An Incompatible Method:  
The Western Liberal Arts Educational Model in Kuwait and the Arab Gulf Region

Christopher Ohan

Associate Professor of History  
American University of Kuwait  
Email: cohan@auk.edu.kw

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Abstract: Drawing on oral histories from the region as well as literature on the subject, this paper begins with an examination of the historical development of the characteristics of liberal arts in Europe and then goes on to argue that those essential characteristics are largely incompatible with the social and cultural traditions of the Arabian Gulf region largely because they are imposed from without rather than from within. While there are similarities in the historical experiences of the west and the Gulf, the necessary conditions for implementing a liberal arts-type of education in the region have yet to be realized.

Keywords: Kuwait, Arabian Gulf, Liberal Arts, Education

The citizen population of Kuwait reached 1.5 million at the end of 2012 (KUNA, 2012). It is estimated that fully 60 percent of these citizens are under the age of 24, placing a large and growing burden on the state’s one public and a handful of small private universities. Given this dramatic growth and the pressures placed upon the limited resources of a small geographic location, the need for highly educated Kuwaitis to assume strategic leadership and planning roles in the near future will become more acute.

With the rise of American-styled universities in the Gulf, one must consider whether a traditional or western liberal arts education can provide the educational needs of the region. This paper will consider the unique development of liberal arts in Europe and then examine several perspectives regarding the role of a traditional liberal arts education in Kuwait and the Gulf region. Many of the problems associated with the liberal arts method today in Kuwait stem from what Brian Whitaker terms the Arab “freedom deficit” or an atmosphere where “change, innovation, creativity, critical thinking, questioning, problem-solving, and virtually any kind of nonconformity are all discouraged if not necessarily punished” (2009, 12). This problem will be further addressed below. In light of both the needs and the social and cultural circumstances of the area, the traditional western liberal arts model of higher education is untenable in the Arabian Gulf states. Rather, only a modified and culturally-sensitive model of tolerance can ultimately fulfill the larger needs of the Gulf region.

1. An approach born out of experience: liberal arts in the west

The liberal arts as a model for education was born in twelfth-century Europe. Abandoning the concept of learning by rote, Peter Abelard (1079-1142) suggests that “questioning excites young readers to the maximum of effort in inquiring into the truth, and such inquiry sharpens their minds.” He goes on to cite Aristotle, who said “To entertain doubts on particular points will not be unprofitable” and adds “For by doubting we come to inquiry; through inquiring we perceive the truth…. (Tierney, 1976, 398). This method of questioning was preferred by Abelard, but controversial. In his Dialectia he goes on to propose that “All knowledge is good, even that which relates to evil…. though it be evil to sin, it is good to know the sin, which otherwise we could not shun” (Tierney, 402). Adelard of Bath (c. 1080-c. 1182) had studied in Paris and traveled extensively in Muslim lands. Indicating that he had learned from Arabic teachers to be guided by reason, he proposes “that first we ought to seek the reason for anything…. Authority alone cannot make a philosopher believe anything, nor should it be adduced for this purpose” (Perry, 2006, 233). In his Metalogicon, John of Salisbury (c. 1115-1180) defends the liberal arts curriculum which was under attack from conservative theologians. He writes that these arts are called “liberal” because “their object is to effect man's liberation, so that, freed from cares, he may devote himself to wisdom.” For medieval students, the liberal arts would have generally come under the headings of law or theology. Today, the recognized liberal arts disciplines can include the physical sciences, economics, English, history, liberal
were looked down on “because they seem to spoil the body and unnerve the mind.”

Once the purview of priests alone, the Humanists’ critical interpretation of Christianity signaled a fundamental shift in the strength and potential of liberal arts education. Individuals such as Thomas More (1478-1535) and Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) took the intellectual lead in the early sixteenth century. They critically evaluated every aspect—both secular and sacred—of their society. It was their contemporary, Martin Luther (1483-1546), who, taking full advantage of the advent of the printing press in Europe, began an outright denunciation of the Catholic Church. In 1521 Luther issued the words that illustrate what can be considered the product of the liberal arts reliance upon critical thought. When asked to recant, or face certain condemnation he replied, “Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience” (Luther, 1929, 838). This dogged reliance on critical reasoning supported by evidence has been the chief hallmark of European liberal arts education from the time of the Protestant Reformation.

