

## Onondaga Community College Statement on the Liberal Arts

To begin, we should be clear on what we mean by “the liberal arts.” The liberal arts are liberal in that they help us understand what it means to live as a free citizen in our community with rights and responsibilities. (The term has no political connotations). They are arts in that they help us cultivate the knowledge and skills necessary to flourish as this free citizen. Onondaga Community College strongly supports the liberal arts, then, in that they empower us to create a more complete sense of ourselves and, by extension, a more complete sense of what it means for us to live and work with other people.

As you encounter the liberal arts on this campus it is important to understand that their end goal involves you, the student. They encourage you to think carefully about what makes for a happy and meaningful life, and what responsibilities you might have toward your fellow human beings. You get to ponder questions like “what is the nature of justice?” and “what is truth?” And you also get to explore how different people in different cultures throughout history have attempted to answer these questions.

The liberal arts have a long history in both western and non-western traditions. In the west, the issue of what a free and flourishing citizen needs to know was a central concern for ancient Greek thinkers around 2,500 years ago. The general idea was that everyone should have a good background in subjects like philosophy, politics, and rhetoric. Over the centuries, this developed into a specific curriculum that students encountered in their education, and seven liberal arts were studied in the medieval European university. These were divided into the Quadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy) and the Trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric). In today’s colleges and universities, you will typically see the following listed under the heading “liberal arts”: the humanities (philosophy, literature, history, languages, and so on); the social sciences (psychology, sociology, political science, and so on); the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.); the creative arts (fine arts, music, etc.)

This western account of the liberal arts does not exclude other cultures and traditions. Similar debates about education and its meaning took place in ancient China and India and in the middle ages under the Abbasid rule in Baghdad, for example. The questions about what it means to live a flourishing life can be asked, and have been asked, by people all across the world. They are human questions and, as such, show up wherever you find humans. In addition, built into the liberal arts is an emphasis on questioning the assumptions that have been made by previous generations – so there is no sense in which you are forced to accept anything that anyone says, or has said, about these big questions. You are expected to carefully think things through for yourself, taking into account the social, cultural, and intellectual norms that typically surround these questions. These questions can certainly be challenging, but the conversations they generate can be a whole lot of fun as well!

Any encounter with the liberal arts will include what have been called “enduring,” “core,” or “transformative” texts. These texts will always originate in some specific culture or other: ancient Greece, ancient India, middle east, medieval Africa, early modern Europe, contemporary USA, or wherever. However, the issues addressed are not tethered to any specific time and place – in some sense they transcend the time and place in which they were written. These texts raise enduring questions that we all ask ourselves. The liberal arts, then, provide a common framework for students of different backgrounds to talk about and tackle their concerns in intellectually and personally transformative ways.