Liberal Arts, Data, and Public Life

By Ruhama Adnew

When I left Addis Ababa for a small public liberal arts university in the Midwest, I thought I was coming for one thing: a business degree. As an international student funding my own education, I saw college in terms of cost, credits, and career prospects. Courses in philosophy, history, art, and statistics looked like a long detour from “real” business training.

What changed over four years was not only what I learned, but how I learned to think. A public liberal arts education did something I did not expect: it turned my interest in business into a commitment to use data and management skills in service of communities, not only companies.

As a Business Administration major with a Statistics minor, I sit at an intersection that liberal arts education makes possible. My weeks swing from corporate finance cases to statistical inference, from management theory to readings on social inequality. That mix drew me into business analytics. I wanted more than a good “gut feeling” about decisions; I wanted to test assumptions, measure impact, and still keep people at the center.

Active learning was the first shock. In a consulting-style course, my team worked with a local small business that had lost customers after the pandemic. On the syllabus, my role sounded familiar: design a survey, analyze the data, recommend a pricing strategy. In practice, the work refused to stay inside a spreadsheet.

We held interviews with staff to understand daily operations. We spoke with city officials about zoning and public transport. In another class, I happened to be reading about “food deserts” and access to affordable groceries. That concept suddenly overlapped with our project. The business we were studying was one of the few low-cost options in a neighborhood with limited transportation and few alternatives.

My statistics courses helped me clean the data, build basic models, and visualize patterns: which customers stopped coming, what times saw the biggest drops, how price sensitivity varied. My business courses taught me to think about cost structures and margins.

But it was that social science reading that forced a different question: if this store raises prices, who goes hungry?

Our initial plan was to recommend higher prices on the most popular items to stabilize revenue. After pulling together the numbers, the interviews, and the neighborhood context, we changed course. Instead, we proposed a partnership with a nearby nonprofit, targeted discounts for low-income families, and a marketing strategy framed around community support. That project is the clearest example of what a liberal arts setting did for me: it trained me to move across disciplines until the problem matched the method.

Ethical reasoning runs through my education in two directions. In business ethics, we traced global supply chains and asked hard questions about labor, wages, and environmental costs. Coming from Ethiopia, I saw familiar stories—cash crops, export agriculture, textile factories—reappear in case studies, this time linked to brand strategy and investor pressure. We debated issues like: Is “better than local norms” an acceptable defense for low wages? Who holds responsibility when a company’s data-driven system quietly disadvantages certain groups?

At the same time, my statistics courses raised different ethical concerns. In regression, sampling, and categorical data, we examined how bias enters at every stage: how questions are worded, how samples are drawn, how missing data is handled. As an international student, it was striking to see entire regions of the globe represented as single, simplified rows in large datasets. Those classes taught me to treat every clean table and elegant model as the end of a long chain of human choices. Being “good with numbers” now means being honest about limits, uncertainty, and whose experience is invisible in the data.

Community engagement, in a public liberal arts context, is not an add-on for weekends; it enters the syllabus. In a service-learning statistics course, we worked with a local public health department on vaccination data. The numbers were real, linked to real neighborhoods, with gaps that mapped directly onto language barriers, income levels, and past medical distrust. Our

job was to help staff see patterns that were not obvious from raw counts: which outreach methods were working, which age groups lagged, where resources should shift.

Presenting our findings to public health professionals felt very different from giving a classroom talk. They did not ask us about R-squared values; they asked, “If we move this campaign to SMS instead of mailers, how many more people can we expect to reach?” Answering that kind of question required every part of my education: technical skill to model outcomes, communication skill to explain the results, and civic awareness to remember that each data point represented a person.

Business analytics became the place where these threads tied together. Courses in operations and information systems gave me tools to work with large datasets and think about process efficiency. Statistics sharpened my ability to test hypotheses and quantify uncertainty. Communication and writing courses taught me how to translate results into clear, honest language for people who do not live in spreadsheets. Group projects in management and marketing forced me to practice something simple but rare: listening to people who care about branding, finance, human resources, and still making the data part of the conversation.

This education also reshaped my idea of citizenship. I am not a citizen of the country where I study, and there are many civic activities I cannot formally take part in. Liberal arts courses in political science and history still treated me as part of the audience for public life. We analyzed news coverage, policy debates, and opinion polls with the same critical skills we used on academic articles. Statistical literacy turned into civic literacy. Now, when I read that “most people” think a certain way, my first instinct is to ask: Who was surveyed? How was the question framed? Who is spoken for, and who is absent?

Those habits followed me into everyday conversations with classmates. Topics like minimum wage, international aid, and immigration often came up. I found myself in the odd position of being both the “business student” and the one cautioning against easy numbers: explaining margins of error, pointing out when data about “foreign workers” silently mixed very

different groups together. In that sense, my liberal arts training made me a more careful reader of public arguments, and a more responsible contributor to them.

My original plan was straightforward: earn a business degree, secure a stable job, support my family. I still carry that responsibility. What has changed is my sense of what kind of work will be worth doing for decades. I want to build a career in business analytics and data-informed management, in roles that ask not only, “Is this profitable?” but also, “Who benefits? Who is harmed?” In the long term, I hope to return to East Africa and work on projects in small-business development or public health that use data with the same mix of rigor and humility I learned here.

Public liberal arts education is often judged as a luxury: a broad curriculum that seems less efficient than a narrow, technical path. I came in sharing some of that skepticism. What convinced me otherwise were not slogans about “well-rounded graduates,” but concrete experiences: a consulting project where spreadsheets met neighborhood maps; a service-learning course where the outcome of a model could change outreach to real families; ethics discussions that linked my home country to boardroom choices; and constant practice moving between numbers, narratives, and norms.

Those experiences did more than prepare me for a job. They taught me to treat business as a public act, data as a shared responsibility, and education as training for active participation in any community I live in. That is what a public liberal arts education has meant in my life—and why I want to carry its habits of mind into every decision I make as a future analyst, manager, and citizen.