It is only by examining, however briefly, the historical context of the European liberal arts tradition that today’s AAUP statement “On Freedom of Expression and Campus Speech Codes” is understood. Often cited as an ideological foundation to the western liberal arts university, it begins “Freedom of thought and expression is essential to any institution of higher learning.” The statement continues by stating,

In broad terms, the liberal arts method of higher education encourages free inquiry into any subject or topic with the primary objective being both comprehension and critique. Essentially, it is a mental exercise that equips the learner with the skills to function in any vocation. A good general definition of liberal arts comes from Julie Reuben who writes that [the purpose of the liberal arts] college was partly defined in contradistinction to other forms of education; a [liberal arts] college education was supposed to be broad rather than specific, “liberal” rather than professional, relevant but not “narrowly vocational.” (Reuben, 1996, 230)

In a discussion such as this there is the hazard of implying that there is a dichotomy between liberal and other forms of education, such as vocational education (Carr, 2009). While fundamental philosophical differences exist, the perceived gulf is greatest outside the academy, which will be demonstrated below. The difference is usually not qualitative but philosophical and methodological. A liberal arts institution seeks to instill a broad knowledge-based experience while the vocation seeks to create a practitioner of a specific vocation. Additionally, it is necessary to point out the difference in criticism and critique or critical thinking. Whereas the former often comes from a perspective lacking tolerance and seeking offense, the latter has as its goal understanding within a framework of tolerance.

While the goals of tolerance and free inquiry inform the diversity of perspectives in European and American liberal arts institutions, it remains to be seen whether such a model is exportable to areas that have no such historical tradition.

2. Advocating liberal arts in the Gulf

From the western perspective, traditional liberal arts education, if implemented, could help improve and develop new economic, social and political strategies for states in the Gulf region. Yusur al-Madani, Associate Dean at Kuwait University believes that applying this model of education will promote productivity and enhance critical thinking among younger Kuwaitis. Al-Madani suggests that the only way to make the educational system competitive in Kuwait is by directly implementing the liberal arts model. This, she contends, can help Kuwait students become better critical thinkers and stronger leaders. Comparing Kuwait’s educational development before and after the 1990 Iraqi invasion, she argues that during the 1970s and 1980s Kuwait was more liberal. In addition, Mohammed Ghanem al-Rumeihi, a professor of Sociology at Kuwait University, asserts that unlike other Arab states in the 1960s and 1970s, Kuwait was a liberal country with liberal institutions (Abu-Zahra, 1983). Both al-Madani and al-Rumeihi believe that Kuwait in the 1970s prospered as a result of this liberal transition. Because liberalism was more common in the seventies, young Kuwaitis were able to challenge laws such as gender segregation. Al-Madani remembers,

[W]e even went in a mob to Khaldiya, boys and girls, asking the government to stop the segregation between the

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1 In classical Greece literature the mechanical or illiberal arts typically included science, mathematics, painting, sculpture, architecture, agriculture and craftsmanship in general. The fifth-century Athenian philosopher Xenophon considered the illiberal arts degrading and praised states where they were deemed illegal. See Xenophon, Oikonomikos, 6.5, c. 370 BCE.
with vocational skills. Al Suaidan believes that a larger degree of self-dependency is required for development, and that

development for the State of Kuwait, Saber al-Suaidan suggests that in order for Kuwait to develop, it needs graduates

who seem too quick to discount the immediate needs of local society. Member of the Higher Council for Planning and

Development and a long-time advocate of liberal arts education, Al-Suaidan challenges the prevailing view that

deeply-seated historic values. While globalization is remaking much of the world, advocates of the liberal arts model

argue that in the current age of specialization, the liberal arts model is no longer relevant. A study by Linh Fehalu, an educational theorist and strong advocate of liberal arts education, argues that the majority of modern theorists believe that at present, liberal arts education has no place in the Kuwaiti curriculum. According to

Fehalu, "If a course does not prepare the individual directly for his specialized work, the educationists argue, it has no

place in curriculum. Ours is an age of specialization, in which there is little time for general cultural studies" (Fehalu,

1940). Some have pushed for a one-sided vocational education—claiming that the Liberal Arts model will not prepare

undergraduates or graduates for their future professions. This argument, while pragmatic in a limited sense, neglects the

broader benefits of the liberal arts. Scholars at Kuwaiti institutions seemingly agree. In his article "The Role of a Liberal

