

Practicing the Liberal Arts: Explore • Renew • Sustain • Lead

At the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM), we don't just talk about the liberal arts and their value, we actually engage in the practice of liberal learning. Our emphasis on "practice" involves doing and living the liberal arts. We focus on the learning that is needed to prepare students for "work, life, and citizenship" in the 21st century. (From the Executive Summary of College Learning for the New Global Century from AAC & U.) The learning that happens here is anything but ivory tower.

The phrase "practicing the liberal arts" operates at multiple levels at UMM. It encompasses both deliberate everyday choices and long-range planning for the future. It applies to the activities of the students, faculty, and staff, as well as those of the institution within the context of west-central Minnesota and beyond. The liberal arts embody an active perspective, with practical and theoretical elements mixing by way of the four actions: explore, renew, sustain, and lead.

The UMM approach to liberal arts and liberal learning is reflected in traditional ways: through study-in-depth (teaching, learning, and research) within the confines of a major program and through study-in-breadth that occurs through the general education curriculum. Our students leave here well prepared in their major fields of study and well versed in the ways of knowing and disciplinary categories that comprise the general fields of the liberal arts.

As a public institution, UMM also approaches the liberal arts and liberal learning in less traditional ways: through the creation and application of knowledge in undergraduate and faculty research; through the pursuit of global citizenship and intercultural understanding through study abroad, classroom learning, service learning, residential life and co-curricular activities; through the development of habits of participation in campus and community that are necessary for leading lives as active citizens; and through the pursuit of practical, out of class experiences (internships and "field placements") that co-locate students in the classroom and in the professional world as preparation for work and graduate school.

Explore:

Exploration, in every sense of the word, permeates the learning environment at UMM--exciting research and artistic activity, creative teaching, and interdisciplinary curricular, co-curricular, and service efforts encourage the broad vision that liberal arts education promises.

"Explore" describes, to a large degree, what students and faculty do at UMM. Students discover new areas of learning and experience. They're exposed to new knowledge communities. They investigate possible careers. They are also engaged in self-discovery, trying out new approaches and new identities. Faculty continually search for ways to improve student learning. They explore the frontiers of their disciplines, make new discoveries, and participate in professional communities beyond the campus. Staff, faculty, and students explore ways to serve society better through a variety of service and outreach activities that have local, regional, and national impact. A liberal arts institution enables this exploration, not only by bringing together the necessary people (students, faculty, and staff), but also by providing the necessary physical, financial, and technical infrastructure to enable that activity. It has libraries, classrooms, laboratories, studios, residence halls, and internet connections. It has programs of academic advising, Honors, study abroad, service learning and internships.

Renew:

In our rapidly changing world, a liberal arts education must be infinitely renewable. Renewing connotes a re-energizing as well as a re-imagining. Students renew themselves by trying new things, both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Faculty evaluate programs and curricula including general education, constantly making adjustments to keep up with new knowledge, changing needs, and evolving methods of inquiry. Faculty also adapt to new technologies in both teaching and research. A liberal arts college renews itself by periodically examining its mission and policies, assessing its programs and procedures, and making changes to meet new needs and situations. An institution renews its faculty and staff by supporting research and professional development opportunities. Alumni of a liberal arts college renew themselves in the process of lifelong learning.

The UMM approach to liberal education and liberal learning is intended to create a lasting and renewable impact on students. It develops skills, knowledge, and attributes that provide the basis for further and future learning, for creative problem solving and for integrative learning (the ability to pull ideas and information together from a variety of fields and disciplines and apply them to real world problems.) At UMM, timeless liberal arts precepts are framed in new and exciting ways both in the classroom and in interaction with the wider world through study abroad, civic engagement, and a living and learning environment in which renewable energy and the built environment can contribute to responsible stewardship of the environment.

Sustain:

The word sustain refers both to how UMM maintains its capacity to provide education as well as to how the education provided enables students to maintain an ability to function as active, informed citizens in a rapidly changing world. UMM must have the physical and financial resources, as well as the personnel to carry out its mission. As a public institution, UMM must also support and encourage our local and national relationships. In addition, it must hold on to core values and functions that remain central to a liberal arts education even if they do not correspond to the “flavor-of-the-day.” Regular assessment of programs and activities will inform decisions about which activities and functions to sustain.

A liberal arts education is sustaining. In a concrete sense, it provides skills and knowledge needed to land a job or to enter professional or graduate school. At the same time, a liberal arts education provides intellectual sustenance or “nourishment”—a foundation (habits of heart and mind) for learning (exploration and discovery) that is life long. A UMM liberal arts education builds on the UMM legacy, on traditions that are valued and valuable even as it re-imagines and reinvents that legacy for the present and the future.

Lead: We teach; we inquire, we research, we learn; we apply; we lead. Members of the UMM community aren't content to sit on the sidelines and watch. As individuals we hold and express opinions; we think and act critically; we uncover and disclose the principles that under-gird our actions; we take risks. Our faculty members lead in their fields. Our students experience multiple opportunities for leadership and public engagement in and out of the classroom. Faculty, staff, and students take on leadership roles on campus and in the University. These individual traits of thoughtful and bold leadership translate into our institutional persona—as a public, liberal arts institution, we lead in terms of academic excellence and access. Our institution leads by modeling good practices and participating in its various communities, local, national, and global. We also lead in terms of our mission—a living and learning community that fosters civic engagement; intercultural competence; global citizenship; and environmental stewardship.