The Value of a Liberal Arts Education
By Patricia Doherty Yoder
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I would like to begin by offering my congratulations to each one of you being inducted into Lambda Pi Eta and to those receiving awards today. As a Duquesne alumna, I know that succeeding at one of the nation’s top ten Catholic universities is a highly competitive challenge.

One of my American Lit courses specified Tom Wolfe’s novel You Can’t Go Home Again as required reading. I must admit that title always puzzled me because I thought of home as a place where I’d always be welcome. I believe it’s not that you can’t go home again, it’s the converse—you can take home with you. I like to think that’s what I’ve done in the years since I’ve left this campus—I relied on what I learned both in and out of the classroom at Duquesne. The lessons have served me well and looking back on it, I can see how much of what I discovered here prepared me for a rapidly changing, competitive world.

This reminds me of a story in a recent book by my English Comp and Lit Crit Professor, Dr. Samuel Hazo: A debate is being held between a businessman and an English teacher. The businessman claims that a college should “train” its students for a life in business, should “mold” them so that, as “products” of the university, they can immediately become part of the workforce. The English teacher tried doggedly to prove that a liberal education should train and mold no one but rather should educate everyone for nothing less than freedom. The businessman exasperated, retorts, “What good is a liberal arts education anyway? All it teaches you to do is think…”

You can comfort yourself with this knowledge—as Duquesne liberal arts students, you will go out into the world armed with the best educational background possible.

I’m aware that the value of a liberal arts degree has been and is now fiercely debated. Students today are told to focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) but a recent story in the Washington Post reported that theory is being questioned. They pointed out that Google founded their company on the conviction that only technologists can understand technology. In fact, it originally set its hiring algorithms to sort for computer science students with top grades from elite science universities.

Fifteen years later, the story continued, they launched Project Oxygen to test their hypothesis. They were shocked to find the study showed that among the eight most important qualities of Google’s top employees, STEM expertise comes in dead last.

According to the article, they found that the seven top characteristics of success are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others’ different values and point of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one’s colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas—in other words, traits one gains as a Liberal Arts major rather than as a
programmer. Consequently, Google enlarged their hiring practices to include those who previously had been looked at with disdain.

Take a look around you. Things are changing faster than ever before. Not just technology. Every aspect of our lives is in constant flux. It used to be that you graduated from college, got a job and stayed with it all of your life.

Now, a Yale University study has told us that the average lifespan of a company listed in the S&P 500 has significantly decreased: In the 1920’s it was 67 years; today it is 15 years. Nothing is forever anymore. At GE Capital, our motto was, “Change is our only constant!”

And that’s why you are the luckiest people in the world. As liberal arts students, you will be well-prepared to take on any challenge. It used to be that people were regarded for what they knew; now the key is also what they can learn. While STEM skills are vital to the world we live in today, Steve Jobs famously insisted, technology alone is not enough. As studies have shown, we need the expertise of those who are educated to the human cultural and social as well as the computational.

On a recent NPR broadcast of “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me,” Governor Kasich of Ohio stated that he believes STEM instead should be STEAM—science, technology, engineering, arts, and math. A hopeful sign.

Over the course of your studies, you’ve developed the discipline, intellectual curiosity and skills to keep expanding your breadth of knowledge. All of those required courses you take in addition to your major and minor curricula are a valuable investment. As the world continues to change at an ever-accelerating pace, that broad base of knowledge will be one of your major assets as you pursue the future and success.

Now, let me tell you about my situation. I graduated from Duquesne with an English degree. It was a time when there were not a lot of options available for women other than nursing, teaching, and secretarial.

Even though I was armed with my BA degree, my first job out of school was in the mailroom at U.S. Steel Corporation, a behemoth in Pittsburgh at the time. Men who graduated with me entered the management trainee program. When I asked about advancement, I was told that if I learned typing and shorthand, I could be moved into the secretarial pool within three months.