Arts in Business," American University of Kuwait (AUk) professor, Jeremy Cripps argues that a diverse range of

individuals from the Renaissance to the modern period all enjoyed the benefits of liberal arts. They "made their business

activity a success because their business activity was based on the knowledge they acquired from their study of the

liberal arts" (Cripps, 2007). Nizar Hamzeh, Dean of AUK's College of Arts and Sciences, adds that the liberal arts model

is more than just critical thinking. Hamzeh defines it as "a way of life that values open minds, freedom, tolerance, and

celebrates the rich diversity of the world cultures" (Hamzeh, 2006; Whitaker, 2009, 26). Other studies have shown how

the liberal model is equally as important for undergraduate students enrolled in Business Administration programs.

According to scholars in this field, liberal arts is needed to teach students the ethical values in employment and

managerial skills (Al-Salam, 2007). Considering the booming business climate in Kuwait and the government's

encouragement of private-sector businesses, liberal arts education can, indeed, play an important role.

Another important consideration is that the western model for liberal arts education advocates equality, allowing

women to play an important role in Kuwaiti politics and society. Prior to the 1950s, women were effectively cut off from

society. Haya al-Mughni argues that women in the pre-oil period—until the sixties—were socially controlled and

devalued. When looking at the positive impact that Liberal ideas had in Kuwait during the sixties and seventies, many

men and women began to question gender inequality. Al-Mughni argues that during the sixties, many Kuwaitis (both men

and women) were educated and influenced by ideas of Western liberalism and the writings of influential Arab nationalists

such as Qasim Amin and Taha Hussein. Young educated Kuwaitis were calling for the Al-Nahda (awakening) and

examples of women in political life, such as women participating in political rallies, being able to hold ministerial positions, or voting and nominating, and standing for parliament are just some of the practices that are now protected under the Kuwaiti constitution and can be attributed to the generation of Kuwaitis educated in the 1960s and 1970s who took advantage of liberal arts education—opportunities abroad.2 Liberal arts could also have a positive impact on the masses—especially in matters concerning freedom of the press, and freedom of speech. An educated and critically-minded electorate could, no doubt, provide a democratic foundation for Kuwait's future development and integration into the global community.

While there are advocates of the liberal arts in Kuwait, most of these supporters tend to come from either the

generation sent abroad for education shortly after Kuwaiti Independence in 1961 and before Kuwait had its own

infrastructure for higher education, or from expatriates.

3. Vocational versus liberal arts education

In a vacuum, the benefits of the liberal arts model are undeniable and uncontroversial. As a western-trained academic,
al-Madani's position of liberal arts might be valid in the west, but it neglects not only the needs of Kuwaiti society, but also

deeply-seated historic values. While globalization is remaking much of the world, advocates of the liberal arts model

seem too quick to discount the immediate needs of local society. Member of the Higher Council for Planning and

Development for the State of Kuwait, Saber al-Suaidan suggests that in order for Kuwait to develop, it needs graduates

with vocational skills. Al Suaidan believes that a larger degree of self-dependency is required for development, and that

2 Kuwait University was founded in 1966, originally with two schools, arts and sciences. Before, 1966 most Kuwaitis seeking higher

education went to liberal arts institutions in Europe and the United States.
this self dependency can be attained by having more students focus on vocational types of education and relieve the state’s heavy dependency on foreign expertise. The traditional western liberal arts approach, he pragmatically suggests, is not appropriate for Kuwait and this stage in its development.

[In Kuwait] you will find so many people studying Shari’ah, literature and history and once they graduate they can’t get a job. I have two daughters that just graduated, they are both mechanical engineers. There’s a high demand for mechanical engineers [in Kuwait].... They got their jobs because there is a market demand for this kind of education in the state.... What the state needs are technicians to ... fix oil refineries. Go to the refineries and see who’s working there. They are all expatriates. (Al-Suaidan, 2007).

He believes that a dependence on foreign workers will not result in the development of Kuwait because expatriate workers do not have a vested interest in seeing Kuwait flourish. Al Suaidan’s argument can be termed the “nationalistic position.”

