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## **The Value of a Liberal Arts Education**

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### **Abstract**

This paper was stimulated by the author's concerns about the future of liberal arts education and the trend toward vocationally-oriented college programs. The author emphasizes the foundational value of a liberal arts education for all college students, illustrates the importance of the liberal arts in three professional areas of study, and presents research and testimonials regarding the success of students who have experienced the benefits of a liberal arts education.

### **Introduction**

Over the past several decades, enrollment in liberal arts majors has significantly decreased while enrollment in professional degree programs has increased. "These shifts reflect student demands for programs that are "practical" or "relevant" and degrees that have some clear instrumental value" (Paris, 2007, 7). The emphasis on the instrumental value of education is illustrated by the City Colleges of Chicago's efforts to match academic programs to job opportunities, for example:

- AAR, an aircraft leasing company that needs aviation mechanics, will help design curriculum at Olive-Harvey College, provide instructors who've worked in the industry and offer internships, facility tours, and job interviews.
- Malcolm X College will work with nearby hospitals and healthcare companies to train students as healthcare assistants, technicians, and nurses (Jacobs, 2012).

Another example of the focus on the instrumental value of a college education is found at the University of North Texas at Dallas. In September of 2012, *The Commission on Building the University of the 21st Century* recommended that the University of North Texas at Dallas "carefully build its portfolio of academic programs based on regional need as defined by job opportunities" and state priorities (Blumenstyk, 2012).

A 1990 study of 540 small private liberal arts colleges found that only 212 of the colleges were being true to their liberal arts mission. The study concluded that "the liberal arts college is disappearing, and another type of institution--the professional college--is taking its place" (Breneman, 1990). A 2012 study found that only 130 of the colleges studied by Breneman (1990) still qualify as having a liberal arts focus (Baker, Baldwin, & Makker, 2012).

## **The Liberal Arts**

A discussion of liberal arts education is complicated by the various conceptions of the term liberal arts education, as follows: a liberal arts college as an institution, a liberal arts college (or school) within a college or university, a general education program (based on the liberal arts) which all students are required to complete, and a major in one of the liberal arts disciplines. In addition, many colleges and universities have schools or colleges of liberal arts and sciences. This paper focuses on liberal arts as a foundation for all college majors, liberal arts institutions, and the success of students who have benefited from a liberal arts education.

The term "liberal arts" (*artes liberales*) originally referred to a course of studies befitting a free person. Liberal arts originally encompassed seven areas of study: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, grammar, rhetoric, logic, and music. AASCU (2008) defines a liberal arts education as:

....an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of the interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

In the broadest sense, a liberal arts education includes an understanding of a wide variety of subjects; e.g., history and culture of the United States; world history and cultures; intercultural competence; epistemology; philosophical and aesthetic traditions; scientific ways of thinking; social institutions (e.g., family, government, economy, education, religion); ethics and values and their expression through human behavior, public policy, and law; quantitative analysis; mathematics and symbolic languages; qualitative analysis; the natural world; the human organism; the arts, literature, music, and other forms of creative expression.

The liberal arts are dedicated to the individual -- to the education of the whole person (intellectually, socially, morally, emotionally, physically, [and spirituality at church affiliated liberal arts institutions]), with studies undertaken across the range of human experience. Students learn about the past and possibilities for the future; become involved in self-discovery; and understand the importance of being a caring, effective, and responsible citizen. "A strong liberal education contributes to effective professional work, responsible citizenship, and a satisfying and meaningful life" (Colby, 2007, p. 40).

The liberal arts provide students with research skills which prepare them for their career and advanced study. "Becoming research literate will empower our students to make sound decisions, assess situations based on assembled data, resolve conflicting points of view, and make choices or choose alternatives substantiated by evidence and supported with data derived from quantitative and qualitative treatments of research" (Stevenson, 2011, p. 129). With the mentorship of the faculty, students can pursue their research and creative interests in a manner which promotes intellectual curiosity, stimulates creativity, and contributes to the learning and sharing of ideas within a community of scholars.

A liberal arts education provides students with intellectual and practical skills which prepare them for participation in a variety of learning experiences; e.g., problem-solving in teams, simulations of real-life applications, conducting research. Students may engage with faculty and/or with other students in evaluating approaches to the identification, analysis, and solution of problems; and explore interdisciplinary connections. In addition, students are prepared to participate with community organizations and agencies to address social problems; e.g., illiteracy, school dropouts, poverty, hunger, homelessness, prejudice, discrimination, crime, environmental cleanup.

Liberal arts students learn valuable work skills; e.g., the ability to conduct scientific research; the ability to listen and understand the communication of others; the ability to communicate effectively through written, oral, visual, and technological methods; the ability to effectively utilize technology; the ability to collaborate with diverse groups and persons; critical thinking skills; problem-solving skills; the ability to make logical and reasoned judgments; ethical reasoning skills; leadership skills.

### **The Liberal Arts and Professional Programs**

The goals of professional programs include: to graduate students who are competent to serve as entry level practitioners for the profession; to graduate students who have the knowledge, skills and experience to advance to levels of increasing responsibility in their profession; and to graduate students who can contribute to the development of the profession. To be effective members of their profession, college graduates need breadth and depth of professional knowledge, regular participation in professional development activities; commitment to lifelong learning, organizational ability, resourcefulness, and basic research skills. In addition, they need to be competent in the following areas: ethics as they apply to one's professional work and personal life; the social, ethical, and scholarly standards of the profession; use of the professional literature; the synthesis of theories and research from the discipline and related disciplines; the use of technology to increase effectiveness and efficiency; and the ability to apply knowledge in the process of solving complex problems. Most of the above attributes are learned in a liberal arts curriculum.

