Liberal arts education suits these changing times

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With the economy in a post-Sept. 11 tailspin — manufacturing in a deep slump, corporate profits plummeting, unemployment growing and consumer confidence plunging despite the lowest interest rates since 1958 — many parents and students have begun to call into question the value of a traditional liberal arts education. That, of course, is not an entirely new question, but it is being asked today much more frequently and with more intensity.

My answer then and now remains the same. After working 30 years in both global investment banking and management education, I can say unequivocally "yes," a liberal arts undergraduate education is not only valuable, it is arguably essential. The temptation to choose a purely technical education to make oneself more immediately marketable in a poor economy is exactly the wrong instinct. A liberal arts education is an advantageous choice during peace and prosperity, and it is an indispensable choice in troubled times.

Consider this: A carefully designed liberal arts curriculum emphasizes a breadth of knowledge. Although it is not ignored, narrow specialization is not the goal. The true goal of a liberal arts education is to provide students with effective thinking skills. My deepest conviction is that humanity more than ever before desperately needs to use the most sophisticated levels of thinking. Nobody knows better than the governmental and business communities that we have become, on a scale never before conceivable, a global society surrounded by information.

A good liberal arts education teaches a student how to deal with enormous amounts of data, how to consider the sources of information and the inaccuracies, biases, perspectives and blind spots those sources might harbor. Further, liberal arts students are drilled throughout their entire course of study on how to organize data and how to communicate their findings into logical and meaningful statements. And finally, they must acquire the ability to discriminate, the ability to create coherence and the ability to make meaning.

Liberal arts graduates are intellectually engaged, innovative and passionately curious. They are trained to take thoughtful risks by thinking and experimenting beyond what is called for by the simple answers.

A recent alumnus told me about one College of Charleston physics professor who set four candles on his lab table and lit them. After a minute, he picked up one of the burning candles and stuffed it in his mouth, whole, as the students watched in amazement.

What the professor was doing was a variation of a "Plato's Cave" demonstration. In the fourth century B.C., the great philosopher Plato used the allegory of shadows on the cave wall to illustrate how perceptions can mask reality and prevent real learning from taking place.

"Was the professor a poor man's David Copperfield?" I asked. "Not at all," the alumnus answered. "Just an amazing teacher. The "candles" were not candles at all, but apple cores. The professor challenged my perception of reality that day, and ever since I've been prepared to consider alternate possibilities."

For 10 years we were in a period of economic expansion, with the nation focused on business. A dot-com culture distorted our vision. To an extent, it was a short-sighted vision that cast education in consumer terms.

Now we are in a global recession and the temptation rises to focus on an immediate return on investment when choosing a college. However, without a disciplined mind shaped by a broad education, students are severely disadvantaged, even in the very first jobs they get after college. In business, the watchword is change, and the pace of change is accelerating.

When surveyed as to the qualities most desired in prospective employees, top CEOs of major corporations identified those qualities cultivated through a liberal arts education — an ability to think broadly and creatively, an ability to remain flexible in unpredictable situations, and an ability to communicate clearly. These, then, are the employees with "The Right Stuff."
We are committed to providing a strong foundation in communication skills, cognitive problem solving, and interpersonal and leadership skills. When our students work one-on-one with faculty sharing in their research, they master more than the subject area.

They learn how to learn, and that might be the single most important skill students can acquire during their college years.

When faculty teach students the ability to take hold of a difficult problem and effectively and logically reason and experiment their way through it, in a disciplined and creative way, they have succeeded in teaching "The Right Stuff."

Although we are working particularly hard in this economic climate to make our programs more practical, we will continue to do what we have done for over 230 years — teach our students how to learn. That, after all, is the most beneficial preparation for professional life in a volatile world.

Lee Higdon wrote this article while president of the College of Charleston from 2001-2006.