As is clear above, liberal arts education generally is non-vocational education. With liberal arts education the graduate would not necessarily gain an employable skill. A philosophy graduate, for example, unless he attends graduate school which might qualify him as a teacher, would very likely be hired by no one as a “philosopher.” Al-Suaidan does not use the term liberal arts to critique various subjects. However an evident connection between liberal arts and the subjects of which he was critical was apparent. He clearly wants to limit non-vocational graduates while championing technicians and engineers for their ability to “fix.” The narrator said

Let’s put 20 percent [of undergraduate focus] on history, literature and Shari’ah, and 80 percent for the sciences. That’s the only way [Kuwait] can develop. Otherwise, we will still have expatriates fix your PC and laptop. (Al-Suaidan, 2007)

Al Suaidan’s concern for students pouring into the Arts and Humanities departments does have some academic backing. An article in Social, Economic & Political Studies of the Middle East argues that when it comes to education, the Gulf area suffers from “duplication and under-utilization” because of the increasing number of high school graduates demanding places in university (Garrett, 1987). Duplication and under-utilization are a result of the increasing number of students who, having finished their secondary education demanded places in university. The governments... yielded to the pressure by expanding university education, particularly the less costly facilities of arts and humanities, out of all proportion with the employment opportunities for university graduates [in vocational programs]. (Amin, 1974)

So while the arts and humanities are being expanded in the Gulf area for their favorable maintenance cost, the already existing technical institutions remain “empty and hard pressed for recruits” (Garrett). However the problem with this position is that it no longer applies. By examining two popular colleges at Kuwait University (KU), one which has a vocational output and one which does not; the notion of vocational education being overwhelmed by non-vocational is seemingly obsolete. Recently a new problem has arisen.

Table 1: Undergraduates at Kuwait University

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<tr>
<td>Undergraduates attending the College of Arts</td>
<td>4048 students</td>
<td>3324 students</td>
<td>2279 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates attending the College of Engineering</td>
<td>877 students</td>
<td>2471 students</td>
<td>2450 students</td>
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Table 1 shows a significant increase in engineering majors at KU between 1985 and 2004, and a steady decline of almost 50% in undergraduates in the college of arts in that time period, ultimately balancing enrolled undergraduates in both the arts and engineering colleges. However, Al-Suaidan’s assumption that all students with vocational degrees (such as the mechanical engineers he used as an example) would be directly utilized by the state to work in their specialized fields is incorrect. The Department of Civil Engineering at KU shows that 43% of engineering graduates have been employed outside their specialized fields (Al-Sanad, 2001). So, out of the 2450 engineering undergraduates in the 2004-2005 academic years, an estimated 1000 were underemployed. 40% of professional and technical workers in Kuwait are Kuwaiti, with the remaining 60% being non-Kuwaiti (Shah, 1995, 1012). The exact figures Shah provides for Kuwaiti and Non-Kuwaiti workers in the Professional and Technical fields, along other fields are represented in Table 2.
Table 2: Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti workers in professional and technical fields

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<tr>
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<th>Kuwaiti</th>
<th>Non-Kuwaiti</th>
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<tr>
<td>Professional and Technical workers</td>
<td>41,137</td>
<td>61,057</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cleric/Office workers</td>
<td>62,984</td>
<td>40,762</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service, Production and Labor workers</td>
<td>27,107</td>
<td>385,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>34,653</td>
<td>47,321</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total workforce</strong></td>
<td><strong>165,881</strong></td>
<td><strong>534,447</strong></td>
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Source: Shah, 2001

While the expatriates outnumber the Kuwaitis in the Service, Production and Labor field in a ratio of 17:1, the contrast in the other fields is not as great. This means that al-Suai dan’s nationalistic position, which would aim to slash the number of non-Kuwaiti Professional and Technical workers and boost the number of Kuwaitis in that field, is within the grasp of short-term planning.

This nationalistic position suggests that Kuwait’s development can only be brought about by the Kuwaitis themselves. Implementing development in accordance with this position would require more Kuwaitis with vocational education to replace the majority of non-Kuwaitis upon which the state is heavily dependent. Even a 2005 Qatari Planning Council Report suggests that for Qatari men, “the prime source of employment for new entrants into the labor market will be in public administration, the oil and gas industry, and the electricity, gas, and water utilities.” The same report goes on to propose that women will benefit from higher education by increased opportunities in the health sector (Stasz, 2007). Finally, in order to curb the exponential growth of the expatriate population in Kuwait, the government is considering limiting the number of years an expat worker can remain in country; ranging from 6 for unskilled to 12 for highly skilled workers (Garcia, 2012). In this light, a specifically liberal arts education is not necessary. The liberal arts model may be a valid method to produce a generally educated citizenry but at this stage in the region’s development there may be a stronger need for skilled citizens who are employable.

