

# *American Association of Colleges and Universities*



## LIBERAL EDUCATION

*Liberal Education* expresses the voices of educators, faculty and administrators in colleges and universities nationwide who are working to enrich liberal learning and undergraduate education. AAC&U's award-winning journal is the national forum about liberal education - a forum addressing teaching and learning, leadership, faculty innovation, and institutional change all in the service of improving undergraduate education.

## Winter 2005 Volume 91, Number 1

### PERSPECTIVES

#### LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY APPROACH

By Leo I. Higdon Jr.

In some quarters, the suggestion that a productive marriage can and should exist between a liberal education and the entrepreneurial mindset might seem heretical. But in clearly defining what we mean by the entrepreneurial mindset, we can understand why its study as an integrative discipline within liberal education is so important, particularly given the changing expectations of the career-driven graduates of the twenty-first century.

#### **The Entrepreneurial Mindset**

Before we begin a discussion on the connections between the entrepreneurial mindset and a liberal education, let's clarify our definitions. First, I would describe those with an entrepreneurial mindset as individuals who can extend their knowledge to recognize opportunities where others don't. These individuals don't think in conventional, linear terms; instead, they excel in thinking at higher levels of complexity. They are *constant learners* who continually challenge assumptions. Starting from a strong foundation of knowledge, they are able to determine key facts and separate the important from the trivial.

But they don't stop at merely recognizing an opportunity; they also seize it, act upon it, and marshal the necessary resources to successfully execute the opportunity as a holistic plan. In other words, these individuals not only sense and define a particular need; they energize others and assemble a team that can create a solution for that need. They create value in any institution, whether it's a commercial enterprise, a nonprofit organization, or a higher education institution.

In executing an opportunity, individuals with the entrepreneurial mindset create alliances based on their own backgrounds, experiences, and relationships. They undertake affiliations to secure the necessary resources and then execute a plan. Also, entrepreneurial thinking instills more active, transparent, and integrative leadership, a style that is critical in today's tumultuous work environment.

If we examine these characteristics one by one, we can see how they can apply to liberal education in a very concrete way. Take, for instance, just some of the goals of a liberal education: a solid foundation in knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, the ability to deal effectively with complexity and ambiguity, and a very real passion for learning. These characteristics are not part of some vague intellectual ideal that will hopefully be ingrained in our students by the time they graduate. Instead, they are tools our students need to use, especially if they are to bring the broad perspective of a well-rounded education to an increasingly compartmentalized society. The Association of American Colleges and Universities' study *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002, viii) addresses the increasingly convoluted, rapidly-changing world our graduates now face:

Students are flocking to college because the world is complex, turbulent, and more reliant on knowledge

than ever before. But educational practices invented when higher education served only the few are increasingly disconnected from the needs of contemporary students. Today's college students come from an extraordinarily diverse array of national, racial/ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. They bring great vitality to campus, but also place significant new demands on faculty knowledge and skill.

### **Seven Traits of the Liberally Educated, Entrepreneurially Informed Student**

There are certain striking characteristics of liberal education graduates who have been infused with the entrepreneurial mindset—characteristics that are particularly relevant given today's unpredictable environment. Some of the most prevalent (and useful) traits these individuals exhibit include the following:

#### ***They Challenge Conventional Thinking.***

In a liberal education, facts are not merely accepted; they are integrated from several perspectives, synthesized, and then used to inform. In this way, students are taught to question and reason from the data provided. Infuse this tradition with an entrepreneurial mindset, and you have graduates who can discover new opportunities by challenging assumptions and questioning results. Without this challenge to longstanding assumptions, nothing of value would be added to an organization. And because we teach our liberal education students not *what* to think but *how* to think, they bring fresh perspectives that are the result of a broad range of thought and experience—an essential part of thinking outside conventional boundaries to see new, multiconceptual approaches to old problems.

#### ***They See Connections Where Others Don't.***

Strongly related to this synthesis of data is the ability of liberally educated students to recognize abstract relationships. If we infuse this ability with an entrepreneurial mindset, students can not only study the data as a whole and look for possible connections; they can also recognize the links between seemingly disparate elements as clear opportunities for new developments. Once recognized, these connections can then be communicated clearly and logically, presented as a simple value proposition that can be understood and appreciated by all.

