

Yes, Employers Do Value Liberal Arts Degrees

by Lynn Pasquerella

September 19, 2019



HBR Staff/Jorg Greuel/Getty Images

Summary. It's no secret that American higher education is under siege, with public confidence in the entire system in rapid decline. But a false-crisis narrative has been fueled by politicians who would have us believe that a liberal arts education is reserved for those within the... [more](#)

It's no secret that American higher education is under siege, with public confidence in the entire system in rapid decline. Politicians have fueled this by proposing legislation that would base funding for public colleges and universities exclusively on

job acquisition for college graduates or stripping out so-called educational “frills,” such as “the search for truth,” “public service,” and “improving the human condition” from their university system’s mission statements (see, for example, actions in Wisconsin and Colorado). A liberal education, they would have us believe, is reserved for those within the ivory tower, reflecting a willful disconnect from the practical matters of everyday life. This positioning fosters the image of a liberal education as a self-indulgent luxury — an image that has led to the excising of humanities programs, especially in public institutions, in favor of vocational and pre-professional programs that are regarded as singularly capable of responding to demands for economic opportunity.

The positing of a false dichotomy between a liberal arts education and preparation for work and life has contributed to a decoupling of higher education from the American Dream, obscuring the reality that colleges and universities continue to represent powerful institutional forces in catalyzing individual and societal transformation. However, it is not enough to decry the skeptics of higher education as misguided. Instead, those of us in academia do need to respond to their overarching concerns that higher education is too expensive, too difficult to access, and doesn’t teach people 21st-century skills.

INSIGHT CENTER

The Future of Education

Preparing the next generation of leaders.

This call to action was part of the impetus behind the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U’s) most recent round of employer research, “Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal

Education and the Future of Work.” The survey, conducted on behalf of AAC&U by Hart Research Associates, was aimed at assessing the extent to which business executives and hiring managers believe that a college education is important and worthwhile, identifying the learning outcomes they believe are

most important for success in today's economy, and discerning how prepared they perceive recent college graduates to be in these areas.

The 501 business executives at private sector and nonprofit organizations and 500 hiring managers, whose current job responsibilities include recruiting, interviewing, and hiring new employees, expressed greater confidence in colleges and universities than the American public does. Sixty-three percent noted having either “a lot of confidence” or “a great deal of confidence” in American higher education. Business executives (82%) and hiring managers (75%) also agree upon the value of college, maintaining that it is an essential and worthwhile investment of time and money. In addition to the potential for increased earnings, both groups cited the benefits of the accumulation of knowledge, the development of critical and analytical skills, and the ability to focus on a goal — in this case, earning a degree — as being especially meaningful.

Consistent with findings from six earlier surveys commissioned by AAC&U as part of its ongoing Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, employers overwhelmingly endorse broad learning and cross-cutting skills as the best preparation for long-term career success. The college learning outcomes they rate as most important are oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, written communication, and the real-world application of skills and knowledge.

Internships and apprenticeships were deemed particularly valuable, with 93% of executives and 94% of hiring managers indicating that they would be more likely to hire a recent graduate who has held an internship or apprenticeship with a company or organization. Likewise, employers at nonprofits say they are much more likely to hire recent graduates who have community-

based or service learning experience. This is not unexpected given that only 33% of executives and 30% of hiring managers believe that recent graduates are “very well prepared” to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. Moreover, among both audiences, the majority believes that colleges and universities need to make improvements to ensure that college graduates possess the skills and knowledge needed for workplace success at the entry level and especially for advancement.

It is precisely because employers place a premium on innovation in response to rapid change that they emphasize these student experiences rather than narrow technical training. Therefore, the dominant narrative that one’s undergraduate major is all that matters and that only some majors will prepare students for success in the workplace doesn’t match the reality. A student’s undergraduate experience, and how well the experience advances critical learning outcomes (knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, integrative and applied learning), is what matters most, with 80% of employers agreeing that all students need a strong foundation in the liberal arts and sciences. Indeed, in the global knowledge economy, employer demand for graduates with a liberal education is growing.

A liberal education for the 21st century mandates the acceleration of integrative, high-impact learning opportunities that engage every student in solving unscripted, real-world problems across all types of institutions, within the context of the workforce, not apart from it. Beyond bridging the gap between curriculum and workforce needs, colleges and universities must acknowledge that there is no longer a consensus about the value of a college degree. In fact, business executives and hiring managers find ePortfolios containing artifacts of demonstrable skills more helpful than college transcripts and resumes alone when evaluating and hiring recent graduates. Given that students today will experience an average of 11.9 career changes over their lifetimes, half of which

will occur between the ages of 18-24, colleges and universities must partner with business and industry to develop the skills that will prepare our students not only for a wide range of workplace options, but that will also equip them to deal with a future none of us can fully predict.

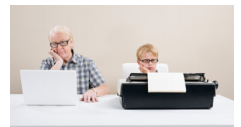
In short, we need to push back against the narrative that a liberal arts education is “useless.” That type of thinking simply doesn’t bear out in the real world.

LP

Lynn Pasquerella is president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Recommended For You

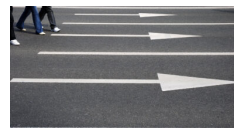
Why "Wisdom Work" Is the New "Knowledge Work"



PODCAST
How to Scale a Start-Up



How Part-Time Senior Leaders Can Help Your Business



How to Give Your Boss Feedback

