

Spring 3-30-2016

MU Dedicated to Retaining Liberal Arts Tradition

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Recommended Citation

Jerome A. Gilbert, "MU dedicated to retaining liberal arts tradition," The Herald-Dispatch, March 30, 2016.

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Jerome A. Gilbert: MU dedicated to retaining liberal arts tradition

Mar 30, 2016

If someone did not know about the marvelous pride of the Thundering Herd, they could easily guess our mascot was the phoenix because of the grit and perseverance that have characterized Marshall University over the past 179 years.

Just look at our namesake John Marshall, who was stymied as chief justice by the executive branch due to political wrangling in the early 1800s but went on to be the greatest and longest-serving chief justice in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Then, of course, there is the plane crash tragedy of 1970 and the incredible spirit of this institution and community in the face of unimaginable disaster.

The early liberal arts college - and later university - that emerged from Marshall Academy in 1837 has a long history of the humanities and liberal arts that persists to today, even though engineering, science, and medicine-focused majors have been added in recent years.

In the interest of full disclosure, let me point out I am a biomedical engineer by training and have no intention of turning Marshall away from these recent additions in the engineering and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields.

Likewise, I am not going to diminish or discount the value and the worth of the liberal arts.

In fact, I firmly believe every major, comprehensive university like Marshall must acknowledge and support the strong liberal arts curriculum that is the foundation of all its academic programs.

Marshall students who major in STEM disciplines, health-related fields, and business, as well as other majors not in the liberal arts, are beneficiaries of taking liberal arts courses that add immeasurably to the breadth of knowledge they take away with their Marshall degrees when they graduate.

Moreover, the liberal arts are - in and of themselves - good for the university and for our students.

You may wonder about the value of a major in the liberal arts and what it does for a student. The simple truth is that the liberal arts foster communication skills, creativity and critical thinking.

I Googled the phrase "companies that hire liberal arts majors" and I would ask that you do so. I particularly call your attention to an article published last summer titled "That 'Useless' Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech's Hottest Ticket." It was written by George Anders for Forbes.

The author argues there is a growing demand for students with degrees in the liberal arts. Anders writes, "software companies are discovering that liberal arts thinking makes them stronger."

This was something I instinctively knew - that diversity adds strength to decision making and problem solving.

Our society needs its liberal arts graduates just as it needs its engineers, physicians and scientists.

Marshall University is a resilient institution that has weathered storms and on occasion risen from the ashes.

We are a comprehensive university with a liberal arts foundation that will not be shaken by the creation of new and needed additions in the STEM and health-related fields.

Our family of majors has branched out to include disciplines that add value to the tradition of Marshall without taking away from our liberal arts heritage.

I believe the legacy of Marshall, which we claim in our fight song and alma mater with references to being sons and daughters of the great John Marshall, is strengthening as we grow in size and stature as a modern, comprehensive university.

Jerome A. "Jerry" Gilbert, Ph.D., is the 37th president of Marshall University. He took office in January 2016.