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A historical and global perspective on liberal arts education: what was, what is,
and what will be

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Historically, liberal education has seen many incarnations and foci over time. The medieval European universities divided knowledge into the trivium and quadrivium and thought that educated people should know about these disciplines—although the universities themselves had a vocational orientation. The American colleges and universities, from their beginnings in the 17th century, had a commitment to different versions of liberal education. The concepts of liberal education have evolved over time and have adjusted to new roles and ideas about higher education.

The 21st century has seen a resurgence of interest in liberal education for many different reasons in a variety of countries—and some diminishing of the influence of liberal education in the United States as segments of the higher education system has become more vocationally focused. This global interest is far from any “revolution” but rather is a limited but nonetheless important change. Motivations include a recognition that the highly specialized curriculum offered in much of the world is too limiting and narrow to serve the knowledge economy and rapidly changing conditions of the 21st century as well as a

commitment to instilling critical and independent thinking and writing skills in undergraduate students.

This paper will chart some of the important historical changes in thinking about liberal education globally and will summarize key trends observed in early part of the 21st century.