4. Legal issues for liberal arts

Another concern affecting the viability of liberal arts education is connected to governing and legal traditions in the Gulf. In the region, authoritarian regimes existed prior to the creation of independent states in the second half of the twentieth century. Whether under the authority of one of the Islamic empires or a more localized tribe, the people of the Gulf have always been governed by hereditary or semi-hereditary authority structures. Although institutionalized advisory bodies like the Ottoman divan or the Gulf diwaniyas are often considered by western observers as more liberal aspects of the region’s political tradition, in most areas in the Gulf questioning or challenging leaders is not permitted. Whitaker connects this tradition to the prevalence of rote learning which “dominates to the exclusion of understanding, analytical thought, problem-solving and so on. This approach reflects the authoritarian tendencies of Arab society as well as the desire of the regimes not to be subjected to critical scrutiny” (Whitaker, 2009, 24). Correspondingly, institutions that encourage the liberal arts method of education can unwittingly foster illegal challenges to the ruling regimes.

A liberal arts education essentially teaches students to ask “why is it done” instead of asking “how it is done?” It also encourages critical thinking to evaluate information and to reach an answer or conclusion. The concept of critical inquiry and freedom of expression, as expressed in the AAUP statement above, play well in political systems that allow dissent and criticism. A critical and free press is often seen as a necessary check on the government itself in the west. The Arabian Gulf countries, however, are headed by various models of absolutist regimes where dissent is often punished and criticism is generally not allowed. In such an environment, western liberal education cannot be fully implemented. The Kuwaiti Constitution states, “The Amir is the head of the state. His person shall be immune and inviolable, and his title is ‘His Highness the Amir of Kuwait’” (1962). According to Article 25 of the Kuwait Criminal Law Code it is a criminal offense to challenge the authority or insult the Amir in speech, writing, drawing or any other means of expression. The code, in fact, mandates a prison term not exceeding five years for anyone who violates this law (Etheridge, 2007). According to Global Integrity, Kuwaiti media are unable to report on corrupt individuals when reporting
will affect “the dignity and lives of persons.”

Kuwait is not only state in the Gulf that feels traditions are being threatened by liberal education and its promotion of such critical evaluation. Saudi Arabia has at least one operating liberal arts university, Effat University and two others currently seeking accreditation by the American Association of Liberal Education. In 2003 150 protesters were arrested in Saudi Arabia because they were carrying banners advocating reform. Police arrested these people simply for staging a public protest in Riyadh. According to The New York Times, “there had been hundreds of protesters, men and women, carrying banners calling for reforms” (2003). In the U.A.E., even though the N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi campus recently accepted its first 200 students, one of the applicants, Laith Aqel suggests that starting a civil rights club there is problematic “because we can't hold protests.” He adds “I think we'll be able to find creative ways to circumvent the restrictions while maintaining respect for our host country” (Foderaro, 2010). While N.Y.U. is one of the only institutions in the Gulf to offer its faculty tenure, such is no guarantee of academic freedom. The university has yet to formulate an agreement with Abu Dhabi regarding the issue and under current laws in the emirate Israeli students and faculty desiring to study or work at the university would be denied visas (Mills, 2010).

While liberal arts in the west is a by-product of political events such as the Magna Carta (1215), the ouster of rulers such as Charles I (1649) and Louis XVI (1792), and political philosophies that advocate popular sovereignty and rights such as those of Montesquieu and Jefferson, the Gulf region has no such tradition. Fully implementing the western liberal arts model might not only threaten the political systems of much of the region, but it could, in the case of Kuwait, lead to unconstitutional and, therefore, illegal behavior.

5. Islam and liberal arts

The liberal arts method has much to do with liberalism, a product of which is political democracy. In theory, no single issue stands immune to the consensus of the majority, no matter how sacred it may be to one group. According to the AAUP statement above, any subject, regardless of its place in society, is open to scrutiny, and is susceptible to being critically evaluated. Regarding this style of education, Overton H. Taylor argues that the concept of the free man, who is responsible for his own wellbeing and in need of a comprehensive, well-rounded education to prepare him for the responsibilities he has come to bear, is now just as applicable and evident in today’s democratic societies, where virtually all are now “free” (Overton, 1945).

