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Our Universities: Liberal Education

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Our Universities: Liberal Education

Students benefit from an educational experience that requires rigorous analytical thought: the power of a sharp mind. The value of such a mind is real in the marketplace, with worth beyond measure for anyone who possesses one.

The liberally educated person is one who is able to resist the easy and preferred answers not because he is obstinate but because he knows others worthy of consideration.

Allan Bloom (1930 - 1992)

With mounting pressure for the production of degrees from universities, as evidenced by state boards with an ever-growing interest in performance metrics such as time-to-degree, numbers of degrees awarded, etc., universities are looking carefully at the value of individual degree programs.

A potential casualty may be programs leading to a liberal education, which may be dismissed as having little utility in the marketplace. But there is a growing sense of importance in the business and industrial marketplace that suggests degrees that teach problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking skills provide benefit to students and seats of commerce and industry as well.

Stephen Pratt, CEO of ESCO Corporation and chair of the Oregon business Council, said, *"My company lives and dies on our ability to innovate and create new products and processes that give us an edge in this very competitive global economy. ESCO needs people who have both a command of certain specific skills and robust problem-solving and communication skills."* He is not alone. Peter D. Hart Research Associates concurs, "employers generally are... frustrated with their inability to find '360 degree people' who have both the specific job/technical skills and the broader skills..."

This is not to imply that all non-technical degrees or degrees in any subject area where the focus may be casually defined have value. Degrees and learning experiences that are rigorous in the development of rhetoric and writing skills, reading, analysis, critical thinking, quantitative capability, and the generally broad range of abilities that allow people to be effective problem solvers are not as common as they should be.

Unfortunately too frequently, a liberal arts degree is turned into a gauzy, leaking, superficial experience that provides the student little but a selection of courses from a smorgasbord of offerings not directed towards any specific end.

The Council on Competitiveness says that abilities in complex communication and expert thinking are growing in demand in the marketplace while ability to perform routine manual and routine cognitive tasks shrink.

Last year, Undersecretary of Education Martha Kanter, said that less than 38% of the jobs for 2018 will require a high school education or less. Over 60% will require certificates or degrees, or both. Assuredly, technical disciplines that demand training and education in specific subjects will be important. But, significant numbers of people with broad-based critical thinking, problem solving, and higher order cognitive coupled with technical skills will be in the highest demand.

That marriage will win the day.

The Association of American College and Universities observes that employers are overwhelmingly seeking employees who have effective written and oral communication skills. Eighty-nine percent of employers interviewed identified this as their top concern.

There is real value of the three R's; reading, writing, and arithmetic, in the marketplace. In addition the ability to locate, organize and evaluate information continually grows in importance, whether on a cell phone, an iPad, or a "big" machine. Finding insight, not just information, in the digital labyrinth is the foundation for critical thinking skills.

The key to unlock the applicability of a strong liberal education lies in the rigor of the courses and programs offered. Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), a national advocacy group for excellence, suggests that essential learning outcomes, high-impact educational practices, and authentic assessments among other initiatives could have a powerful impact in the workplace and on graduates' ability to find gainful employment.

This is not a reconstituted quadrivium of the Renaissance - arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, followed the tritium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. These subjects were/are the foundation for a liberal education as we know it today. Education that values a rigorous appreciation for literature, arts and science, coupled with quantitative and technical skills, will prepare graduates for good jobs that require the thoughtful application of cognitive and intellectual skills, and a 21st century rebirth of a Renaissance realization.

Our universities, in a legitimate rush to give students value for their educational investment, should not overlook the traditional baccalaureate skills offered in a strong liberal education. I like **Golden Corral** as much as the next guy, but fad driven core-curricula that look like all-you-can-eat buffets won't work.