

# Living Well at Embry-Riddle – and After

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I called a curator at a fine arts museum in Maryland a few weeks ago to ask for information about a painting I wanted to show in my art history class. “Oh, you teach those young pilots about art? How wonderful!” the curator exclaimed when I mentioned where I was calling from.

The name Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University tends to have this effect on people – the word “aeronautical” overshadowing the one that follows it: “university.” Yes, all of us who have had these conversations patiently explain, it’s a real university. Our students who study to become pilots – as well as those studying engineering, business, communications, and other programs – do so as part of the universal education the word “university” in our name denotes. Like students at any other university, Embry-Riddle’s undergraduates study the humanities – history, literature, philosophy, geography, and so on – as well as subjects aeronautical.

The curriculum that directs Embry-Riddle students into these kinds of courses represents the spirit of universal education that defines a university. The requirement that students take a broad spectrum of courses outside of their majors is the result of the shared belief, handed down to us since the first universities were created over seven centuries ago, that becoming an educated person is not the same thing as learning a trade. It is a matter of learning about the world, its physical and cultural systems and histories, and of developing a sense of one’s place in it. Giving students a broad education grounded in the physical sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities is what universities do. It’s what they are.

And, despite the absence of a curriculum in foreign languages and literatures at Embry-Riddle, it is what the university is shaping itself to be. Without a doubt, we are turning out highly skilled, well-trained engineers, pilots, air traffic controllers and business people. But in realizing our ideal of educating them as well, we are always faced with certain necessary questions. Are we giving our students the thing it will be difficult to come by in the real world when they’re concentrating on spacecraft design, military operations, or airline safety – the opportunity to develop a broad perspective, to establish a frame of reference for a way of being in the world? Do Embry-Riddle graduates leave with a richer sense of what it means to live well than they had when they came in?

This question matters because the consideration of living well is what moves our lives beyond mere existence

and connects us to the larger sphere of life in the world.

We all exist in relation to other people, to animals and the natural environment, to institutions and history and, because we have consciousness, to ourselves as well. We spend our lives finding our way among these relations, giving shape not only to our own being but shaping the world around us as we do. The word “ethics” derives from the Greek term *ethos*, which means path or way, as well as mode of conduct in relation to others. Our way of being in the world is an *ethos*, the accumulating series of all of the actions and choices that make up the business of living in the real world.

Because our way of being in the world is created as we go along, reaching ahead of us only as far as our next step, finding it is difficult. Figuring out where to make the next step requires perspective and a frame of reference, consultation with an internal GPS, and accounts of the terrain or something like it. Finding a way of being that might become ethical requires a reasoning and open mind, and faith (the basis of reason) in both oneself and the world.

The idea of the university – as opposed to schools for technical or specialized professional training – has essentially always been the cultivation of minds broadened and deepened by studies in the workings of nature and culture. It is not that the university finds the idea of preparing students for a career anathema, but rather that the development of a multifaceted frame of reference through a wide-ranging, exploratory education prepares human beings, able to draw on diverse stores of knowledge and apply their lessons to new and unanticipated problems, on the job and off. A universal education prepares students for the difficult project of figuring out what it means to live well.

This is why the humanities have traditionally been considered the core of a university education. In literature and the visual arts, one encounters the world as others have imagined it, not only living in those imaginary worlds by way of experiment, as Aristotle maintained, but also learning the difference between artifice and truth, a distinction that is becoming harder to locate while the stakes are getting higher. In philosophy we learn to reason and think with clarity and discipline.

A broad and diverse education teaches one thing above all: to ask questions. ➔

*The views expressed in “Perspectives” are those of the writer and not necessarily Embry-Riddle’s. Let us know what you think.*



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