Education for the 21st Century Deserves Support
In *City*, the community issues magazine of the Kentucky League of Cities, Summer 2005

By Dr. John Roush, President, Centre College

A striking image cited in an essay in a recent New York Review of Books brings home just how rare a liberal arts education has become. “The nation’s liberal arts college students would almost certainly fit easily inside a Big Ten football stadium: fewer than 100,000 students out of more than 14 million.” Appropriately enough, perhaps, the title of the essay is “Colleges: An Endangered Species?”

Just how endangered? According to the essay’s author, Andrew Delbanco, Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, “only one-sixth of all college students fit the traditional profile of full-time residential students between the ages of 18 and 22.”

While traditional liberal arts education is neither quite as expensive nor as unaffordable (two different things, when one considers the myriad aid options) as many think, it’s an all too common view that education at a place like, say, Centre College, is a luxury from another era. What good is such an expensive, time-consuming thing in the what-have-you-done-for-me-lately world of the early 21st century?

One of the best answers to this question can be found in Paul Courant’s “The Value of Liberal Education,” an essay first published in the Swarthmore College Bulletin. Courant, the provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at the University of Michigan, identifies several “good reasons for liberal learning.”

Three of them—that liberal learning is a) challenging work, b) practical, and c) the best way to construct interesting and fulfilling lives—are relatively straightforward. The fourth is that we don’t now know the problems we’ll have to face in the future. As Courant writes, “If you don’t know what the next problem is going to be, but you do know that it will be important, at least the following two capacities will be valuable: First is the capacity to make sense of the unfamiliar—a capacity that is at the heart of liberal learning. Second is the social capacity that derives from there being someone out there [i.e. the broadly trained liberal arts graduates] who knows at least High concept involves the ability to create artistic and emotional beauty, to detect patterns and opportunities, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to come up with inventions the world didn’t know it was missing. Still, the larger point remains. A liberal arts education takes a great deal of time, energy and money. To the question: Can my child afford it? I would reply with a question of my own: Can my child afford to be without it?”

Another essay, this one from Wired magazine, further illustrates what kinds of education will be valuable in the coming years and what kinds will not. In “Revenge of the Right Brain,” Daniel H. Pink, author of the bestseller Free Agent Nation, declares that we are in the midst of a seismic shift. “The Information Age we all prepared for is ending. Rising in its place is what I call the Conceptual Age, an era in which mastery of abilities that
we’ve often overlooked and undervalued marks the fault line between who gets ahead and who falls behind.”

The skill set for the Information Age tends to rely on left-brain aptitudes. It’s all about being linear and analytic. But because of what Pink boils down to three factors—Asia, automation and abundance—that type of learning is rapidly losing its value. “Any job that can be reduced to a set of rules is at risk. If a $500-a-month accountant in India doesn’t swipe your accounting job, TurboTax will. Now that computers can emulate left-hemisphere skills, we’ll have to rely ever more on our right hemispheres.”

And what types of thought processes are controlled by the right brain? Says Pink: “To flourish in this age, we’ll need to supplement our well-developed high tech abilities with aptitudes that are ‘high concept’ and ‘high touch.’

“High concept involves the ability to create artistic and emotional beauty, to detect patterns and opportunities, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to come up with inventions the world didn’t know it was missing. High touch involves the capacity to empathize, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one’s self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning.”

Is it just me, or do these aptitudes sound a lot like those nurtured by that old-fashioned liberal learning? I would suggest there is an aspect of the more things change, the more they remain the same to all this. Let’s back up about a century and take a look at former Bowdoin president William DeWitt Hyde’s “Offer of the College,” written in 1906: To be at home in all lands and all ages; To count Nature a familiar acquaintance, and Art an intimate friend; To gain a standard for the appreciation of others’ work And the criticism of your own; To carry the keys of the world’s library in your pocket, And feel its resources behind you in whatever task you undertake; To make hosts of friends . . . Who are to be leaders in all walks of life; To lose yourself in generous enthusiasms And cooperate with others for common ends This is the offer of the college for the best four years of your life.

A liberal arts education is worthy of support, indeed. And for young men and women looking to have meaningful, rewarding lives and extraordinary careers in an age of dwindling resources, it might be more a necessity than a luxury.

We are lucky here at Centre College. More accurately, we have done a great deal to create our own luck. We have the most loyal alumni in the country; we currently have a record number of deposits in hand for the incoming freshman class; and, having been cited year after year as one of America’s top 50 colleges and best college bargains, we’re certainly among the most affordable top-tier colleges in the country. We take nothing for granted, but we’re currently in great shape. Still, the larger point remains. A liberal arts education takes a great deal of time, energy and money. To the question: Can my child afford it? I would reply with a question of my own: As the 21st century unfolds, can my child afford to be without it?