

**Norton Dodge Acceptance Speech**  
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It is a great honor to accept the Norton Dodge Award for Scholarly and Creative Achievement. I want to thank Robin Bates and Michael Taber for nominating me and the members of the committee for picking me out of a pool of very deserving colleagues.

The value of the liberal arts education is much in the news lately and most of that press coverage is not good. We are told that the liberal arts model is too expensive and burdens students with crushing debt that they cannot repay because there are no jobs for which their liberal arts education has prepared them. We are told that the knowledge cultivated in philosophy and German classes, by theater and history majors, fails to meet the needs of employers who are looking for employable job skills. We are told that the country would be better off investing in professional training, particularly in the sciences and engineering, accounting and nursing. If the value of a liberal arts education in general is being questioned, religious studies in particular seems to have little to offer, and it ranks among the least employable majors. Parents ask me with terror in their eyes, whether their child will ever find a job that makes money with their religious studies major. Chances are, they won't.

I went into religious studies, against the advice of my father who, like any good parent, wanted me to go into medicine because I was interested in evil. I wanted to know why terrible things happen to good people and why good people do terrible things. Religious studies was the field where I could ask these questions and study the answers developed by the world's wisdom traditions over centuries and in very different cultural and political contexts. Sooner or later, when one studies the roots of evil one stumbles across the central role of education. Failure in education is at the heart of individual criminal behavior as well as of ideologically motivated, political crimes.

It may sound like a good idea to save money by investing in professional training and technical skills. But I want to give two examples to show why a reductionist focus on technical and professional skills is dangerous and ultimately very costly. The first example comes from my academic area of expertise: Nazi Germany. Germany had one of the most advanced university systems in the world when Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. But this university education did not encourage critical thinking, did not value cultural diversity, and did not encourage open discussion and independent inquiry. Instead, it emphasized obedience to authority and turned out lawyers who drew up legislation to deprive minorities of citizenship and human rights; architects who designed gas chambers; engineers who built crematories, medical doctors who performed experiments on inmates; and accountants who recorded the wealth of Jewish victims in Auschwitz. The knowledge produced and transmitted in any university can be used for good or ill.

Without a liberal arts education that strengthens moral agency and critical thinking, technical proficiency can be used to commit great harm. When the United States occupied Germany in 1945, it moved immediately to reform the education system. Nazi professors lost their [tenured] jobs, and universities began the slow process of introducing an ethos of critical debate and political reflection into the education of computer scientists and engineers, medical doctors and chemists, lawyers and accountants. We should learn from this history and prevent the return to an exclusive focus on technical expertise and professional training in education on the presumption that political, aesthetic, historical and moral education is a costly luxury. Whatever savings there may be in the short term is sure to cost dearly in the long term.

The case of ISIS jihadists speaks not only to absence of the liberal arts, but to the collapse of religious instruction and knowledge of the religious traditions. The majority of young Europeans and Americans, who have been recruited into the ranks of Al Qaida, ISIS, or Al Shabab hold university degrees in technical fields and the sciences. The leaders of the Islamist revival are computer scientists and architects (e.g., Osama bin Laden), medical doctors (e.g., Ayman al-Zawahiri), and engineers. Sociologists have shown that religious fundamentalism, whether in Christianity or Islam, Judaism or Hinduism, thrives among university graduates who are cultural disaffected and religiously deprived as a result of massive modern political and economic dislocations. Religious fundamentalism thrives in modern societies where traditional infrastructures of religious learning have collapsed and secular universities fail to provide intellectual spaces to ask questions of ultimate meaning and the purpose of life. The secular university leaves students empty-hearted and ready to embrace radical messages and rigorous religious lives. Fundamentalist religious revivals are not a conservative return to old-time-religion but a radical departure from traditional worldviews and religious practice. Fundamentalist religious leaders have little training in the sacred languages (e.g., Sanskrit, Hebrew, Latin or Arabic) or in the history of interpretation and hermeneutics to decode the deeper and hidden meanings of religious symbols, narratives, and laws. Instead, they approach sacred texts literally, as if the Bible or the Qur'an was a physics textbook or a computer manual. The young conscripts of ISIS are willing to sacrifice their own lives and the lives of others following the "voice and will of god" without genuine understanding of theology, Qu'ranic interpretation, or the application of Sharia law. Neglecting education in religion diminishes people's ability to articulate ultimate meaning and leaves people vulnerable to manipulation by religious radicals.

As the bumper sticker says: If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.

The wars we have fought to contain the failures of education have been extremely costly, whether we consider our inner-city wars against drugs and crime, or the international wars against Nazi Germany and global terror networks. While education certainly does not cure all ills, it cultivates civility and enriches civilizations for greater purposes.

As future graduates of this liberal arts college, you are the product of our labors. We know that you will make us proud, just as soon as you figure out how to turn all of those term papers, research projects, class debates, and final presentations into money-making careers. Once you do, we depend on you to raise your voices in defense of the liberal arts. We need you to write letters to your state legislators and op-ed pieces to the newspapers in order to disprove the claim that a liberal arts education is a waste of money. The calculus that reduces education to professional skills and technical training is false and ultimately deprives people of the fullness of civilization that is grounded in the history of religion and the arts, in the humanities and the sciences.