Liberal Arts Education and Professional Success: Debunking Myths About What Employers Need and What the Economy Rewards

Intellectual Foundations of Modern Liberal Education
(Saint Petersburg, Russia, November 2014)

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Frequently Confused Terms

• **Liberal Education**: a broad philosophy of education that has traditionally been the standard of excellence in Baccalaureate level education in the United States. The philosophy has consistently entailed three broad educational goals: providing students the broad knowledge of society and culture required for full participation in the life of a democratic society; cultivating the powers of the mind to make sense of the world and to use evidence-based reasoning in making judgments; and nurturing an examined commitment to ethical and civic responsibility. This philosophy of education can apply and is being applied in the US to all sorts of degree programs—including those in arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences, but also professional fields like nursing, education, engineering, social work.

• **Liberal Arts and Sciences** (sometimes called just “liberal arts”): specific disciplines (e.g. the humanities, sciences, social sciences).

• **Liberal Arts College**: a particular type of institution—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, and a curriculum grounded in liberal arts disciplines.

• **General Education**: the part of the curriculum shared by all students. A uniquely American feature, general education programs provide broad exposure to multiple disciplines, development of essential intellectual and civic skills, and practice in applying different disciplinary perspectives to problem-solving.
Essential Learning Outcomes
Developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (adopted by hundreds of colleges and universities in the US and abroad)

- **Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World**
  Focused on engagement with big questions, enduring and contemporary

- **Intellectual and Practical Skills**
  Practiced extensively across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

- **Personal and Social Responsibility**
  Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

- **Integrative and Applied Learning**
  Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems
Current Debates

• Should all students in all fields get a broad liberal education?

• Is it a luxury we cannot afford to provide a broad liberal education to all college students?

• Should we enact state policies to encourage students to major in particular fields (e.g. science, technology, professional fields whose graduates are currently in demand in the economy)?

• Aren’t liberal arts majors, in particular, a waste of time and money for individuals and for taxpayers?
How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment

A REPORT ON EARNINGS AND LONG-TERM CAREER PATHS

By Debra Humphreys and Patrick Kelly

Published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems
The College Earnings Premium

Source: Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Cheah (2013)
## Employers Prioritize Innovation and Transferable Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our company puts a priority on hiring people with the intellectual and</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>interpersonal skills that will help them contribute to innovation in the</td>
<td></td>
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<td>workplace.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidates’ demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate</td>
<td>93%</td>
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<td>clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their</td>
<td></td>
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<td>undergraduate major.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whatever their major, all students should have experience in solving</td>
<td>91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>problems with colleagues whose views are different from their own.</td>
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Employers Want Both Broad Knowledge and Specific Skills

Which of the following ranges of knowledge and skills are more important for recent graduates who want to pursue advancement and long-term career success at your company?

- Knowledge and skills that apply to a specific field or position (16%)
- A range of knowledge and skills that apply to a range of fields or positions (29%)
- Both field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of knowledge and skills (55%)

Employers Support Liberal Arts, Diversity, and Civic Learning

Percentage of employers who agree “somewhat” or “strongly” with each statement

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
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<tr>
<td>All students should have educational experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own.</td>
<td>91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>All students should learn about ethical issues and public debates important in their field.</td>
<td>87%</td>
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<tr>
<td>All students should have direct learning experiences working with others to solve problems important in their communities.</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students should take courses that build knowledge, judgment, commitment to communities, ensure integrity/vitality of democracy.</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students should acquire broad knowledge in liberal arts and sciences.</td>
<td>80%</td>
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Median Annual Earnings by Age-Group and Undergraduate Major (2010-11)

Source: How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment. 2013
Short-term vs. Long-term Earnings (2010-11)

Source: How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment. 2013
Graduate and Professional Degree Attainment

Source: *How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment. 2013*
Economy Rewards Liberally Educated Graduates—but More Is Needed

% of Employers Who Want “More Emphasis On” Essential Intellectual and Practical Skills

- Critical thinking and analytic reasoning: 82%
- Complex problem solving: 81%
- Written and oral communication: 80%
- Applied knowledge in real-world settings: 78%
- Information literacy: 72%
- Innovation and creativity: 71%
- Teamwork skills in diverse groups: 67%
- Ethical decision making: 64%
Other Perspectives from Around the World

Skills That Matter

While more than 2/3 of employers in a global survey ranked problem solving, written communication, creativity, basic math, English proficiency, and leadership as important to professional success, less than half rate college graduates as competent in those areas. (McKinsey 2013)

“Employers interviewed say things like: I have never fired an engineer for bad engineering, but I have fired an engineer for lack of teamwork. People have to work together. They have to collaborate.” (Mona Moursheid, Leader, Education Practice, McKinsey 2013)

“Many technical programs around the world have historically focused more on technical depth. We’ve been communicating to universities the importance of soft skills.” (Paul McIntyre, VP for Global Recruiting, BP 2013)

Experiences with Impact

Student international exchange study programs boost employability and job mobility. 5 years after graduation, young people who studied abroad were half as likely to face long-term unemployment. (Erasmus Impact Study, EU 2014)

Graduates who participated in internships, extracurricular and cocurricular activities, and projects that took a semester or more to complete are more than twice as likely to report being engaged at work as those who haven’t had these educational experiences. (Gallup-Purdue Index 2014)