According to Islam, however, though there is free will, all are considered slaves of Allah. Indeed, this status is repeated throughout the Qur’an and hadeeth. The purpose of existence, according to these texts, is so that the creation may worship only Him (The Noble Qur’an (51)). The relationship between Allah and His slaves, therefore, constitutes one of total obedience and subservience; such that the slave has absolutely no right to question (by way of criticism), deny or disobey His Laws, Commandments and Verses. Yet the liberal arts method says otherwise. In both of the major types of Islam—Shia and Sunna—any interpretation, critique or evaluation of the Qur’an outside of established criteria can be problematic. This is a clear clashing of ideals with the liberal arts method, which allows for the critical deconstruction and evaluation of any issue. It must be noted that in many types of Islam it is acceptable for the layman today to ask questions if he/she wishes to understand the logic and wisdom behind a certain ruling of the religion. Still, this does not equate with the western notion of critical evaluation. Like democracy, freedom and equality are fundamental to a liberal arts education. The manifestations of this are evident in learning and teaching methods by instilling a sense of critical evaluation of even religious subjects. All things, in this regard, are rendered equal, and the students of the liberal arts are free, even encouraged to carry out such methods.

Full implementation of the traditional western style liberal arts style of education will remain problematic in any country that officially holds its religion as sacred, and therefore above criticism. A 2004 Arab Human Development Report observed the most widespread style of child rearing in Arab families is the authoritarian mode .... it affects how the child thinks by suppressing questioning, exploration and initiative.... education is didactic, supported by a set of books containing indisputable texts in which knowledge is objectified so as to hold incontestable facts, and by an examination process that only tests memorization and factual recall.

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3 According to Global Integrity, Kuwait scores a “very weak” on overall integrity indicators. Qatar also scored a “very weak,” while the UAE scored “weak.” (2008)

4 The new N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi campus—billed as a liberal arts institution—will face risks: “homosexual acts are illegal and the Internet is censored, And there is no guarantee that the seemingly limitless resources of its oil-rich government will remain so, given the precarious global economy and Middle East Politics” (Foderaro, 2010)
6. Profit and liberal arts

One final aspect of liberal arts institutions concerns profit. Since the 1990s there has been an ongoing debate in the west regarding the rise of for-profit universities. Ann Morey points out some of the problems with for-profit institutions. For example, faculty at such institutions do not normally engage in research and they follow centrally-developed syllabi. With this approach, as Morey points out, “there is a major difference between those who are in the business of education and those whose mission it is to provide an education” (Morey, 2004). In a comprehensive article on this theme, Frank Lutz and Robert Field bring together several of the major consequences of the for-profit model. They suggest that the university has lost its “classical” liberal arts curricula and is being guided by the “invisible” hand of free market competition. Their most stinging criticism is that “The pervasive business valuing in American society is embedded in the boards and administrators who run education institutions. This has created schools run like factories rather than institutions of inquiry” (Lutz, 1998). To a medieval scholar such as Peter Abelard it might seem that the illiberal had swallowed the liberal arts. From the classical perspective of liberal arts, profit-seeking in this regard could be considered unethical.

In the Gulf region, there has been a mushrooming of so-called American institutions based on the liberal arts model. Yet, much of the funding for these institutions remains clouded in secrecy—raising the question of whether they are truly non-profit. Profit-based universities, usually run as businesses, often do not seek high quality education. Rather, their prime motivation is to generate revenue, often at the expense of quality education. There are several signs that can hint if an educational institution is profit based or not. The caliber of professors hired enables one to make the judgment whether a university is non-profit or profit based. A product of top scholarship and research is a university’s endowment. Another is the student-to-professor ratio. The higher the student-to-professor ratio, the more likely the institution is profit-based. Furthermore, resources that include equipment, technology, campus services as well as research grants for professors are all indicators of a university’s profit status.

