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Our Universities: The Liberal Arts and China

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Our Universities: The Liberal Arts and China

The fundamentals of a free thinking society, communication and ciphering ability, are not do-dads, or throw-aways but essentials for a university to meet its public responsibilities and have durable economic impact.

“So what does business need from our educational system? One answer is that it needs more employees who excel in science and engineering and the remainder of a workforce that is exposed to enough science and mathematics to function in the rapidly evolving high-tech world.

But that is only the beginning: one cannot live by equations alone. The need is increasing for workers with greater foreign language skills and an expanded knowledge of economics, history and geography. And who wants a technology-driven economy when those who drive it are not grounded in such fields as ethics?”

Norman Augustine, former Chairman and CEO of the Lockheed Martin Corporation, 2013

The impact of Chinese universities on international higher education is inarguable. The order of magnitude will not be fully realized until mid-century, but the effects will be pervasive and likely equal in influence to the German Polytechnics of the mid 19th century.

Gerald A. Postiglione, director of the ***Center of Research on Education in China*** at the University of Hong Kong, like many educational leaders worldwide, believes the Western conception and centrality of the liberal arts will take root in China. Norman Augustine is correct and Chinese educators sense it.

High-energy, high-achieving research universities power economies.

Tremendous pressure exists in a developing economy that is shedding top-down authoritarian traditions and adopting an entrepreneurial bottom-up approach to focus on pragmatics. But, producing “useful” skilled workers without regard to creativity, free thinking, and inquisitiveness is shortsighted. Short-term cost-benefit thinking rather than long-term economic vision flashes brightly for a season but fades brusquely.

Chinese leaders know this, having lived the fruits of a “rote learning culture.” The pressure to train students with marketable skills is important, but must be looked at long-term, not solely through the myopia of immediate need.

In the U.S. this consternation existed before the Morrill Act that created public research universities as we know them today signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862. The act, its founders, and endorsers, had the vision and foresight to “***promote the liberal and practical education*** (emphasis added) of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”

Societies that focus on the ***practical***, without regard to the ***liberal***, pay the utmost long-term cost. The power to sustain is trumped by the power to produce. The value of balance is irrefutable. In America’s best research universities, which have ubiquitous economic impact, a broad “liberal” view of learning is absolutely essential and recognized as such by university leadership and faculty.

Examples of powerful economic impact, nurtured by a liberal arts background, are well-known in America. In 2011, Stanford faculty published a report, “***Impact: Stanford University’s Economic Impact via Innovation and Entrepreneurship***,” that identified 12 Companies with Stanford “DNA” whose market values exceeded \$10 billion each, and whose economic impact topped \$.5 trillion. A case-by-case analysis of the entrepreneurs reveals a wide range of educational experiences but, each one of them exhibits an understanding of the value and economic power of discovery and creative thinking.

Domestic universities generated \$1.8 billion in patent revenue in 2012, and more than double that in recurring royalty income. University “profits” follow research investments yielding between a 4% and 8% return. During 2012 in the U.S., return on investment was \$54.2 billion.

California, Columbia, Dartmouth, Florida, Michigan, MIT and a host of others combine a strong liberal arts foundation with sound scientific and practical educational opportunities. Other institutions perform proportionally to investment and vision.

Chen Yongfang, a Chinese national, studied at Bowdoin College, a perennial champion of liberal arts. His record allowed him entry into leading research universities. He was so impressed with the Bowdoin experience he penned a book: ***A True Liberal Arts Education*** heralding the virtues of an experience little known in China. He suggests thoughtful reflection is invaluable to individual and state. Not a do-dad.

Our universities are responsible for vitalizing economies with skillful workers. But, uncoupled from a keenly nurtured mind that responsibility is squandered. The marriage of creative thinking and high skill creates strong economies. Nothing else will. The Chinese are on the precipice of belief.