

Embracing Diverse Perspectives in Liberal Arts Education

With Dr. Laura DeSisto

[Johns Hopkins University](#)

A liberal arts degree can provide valuable career success and personal growth skills and encourage critical thinking and open-mindedness.

What if there's a place where learning isn't confined within the walls of a single discipline? Johns Hopkins University stands out for its innovative approach to liberal arts education.

At the heart of this approach lies an interdisciplinary program that not only values the historical and epistemological foundations of liberal arts but also actively integrates cutting-edge tools for intellectual exploration. In our Digication Scholars Conversations podcast with Dr. Laura DeSisto, a passionate Program Director for the Master of Liberal Arts program at Johns Hopkins University, we delved into the rich background of liberal arts education, philosophy, and the profound impact of integrating ePortfolios into the learning experience. Laura's insights shed light on the dynamic intersection of technology, philosophy, and the ever-evolving field of education.

Incorporating reflective prompts allows students to engage with their learning experiences deeply. Philosophy in education encourages students to question, reflect, and articulate their thoughts, contributing to developing their critical thinking skills.

ePortfolios Provide Students With a Unique Opportunity for Self-Expression and Synthesis of Knowledge

A distinctive feature of this educational paradigm is the utilization of digital portfolios, providing students with a powerful platform for self-expression and knowledge synthesis. Facilitated through the Digication platform, these portfolios serve as dynamic spaces where students showcase their academic journey. Laura's insights reveal the transformative potential of ePortfolios in fostering narrative unity, reflective engagement, and the synthesis of personal and academic growth.

The Uniqueness of the Master of Liberal Arts Program

Johns Hopkins University takes pride in hosting the first Master of Liberal Arts (MLA) program in the United States, setting a precedent for innovative graduate education. This trailblazing program is a testament to the institution's commitment to pushing the boundaries of conventional education and providing students with a transformative academic experience.

At the core of the MLA program is a deliberate emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, a distinctive feature that sets it apart. Courses within the program are designed to foster interdisciplinary connections and focus on specific topics, ensuring a nuanced exploration of subjects that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. This intentional approach encourages students to engage deeply

with multifaceted perspectives, contributing to a holistic understanding of the liberal arts.

The program's uniqueness extends to its commitment to appreciating complexity within each discipline. Rather than viewing subjects in isolation, students are encouraged to understand the interconnectedness of various disciplines. This approach cultivates a capacity to navigate the intricate web of knowledge, promoting intellectual agility and adaptability.

An intriguing facet of the MLA program is its recognition of the role of storytelling in education. Acknowledging students' diverse backgrounds and perspectives, the program values the narrative as a means to connect with, understand, and appreciate the multifaceted stories within each discipline. The emphasis on story serves as a bridge, fostering connections between students and their academic journey, as well as with the diverse perspectives embedded in the liberal arts.

"History is a field that is constantly in the process of being made."

Dr. Laura DeSisto

Program Director, Master of Liberal Arts, Johns Hopkins University

Skills for the Professional Arena: A Harvest from Liberal Arts Programs

The Master of Liberal Arts (MLA) program at Johns Hopkins University equips students with profound knowledge and hones a spectrum of skills vital for success in professional environments. Beyond subject-specific expertise, liberal arts programs cultivate critical thinking, effective communication, and analytical prowess \u2014 skills that resonate deeply in today's dynamic and complex job market.

The interdisciplinary approach embedded in the MLA program transcends academic boundaries and extends its influence into the professional realm. Graduates emerge with a unique ability to navigate diverse perspectives, fostering flexibility and adaptability. This feature proves invaluable in careers that demand innovative thinking and the ability to connect disparate ideas.

A distinctive privilege of a liberal arts education is intentionally providing time and space for reflection. The MLA program emphasizes the significance of critical turning points and the lessons learned throughout one's academic journey. This reflective practice enhances the depth of understanding and fosters personal growth, allowing students to articulate the evolution of their thoughts and perspectives over time.

The journey through a liberal arts program is more than an academic expedition \u2014 it is a profound process of self-discovery. Within the MLA program, students experience the privilege of being heard, seen, and recognized by themselves. Dr. Laura DeSisto, an advocate for this transformative aspect, emphasizes recognizing one's unique voice and power in shaping a meaningful academic narrative.

Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration and Analyzing Different Viewpoints

The Master of Liberal Arts (MLA) program at Johns Hopkins University pioneers an innovative approach by emphasizing cross-disciplinary collaboration and the integration of multiple methods of inquiry. This intentional design goes beyond the conventional boundaries of academic disciplines, fostering an environment where students engage with various perspectives and methodologies. The impact is transformative, enriching their ability to synthesize knowledge from diverse sources.

Success often hinges on navigating complexity and understanding diverse perspectives in today's professional landscape. The MLA program underscores the importance of analyzing different viewpoints, providing students with the skills to thrive in workplaces that demand nuanced understanding and collaboration. By fostering an appreciation for diverse perspectives, the program equips graduates with a competitive edge in professions that value a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

ePortfolios, a hallmark feature of the MLA program, are pivotal in encouraging students to identify critical moments in their academic journey. As repositories of reflective responses, they serve as tools for students to articulate their experiences, chart personal growth, and recognize the transformative impact of their education. This emphasis on reflection enhances the depth of understanding and empowers students to analyze the significance of their unique academic trajectory.

The nature of self-expression and synthesis within the MLA program defies linearity and specialization. Embracing the non-linear path, students explore the intersections of disciplines, cultivating a versatile approach to knowledge acquisition and application. By encouraging a non-specialized narrative, the program fosters a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness of diverse fields, preparing students for the intricacies of an ever-evolving professional landscape.

Crafting Professional Pathways and Lifelong Learning

Within the Master of Liberal Arts (MLA) program at Johns Hopkins University, ePortfolios are potent catalysts for students to synthesize their learning and articulate profound reflections. These curated collections encapsulate the essence of each student's academic journey, providing tangible evidence of intellectual growth, critical insights, and transformative experiences. As dynamic tools, ePortfolios empower students to navigate their professional pathways with a nuanced understanding of their evolving capabilities.

Liberal arts education, exemplified by the MLA program, is not confined to the academic realm but extends its influence into individual professional pathways. The program operationalizes the core values of liberal arts by fostering adaptability, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Graduates emerge equipped to navigate diverse professional landscapes, enriching their respective fields with the unique blend of insights from a multidisciplinary education.

The MLA program promotes a culture of continuous dialogue, emphasizing the importance of expression, self-expression, and the art of reaching across disciplinary boundaries. Through this ongoing discourse, students cultivate a refined ability to articulate ideas, engage in meaningful conversations, and bridge perspectives. The dynamic exchange of thoughts and experiences further enhances the program's interdisciplinary nature, fostering an environment where diverse voices are heard and celebrated.

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