Many professed American-model universities in the Gulf region show signs of profit-based decisions. From a western perspective, it seems hypocritical that a proclaimed American-model institution based on a liberal arts model is a subsidiary of a “parent company” on a stock market. Founding president of the American University of Kuwait, Shafeeq Ghabra paints a clear picture of the situation in the region, stating:

A conflict of interest exists between the aims of providing high-quality education and of making a profit on money invested by owners… A university should have an element of altruism to earn respect of from the community, develop an active alumni community, and raise funds. Without such an approach, only non-profit institutions (such as the American University of Beirut and the American University of Cairo) will be able to solicit money via fundraising, while the other universities will be heavily dependent on high tuition. With the commercialization of education, universities will end up lowering their standards to attract students and providing easy education for the elites. (2007)

In addition, some of these institutions see brand recognition as measure of success. AUK, for example, was awarded “Superbrand” recognition in early 2008. The distinction is based on value in the Kuwaiti market, brand recognition and perception as well as corporate performance, among other things (AUK PR, 2008). The concept that the institution is a brand, just like Gucci or Prada or Sony, reinforces the viewpoint that these proclaimed non-profit universities are profit-seeking. The equation is simple: loyal customers (paying students) purchasing their brand (easily “American” modeled education). If there is an apt marketing strategy, it might be borrowed from Mastercard’s “Priceless” ad campaign: a liberal arts education might very well be one of those things that money can’t buy.

Numerous obstacles lay in the way of these American-modeled higher education institutions to truly be considered non-profit. Funding is essential and critical to any institution’s success, and because the line in the Gulf region between non-profit and profit is blurry, sometimes it is inevitable that those claiming to be non-profit will resort to profit tactics due to a myriad of factors. Unlike the west, many Arab countries do not have a tax system and thus there is no tax exemption...
available for donating to a non-profit institution. Another factor is the perception from governments in the region that liberal arts institutions are agents of change, perhaps even a threat to their regimes. A conference entitled "Independent Universities in the Middle East: A New Approach" held in Istanbul, Turkey in 2005 reported that "Funding shortfalls...reflect the state's determination to keep universities on a short leash. Within autocratic societies, university independence is often something to be prevented, not nourished" (Chanin, 2005). Thus, governments view these institutions with suspicion and there is a reluctance to fund them.

However, this is not the case with all governments. The massive funding by the Qatari government for its Education City, under the umbrella of the Qatar Foundation, has been successful in creating a non-profit based higher education zone with world-renowned universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown University, Northwestern University, Virginia Commonwealth and Texas A&M University placing branch campuses there. In addition, the Abu Dhabi government is funding a four-year liberal arts research university associated with N.Y.U. whose student population is targeted to reach 2,000 undergraduates (Foderaro, 2010). Even with these successful models, one cannot be quick to call these traditional liberal arts institutions as the campuses opened thus far are focused on vocational and technical skills. For example, Virginia Commonwealth University of the Arts in Qatar focuses on Graphic Design, Fashion Design and Interior Design; Texas A&M's Liberal Arts Program is, according to its website, "support for students undertaking research projects for their respective engineering degree." Northwestern offers a liberal arts general education curricula but only major programs in journalism and communication; and while Georgetown requires two theology courses as part of its general education curriculum for its School of Foreign Service, it offers no traditional liberal arts major programs.

7. Toward a conclusion

Kuwait and the Gulf region are in need of a long-term educational strategy that is neither an attempt to stamp a western standard, nor a complete rejection of the western model. The lead article of the February 1938 edition of The Journal of Higher Education was entitled "Is the Liberal-Arts College Doomed?" The author suggested that universities in the United States were devoting their energies and capital toward the development of professional and technical training; and away from "literature, philosophy and art." He predicted that except along the eastern coast of the US, liberal arts institutions would be "submerged." While this, of course, did not occur, the liberal arts tradition in the US did change to fit the nation's circumstances immediately following the Second World War. Liberal arts curricula, for example, began to include a physical science and, later, a computer/technology component. A similar change or alteration must occur in the Arabian Gulf. However, in implementing change reformers must be cognizant of the region's cultural and religious values and traditions that enable it to interact in that community without losing its own identity or position.