#### ***They Understand the Value of the Team.***

Understanding the strength of various perspectives is of paramount importance to the liberally educated student; individuals with the entrepreneurial mindset understand the different roles within a team and how each contributes to the resulting dynamic. Students knowledgeable in both appreciate the interplay of different strengths and the inherent value in diversity of thought and perspective. It is this recognition—that true strength is a result of diverse components working together—that forms the basis of our best liberal education programs and our most successful social endeavors.

#### ***They Focus on the Larger Goal.***

Liberally educated students who are infused with the entrepreneurial mindset can bring greater discipline to thinking in pursuit of the larger goal. They learn to look beyond the temporary diversions that can sidetrack them from their original objective. And in the ethical and cultural turbulence of today's society, any loss of focus in our pursuits can be deadly: they can turn what would have been a temporary setback into an insurmountable obstacle.

#### ***They Learn From Setbacks.***

When setbacks arise, the individual with the entrepreneurial mindset gathers information from available sources, interprets it, and adjusts the plan of action accordingly. Like the liberal education student, this individual is a *constant learner*. Being a constant learner brings with it the ability to learn from unanticipated events. In this respect there are two key elements: (1) having the ability to discern what's important and therefore what to react to, as opposed to seeing all information as being equally important; and (2) expecting surprises and knowing you will have to adjust. Liberally educated individuals with this characteristic have learned to differentiate the salient points of an issue from the nonessential trivia and act on them. Every educator seeks to instill in students the ability to learn from unanticipated events, for they understand its importance as a condition of lifelong learning. And in so doing, they bring fresh perspectives into the mix, thus reinforcing the characteristic of challenging assumptions.

This "trial and error" approach of liberal education can only be strengthened by an entrepreneurial mindset, in which students act, observe, learn from their mistakes, and adjust their plan or hypothesis as needed. In effect, liberally educated students with an entrepreneurial mindset are taught to expect surprises; the important thing is that they decide on a course of action, see the consequences of their decisions, and learn from them.

But these students also apply the knowledge they have gained and they *act on it*. They seek solutions. And once a plan has been well-formulated and acted upon, it serves as a valuable experience regardless of the outcome. Liberal education students with an entrepreneurial mindset instinctively recognize that direct experiences

often have much more to teach, and they use each experience as a cornerstone for further opportunities. They benefit from the *practical* application of knowledge outside the classroom, in situations where they must process their experience and learn from it.

Additionally, the entrepreneurial mindset encourages the hands-on, practical approach to a liberal education, in which knowledge can be *immediately* applied. Students learn from direct experience, come up with new approaches when necessary, recognize the important issues, and think through the problems that arise. This process of learning and then applying knowledge is extremely important to today's liberal education graduates, who are facing much more technological and social change than their predecessors. The necessity of creative thinking and multiple approaches to problem solving are visible, highly-prized skills in today's complex society and are key elements of a well-rounded liberal education.

### ***They Develop and Appreciate a Sense of Self.***

Having a strong sense of self is an important outcome of a liberal education, and it can be greatly strengthened when it's informed by an entrepreneurial mindset. In other words, the ability to act is essential, but so is the ability to act from a sound basis of personal values, strong ethics, and a clear knowledge of oneself. A liberal education is designed to let students explore many interests, to discover their passion, to realize their thirst to learn. In so doing, students see where they can and want to have the greatest impact.

And here is where the connection between the entrepreneurial mindset and a liberal education becomes so important. The ability to think entrepreneurially means the ability to take a vision from opportunity recognition through team building to successful execution, regardless of the endeavor. By promoting self-awareness, personal development, and the value of the team, the entrepreneurial mindset shows, in real-world applications, how critical one's values and self-knowledge are to a successful and fulfilling life. This element of self-knowledge, so strengthened by a liberal education and so helpful to understanding one's role in planning and executing the entrepreneurial vision, is particularly crucial given the tremendous global needs of the twenty-first century.

### ***They Communicate Effectively.***

Liberal education students are taught the value of clear communication early on; individuals with an entrepreneurial mindset know that the ability to communicate effectively and persuasively is critical to the success of their endeavors. Without the ability to articulate a vision and a plan, and without the ability to articulate it with clarity, enthusiasm, and passion, these individuals have little chance of recruiting the team members and the resources they will need to see a plan through to completion.