The liberal arts contribute to professional programs by demonstrating the connections between the liberal arts and the professions, by preparing students who have transferable knowledge and skills, and by preparing graduates who can provide leadership in the workplace and for the profession. The remainder of this section illustrates the importance of the liberal arts to three professional areas: science and technology, teaching, and nursing.

**Science and Technology Professions.** The National Science Board emphasized areas which require a liberal arts and sciences background for science and technology careers. The following excerpts are from the National Science Board report (2007, p. 74-75):

- The 21st century STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) workforce must be communicators, must have a grasp of history and geography (must easily be able to find India on a map!), must be critical thinkers, and must understand in general terms how our government works.
- The vast influence of globalization as described in Tom Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*, stresses the importance of a liberal arts education that includes STEM fields.
- We live in a world where it is difficult to think of any employment that is not tinged by some scientific or technological issue or any area of life unaffected by them.

- Law and science continuously intersect: patents, liability, international agreements, and Katrina and its lawsuits are a few issues.
- Understanding the dynamics of global climate change emerges from software that must take into account ocean solubility, atmospheric chemistry, reflectivity of ice and snow, solar radiation, and many other factors.
- National defense involves nuclear science, properties of toxic gases, communications technology, and radar and missile technology.

**Teacher Education.** Duke University believes that “preprofessional teacher preparation programs must go beyond mastery of a professional knowledge base and narrow training in technical skills” (Riggsbee, Malone, & Straus, 2012, p. 12). Duke strives to build on and integrate the liberal education experience that students bring to the teacher preparation program because of its belief that the “context of a liberal education is central to effective teaching and learning” (Riggsbee, et al., 2012, p. 12).

**Nursing Education.** The nursing coursework at Keene State College begins during the second semester of the junior year. This schedule allows students to complete all of the general education courses which are the foundation for nursing knowledge and practice. “At Keene State College, academic programs are solidly based in the liberal arts and sciences ensuring graduates acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to navigate the rapidly changing world” (Fleeger & Connelly, 2012, p. 17).

### **Evidence and Testimonials regarding the Value of a Liberal Arts Education**

Rhodes College’s feedback from businesses indicates that Rhode’s liberal arts graduates “...have an excellent ability to think and communicate creative solutions to business problems and deal with ethical questions” (Rhodes College, 2005). An AT&T survey found that liberal arts majors advance more quickly to middle and senior management positions than their colleagues who majored in other fields of study (ISseek Education, 2008).

Hansen (2004) reports that employers describe liberal arts graduates as “well-rounded”; and employers say that liberal arts graduates see the “big picture.” Employers value liberal arts graduates because they possess many of the skills needed to be successful in their chosen profession, and they possess transferable skills. Liberal arts graduates have the skills necessary to adapt to a changing workplace, and to “take advantage of opportunities that arise in our increasingly dynamic global economy” (Landhuis, 2003).

Only three percent of American college graduates were educated at a residential liberal arts college; however alumni of these colleges are disproportionately represented among leaders in their respective fields, as follows (College News, 2012):

- 8 percent of Forbes magazine’s listing of the nation’s wealthiest CEOs in 1998.
- 8 percent of former Peace Corps volunteers.
- 19 percent of U.S. presidents
- 23 percent of Pulitzer Prize winners in drama, 19 percent of the winners in history, 18 percent in poetry, 8 percent in biography, and 6 percent in fiction (between 1960 and 1998).
- 9 percent of all Fulbright scholarship recipients
- 24 percent of all Mellon fellowships in the humanities.

- 20 percent of Phi Beta Kappa inductions between 1995 and 1997.
- On a per capita basis, liberal arts colleges produce nearly twice as many Ph.D. degrees in science as other institutions.
- Nearly 20 percent of the scientists elected to the National Academy of Sciences received their undergraduate education at a liberal arts college (College News, 2012).

The Annapolis Comparative Alumni Research study (Hardwick Day, 2011) compared alumni with liberal arts and sciences majors from different types and sizes of institution with regards to how they viewed their college experience. The findings of the study include the following:

- 76 percent of liberal arts college graduates rated their college experience highly for preparing them for their first job, compared to 66 percent who attended public flagship universities.
- 60 percent of liberal arts college graduates said they felt better prepared for life after college than students who attended other colleges, compared to 34 percent who attended public flagship universities.

A liberal arts education will become more important as the global economy increasingly depends on workers who have the following attributes: problem-solving skills; creativity; competence in mathematics, speaking, writing, and listening; intercultural competency; technology skills; and collaboration skills. Gordon (2009, p. 29) concludes that in order for the US to be competitive in the global economy, a significant number of future jobs will require "...a good liberal arts education plus postsecondary career-specific technical skills."

## Conclusion

The evidence and testimonials discussed in this paper provide one with a level of optimism regarding the future of liberal arts education. Liberal arts advocates need to continue their efforts to effectively communicate the meaning of a liberal arts education, and provide evidence that the liberal arts provide students with important skills for the world of work, for advanced study, for effective citizenship, and for leadership. In addition, advocates need to focus on how the liberal arts facilitate the effectiveness of student learning by the inclusion of interdisciplinary curriculum; by demonstrating the connections between the liberal arts and the professions; by developing students who have transferable knowledge and skills; by preparing students who can successfully address complex problems; and by developing graduates who can provide leadership in a dynamic and diverse work environment and in their respective profession.

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