So, I left U.S. Steel and went to Washington, DC, where there was more equal opportunity and landed a job on Capitol Hill. After stints as a case worker, press secretary and legislative aide, I parlayed the Hill experience into different positions. My increasing success was based on moving from job to job as new opportunities arose. Each time I changed positions, it involved a step up the ladder, more learning, and more responsibility.

It’s true that I was in public relations, but my experience includes service in both federal and local government, the arts, trade associations, telecommunications, and financial services. At one time, I ran the Pittsburgh office of a world-wide public affairs/public relations agency, whose
clients included some 30 different companies ranging from aluminum to chemicals to health care.

In your liberal arts courses, you study many things, including languages, sciences, arts and literature. This broad brush will give you the ability to be flexible by demystifying the unknown as you’ve developed the confidence to learn. It’s the same in life. You’ll be able to move from entertainment to publishing to manufacturing to health care no matter what the risks because now that your intellectual curiosity has been aroused, you’ll be in constant pursuit of learning.

When I went to Duquesne, it was an urban school. Half the buildings, including this one, weren’t here. A number of classes were held in the basements of nearby office buildings. Families lived on the blocks surrounding the university and this is where I was raised. Students at Duquesne called us “Bluff rats.” I was born right over there at Mercy Hospital. My family lived on the Bluff—my home was where the football field is now. I went to Church over there (Epiphany) and when I graduated, I went to work a couple of blocks away at U.S. Steel. Had I not chosen to take risks, I could have spent my entire life within a four block area. Think of that!

Although rare in my era, several times I left secure executive positions (even as the single parent of two daughters and a black lab) to pursue new career opportunities in another field and another city, usually in an industry in which I had no experience. Each time, it presented a challenge and the continuing opportunity to learn and to move up the executive ladder. Without my foundation in the liberal arts, I wouldn’t have had the flexibility or courage to take the risk of “flying without a net” to pursue new career advancements.

Every generation is fraught with risk. In mine, there were few opportunities for women. But I just assumed I was equal and moved on confidently to seek career openings.

It’s as important for you as it was for me to take charge of your own career because only you will determine how far you will go. It would be very difficult for a company to train for the jobs they’ll have in a few years because those jobs might not even exist yet. So, don’t rely on others; the drive has to come from within. And you have that drive—it got you here today.

Also, along the way it has to be fun. If you wake up in the morning and dread going into work, then it’s time to look elsewhere. At the same time, if you realize that you’re no longer learning and growing, it’s time to move on. To be fulfilled, you always have to grow and use all of the talents the Lord gave you, as we learned at Duquesne.

Having a liberal arts background has been important to me because it has taught me to think broadly. When you think broadly, risks are not as threatening. Going from industry to industry—government to industry—junior staffer to senior executive, I always knew that I could learn what I needed to grow. You focus on success rather than failure. I know my success would not have been possible without my Duquesne education and the desire to learn that I developed here.

One of the University’s announcements states, “Duquesne provides an education for the heart, mind and soul.” In the years ahead, you’ll find that enrichment as the basis for your ultimate happiness.
Coming back here today and being recognized for the Anthony L. Bucci Excellence in Communication Ethics Award has brought me full circle. I’m back to where I first dreamed of a career and learned what it takes to succeed in life. My thanks for making it possible to come home again.

Patricia Doherty Yoder is a 1961 alumna of Duquesne University and has held many executive management positions in Fortune 100 and Fortune 50 Corporations, including Avis, General Electric Capital (GE Capital), and PNC Financial. Yoder has been elected “Outstanding Woman in Business and Industry” in Pittsburgh and awarded with the Distinguished Alumni Award, Duquesne University McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts (1996) and the McAnulty Award for Extraordinary Service to Duquesne University. She has been featured in Who’s Who in America, Who's Who in Women, and Who's Who in Finance. In 2018, she received the Anthony L. Bucci Excellence in Communication Ethics Award from the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University.