

Letter from Guest Editor to Readers

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This special section of *Educational Studies, Moscow [Voprosy Obrazovaniya]* focuses on liberal arts and sciences (LAS) education. The original inspiration for the section was a conference at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University on “Intellectual Foundations of Modern Liberal Education” that took place in November 2014.

While LAS education is often associated with the United States, the conference demonstrated clearly that the LAS approach is gaining strength across the globe, including in Europe, Eurasia, and the Middle East. As I discuss in my article on “Liberal Arts and Sciences Education and the Challenges of the XXIst Century,” LAS education as discussed here is best understood as a system of education rather than a set of subjects, which are often reduced to humanities and the arts. This system entails breadth as well as depth of learning, curricular flexibility that includes student choice and interdisciplinarity, and a student-centered pedagogy.

Many of the curricular and teaching approaches associated with LAS education have roots in the national traditions of countries where fully developed LAS programs are being developed. In his article, “Свободные искусства и науки в системе российского университетского образования” [The Liberal Arts and Sciences in Russian System of University Education], Alexei Kudrin, the Dean of St. Petersburg State’s Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Russia’s longtime Minister of Finance, situated LAS education within the Russian educational tradition. He cited a letter from Academician Dmitry Likhachev to the Russian Ministry of Education, sent at a time when St. Petersburg State was pursuing a new state standard to support LAS education, in which Likhachev asserted that “a program for training bachelors of liberal arts and sciences rests not only upon the modern achievements of foreign higher education, but, in the first place, it organically advances the best Russian traditions of university education, particularly those which, unfortunately, we have lost because of the dramatic cataclysms that swept through our country in the previous century.”

The special section includes articles, interviews and presentations from academics and university leaders. Several pieces explore the nature and background of liberal arts and sciences education. Bard College President Leon Botstein points to the role of natural sciences and mathematics in liberal arts and sciences education, while Ronald Crutcher, President of the University of Richmond, argues that the LAS approach is not simply found in residential liberal arts colleges, where LAS reaches its purest form, but is also an integral part of undergraduate education at the world's leading research universities like Harvard and Yale. Aleksei Kudrin and I both focus on the role of LAS education in the modern economy, citing evidence of the success of LAS graduates amongst employers in Russia, Europe and the United States. We both argue that LAS education prepares students to changing conditions and to become lifelong learners that can address the challenges of the XXIst century. Yulia Ivanova and Pavel Sokolov of the National Research University Higher School of Economics take a different tack, recycling some tired but very representative arguments against liberal arts and sciences education in Russia, pointing to it as an elitist American import while largely ignoring its role within leading American research universities and its successful adaptation in Europe and elsewhere. Their article summarizes a conference that took place in St. Petersburg in 2012. Ingrid McLaren of University of the West Indies and Peg Peoples of Bard College both address innovative teaching approaches associated with LAS education, with a particular focus on writing and expression of ideas. David Shein of Bard College concludes by focusing on academic advising, which he views as an essential element of the LAS system.

In sum, and in spite of the skepticism of Ivanova and Sokolov, the section highlights the successful adaptation of LAS education to different educational environments. As I argue in my essay, the LAS system will not solve all of society's problems, but it is much more adaptable than some simplistic interpretations suggest, and when properly constituted, "it offers a coherent approach that endows students with abilities that will prepare them for a lifetime of civic engagement, learning, and employment."