And isn't this the same aim of a liberal education? Just as we don't want our liberal education graduates bound by traditional thinking, we also don't want our graduates unable to persuasively communicate their ideas, visions, and conclusions. And as we move into a more technological, automated society, there are aspects of communication being lost—aspects like reading and comprehension, or of seeing the less obvious subtext (i.e., opportunity) of situations. Most importantly, as leaders and visionaries, our liberal education graduates cannot devalue effective communication and work in a vacuum; the nature of today's society is far too interdependent.

And this interdependence underscores why entrepreneurial thinking should be considered from the first as an integrative, interconnected theme in liberal education, and why a liberal education can only serve to sharpen the entrepreneurial mindset. The crux of the matter is this: it's a different century, a different world of work, and most importantly, a different type of student being educated. In an environment like this, a narrow education holds two risks. First, it's preparing students for jobs that may not exist by the time they graduate. Second, it may *not* be preparing them for the challenges of citizenship or professional life, whether they are in the for-profit or non-profit sector.

Today's students not only know this, they understand it on a level that most of us have never had to appreciate. They are a different breed, having come of age in a rapidly-changing society where jobs are no longer guaranteed as the result of a college education, and where world politics have made a global society an undeniable fact of life.

Technological advances are also instigating enormous changes in the social and not-for-profit sectors. To cope with this new and unpredictable world, we need individuals with a new way of thinking: individuals with the combination of a liberal education and an entrepreneurial mindset who will be creative, adaptable, and able to think at higher levels of complexity. Contrary to the beliefs of many who grew up in the pre-technology boom of the mid-twentieth century, a liberal education is a practical solution to the changing needs and concerns of society. And this practicality, strengthened by the spirit of the entrepreneurial mindset, is what students are looking for now.

So what do we do? How do we best serve this new type of student, given the advantages of infusing a liberal education with entrepreneurial thinking? There's no question that, along with a new century and a new type of student, we have an alarming new trend away from the liberal arts and toward a narrow or specialized education. The problem is not so much in assigning value to a particular type of education, but more in providing the broad-

based education that can best serve as a preparation for life and career. The challenges of the new century demand these new perspectives, regardless of whether the sector is private or nonprofit, in the general academic or in the skilled preprofessional.

We can start by recognizing the tremendous benefits to be gained from the infusion of entrepreneurial thinking across all academic disciplines of a liberal education. As educators of the next generation of leaders, we can't have graduates bound by traditional thinking. We must also have individuals who develop a creative approach to problem solving, the ability to see opportunities where others don't, and who focus, above all, on making a difference.

A good example of this proactive attitude is the work being done by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, arguably the best-known entrepreneurial education foundation in the country. Although entrepreneurship courses were scarce as recently as fifteen years ago, the Kauffman Foundation notes the spread of entrepreneurship courses as well as the flourishing interest in entrepreneurship in "non-business" disciplines, such as the liberal arts, life sciences, and engineering. And in the spirit of encouraging this integration, the Kauffman Foundation has established a number of grants for model programs that will make the study of entrepreneurship accessible to liberal arts students, regardless of their academic discipline.

This is already taking place at Wake Forest University, which has partnered with the Kauffman Foundation to develop an effective model for making entrepreneurial thinking part of the campus culture. According to Associate Professor Page West (Mansell 2003), principal investigator of the proposal, the idea is to "support any student from any discipline, from freshman year to graduate school, who wants to learn about and pursue entrepreneurship. We believe that liberal education and entrepreneurship are not at odds with each other, that in fact they may be mutually reinforcing concepts."

So the precedent has been set. The students need it. And the status quo of a liberal education may no longer be as effective in adequately preparing our graduates for life in the twenty-first century. Does this mean we should reform, or even abandon, the core principles of a sound liberal education? Of course not. But what we *can* do is adapt to this new world and these new students, and then, as constant learners, educate ourselves as to how best we can serve their changing needs. How we ultimately decide to implement entrepreneurial thinking in our classrooms is a question that only trial and error can answer. But it's a process that needs to be inculcated, before the idea of a well-rounded, liberal education is perceived as a rarefied privilege instead of the societal necessity it must remain.

#### **References**

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2002. *Greater expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Mansell, Sarah. 2003. WFU receives \$2 million entrepreneurship grant. Wake Forest University News Service. <http://www.wfu.edu/wfunews/2003/121503k.html>.