to pretend to have them). It is precisely this open mind and spirit that sets liberal arts graduates apart. And I believe that such a rich sensibility to things that connect us in new ways to nature and to others is cultivated within a person through an education that values curiosity and imagination.

Dr. Fulcomer:

We are living in the Knowledge Age, where AI increasingly automates technical coding and routine calculations. Purely having technical "know-what" is no longer a sustainable competitive advantage. What technology companies and our broader society urgently need are the distinctly human capabilities fostered by the liberal arts (e.g., ethical judgment, imagination, historical context, curiosity, and a deep understanding of human behavior and culture). The liberal arts teach students what Alfred North Whitehead called "the habitual vision of greatness." It would seem to be far easier to teach a liberally educated thinker modern technical tools than to teach a narrowly trained technician how to ask profound, humane, and innovative questions.