

A Rhetorical Analysis of “A Liberal Education is Key to a Civil Society” Ivy Williams

James Downey’s essay entitled “A Liberal Education is Key to a Civil Society” was written sometime after 1993. Downey summarizes his view on the “value of a liberal education” and how university educators should be responsible for incorporating it into all undergraduate studies to give students “a broad base of skills, knowledge, and outlook for a meaningful engagement as citizens.” Downey’s target audience is his colleagues in the universities, especially those in the humanities and social sciences faculties, whom he thinks are failing in setting an example of social capitalism. Downey’s thesis states that the value of a liberal education in universities is that it prepares students to prosper in social capitalism and creates a much-needed civil society.

He also states that it is the responsibility of the universities to incorporate a liberal education. Downey effectively appeals to his audience by using logos (cause and effect on society, using a well-respected colleague’s studies), pathos (in his respectful tone of language, and reminders of his colleague’s responsibilities to their students and society), and ethos (his standing as a past Dean of two universities, an author and a well-respected speaker).

Downey identifies his audience early in the essay by addressing the humanists and social scientists in the university. He also directly addresses his colleagues in “starting with ourselves, in universities,” when he explains who should be addressing the problem of a lack of strong community in our society. He again speaks directly to his colleagues when he states that “we, who profess ourselves to be humanists and social scientists...[,] must be prepared to lead by example, starting with our own universities--the programs we offer, the academic citizenship we practice.” Downey is a well-known and respected speaker in universities and past president of the universities of Waterloo and New Brunswick, and his essay could well have been a speech prepared for his colleagues. He is imploring his colleagues that it would be “better and truer” for them to take responsibility and commit to setting an example of a civil society in the university they teach in. He supports his views on the institutions having a positive effect on society by stating that “an institution that relies on mutual respect and assistance is simply more effective at achieving its ends than an oppositional, distrustful community.”

Even though Downey refers to only one other colleague’s studies for support of his thesis, this use of logos is quite effective with his target audience, since the majority of his colleagues would know of Robert Putnam from Harvard University. Putnam is a well-known author of books and scholarly articles published in 10 languages, he is a past dean of JFK School of Government, and he is held in high esteem as a speaker at

universities. Downey would have been even more effective if he had used at least one more study, especially one from the North American continent. Downey uses cause and effect well throughout the essay in stating how society has changed from valuing social economics to valuing capitalistic economics. He states people feel that “social capital has been depleted in Canada” and says it is “the result in part of severe and often crude economic measures governments and corporations have taken to balance budgets, contain costs, and increase productivity.” He says that the effect of this is that “economic disparities have grown,” and people have become apathetic. His logical appeal is quite strong throughout by his reminding his colleagues over and over of the effects a liberal education would have on society versus the capitalistic sway that it seems to be given at present.

Downey’s use of pathos may seem a bit weak, but to his target audience it would be very effective in that he uses a very respectful language tone in imploring his colleagues to take action and be responsible members of the institutions they represent. His use of the words “better and truer,” “mutual respect and assistance,” “application of knowledge and values it embodies,” and “heart of the university” are particularly effective. In his last statement, he uses his strongest pathos as he restates his thesis in saying, “If we who profess ourselves to be humanists and social scientists wish to defend and promote the ideals of a liberal education in a hard-edged materialist culture, we must be prepared to lead by example, starting with our own universities- the programs we offer, the academic citizenship we practice.”

Downey’s ethos lies in the fact that he himself is a past president in universities and he is very knowledgeable about what goes on in universities as far as teaching goes. He is a well-known speaker to his colleagues and a writer as well. He also is well connected to other deans, presidents, professors and other faculty members of universities. His essay is very effective in the way he uses logos and pathos in appealing to his target audience even though he could have been more specific in ways for the faculty to address the problem he sees.