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's 1927 lecture, "Tolerance in Islam" suggests what could be a workable alternative to the western liberal model. He points out that, "The tolerance within the body of Islam was, and is, something without parallel in history." Given the cultural relevance of the Qur'an in the region, resorting to it as an educational foundation seems appropriate (Pickthall, 1927). It states, "There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path" (The Noble Qur'an (2)). In the same way that the liberal model is informed by a European experience, a Muslim model ought to be informed by experience. The history of tolerance advocated by Islam is unique in the global experience. Under the patronage and protection of regional leaders universities could become bastions of tolerance that might later affect society at large.

While the west might have a difficult time appreciating the difference between a liberal and tolerant model of higher education, the term "tolerance" is commonly defined across socio-cultural groups. Simply put, it is the act of allowing deviation from a standard. In the case of the Muslim experience, it has usually been a patronized protection. One need only compare the historical experiences of Spain under Muslim and Spanish rule. Al-Andalus was generally tolerant toward Christians and Jews living in Spain while the process of the Reconquista was known for its brutality toward both Jews and Muslims. Although it is incorrect to suggest that Al-Andalus treated Muslims and non-Muslims equally, it was certainly more tolerant toward divergent religious views. Probably the best documented example of tolerance during the Muslim period in Spain comes from a ninth-century letter from al-Hâshimî to a Christian king, inviting him to embrace Islam. In it he writes,

[You are safe and free to say whatever you please, appoint some arbitrator who will impartially judge between us and lean only towards the truth and be free from the empery of passion: and that arbitrator shall be reason, whereby God makes us responsible for our own rewards and punishments... For “there is no compulsion in religion” and I have only invited you to accept our faith willingly and of your own accord. (Hourani, 1976)]

Al-Hâshimî's words advocate tolerance rather than freedom. The latter is boundless while the former limits the goal of
any inquiry to uncovering truth.

One further example can be given to illustrate the tradition of tolerance within Islamic society. After the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople in 1453 he allowed not only Christians but also Jews to continue living and working within the capital. A Hungarian observer at the time wrote, “The Turks do not compel anyone to renounce his faith, do not try hard to persuade anyone and do not have a great opinion of renegades” (Mansel, 1995, 47). They were not, however, allowed freedom. Mehmet assigned Jews and Christians to certain sections of the city. They had to wear distinctive dress and were not permitted to carry arms. One rabbi who had been expelled from Spain and eventually settled in Constantinople wrote, “Here in the land of the Turks we have nothing to complain of…. ‘We possess great fortunes, much gold and silver are in our hands. We are not oppressed with heavy taxes and our commerce is free and unhindered’” (Mansel). With such tolerance for the other, the Ottoman Empire would reach its peak. The nuances between freedom (liberalism) and tolerance might be slight but might best be reduced to the concept of mutual respect.

In a liberal arts environment, even statements that might be deemed hateful or offensive have credibility. John Stuart Mill’s classic work, On Liberty (1859) claims that no individual or government has a monopoly on truth. He states, “the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race.” In this context veracity is less important since the goal is the exercise of critical thought. As demonstrated above, in the Arabian Gulf, expressing an errant opinion can be problematic when the opinion opposes the law or contradicts a religious belief or tradition. In a general sense, the culture in the Gulf seems to function with the understanding that there is no compulsion to accept an argument but there is, ultimately, a punishment for error. This environment has been beneficial in the past as it aided in creating the Muslim Golden Age—encompassing a geographic area that stretched from Spain across North Africa to Persia—which far surpassed medieval Europe in philosophy, science, the arts, and literature.

Pundits might argue that the Gulf region is caught in a perspective similar to that of the twelfth-century Bernard of Clairvaux who argued that truth was intimately connect to faith and, therefore, could not be challenged. This, however, is simply an imposition of a western perspective on a non-western socio-cultural tradition. Since the early days of Islam, questioning has always been permitted. While questions are not to refute or deny the religion, they are intended to lead one to a deeper understanding of the truth of Islam, a religion not dependent on blind faith but rational argument and convincing proof. Questioning a religious tenet in Europe in the twelfth century might have ended in charges of heresy because there was not yet a tradition of tolerance. The historical experience of the Gulf, bound as it is to the culture and religion of Islam, has a unique tradition of tolerance upon which it should build its own educational method and standards. Since almost every university in the Gulf region operates under the patronage of various members of royal families, this method could develop under such protection and thereby sidestep many of the problems connected to a strict implementation of the western liberal arts model. With 60 percent of Kuwait’s population under 24 years old (IMF, 2012), a workable method is imperative.

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