

Halt retreat of liberal arts education

BY LEO I. HIGDON, JR.

The liberal arts model of education, once the Gold Standard, is falling into disrepute.



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Only 30 years ago, almost every college student trained under this regimen. Yet now the liberal arts are in retreat on many campuses across the country, both large universities and even some traditional liberal arts colleges.

Some critics of these new trends bemoan the fact that many college seniors can't say for sure whether Italy was a friend or foe in World War II, identify one Shakespeare play, or recognize the names of a dozen lesser-known U.S. presidents. (One wag said that college students today believe Marxism is all about Groucho.)

What accounts for this trend? There are probably several factors. In the 10th year of an economic expansion, the nation is focused on business. (Despite predictions of a downturn, we are still in a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity.)

Another reason is our consumer culture, which dominates the thinking about higher education. Parents and students have adopted a kind of short-term outlook that sees education only in utilitarian terms. The obsession with credentials and return-on-investment has forced colleges and universities to show an immediate payoff by focusing on increasingly narrow fields of study.

The cost of education can't be overlooked as a factor in increasing families' expectations of results. But what

are the outcomes we should be looking for?

The abandonment of the liberal arts and humanities as a core part of higher education, if allowed to continue, is a mistake that will come to haunt us as a society in the decades to come. Abandoning the liberal arts will certainly hobble the career trajectories of thousands of college students who may one day find themselves without the kind of broad education that allows them to remain flexible and adaptable during rapid changes in the economy.

Instead, before it is too late, we

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should modify the teaching of liberal arts to take into account the changes that have occurred in our society, our economy, and the mindsets and needs of today's students. We must recast the teaching of the liberal arts at the undergraduate level to develop students as good business people and as good citizens for the complex global society we live in.

Many students perceive the liberal arts as irrelevant to professional success and it is not hard to see some of the reasons why. Traditionally, liberal arts courses are designed as a step-by-step progression towards mastery in a discipline. That means graduate school, although few students actually pursue the advanced degrees these programs were designed to prepare them for.

In most management or pre-professional programs, the liberal arts (which are 50 percent of the curriculum) are often seen by students (and parents) as a requirement to "get out of the way" during the first two years. Again, it's a question of relevance. If students are exposed to history and literature, for example, only in their early years, they miss the opportunity to reflect on these subjects when they are older and more mature, have developed better critical abilities, and can apply more sophisticated experiences to their learning.

At Babson, a management college, our students continue their liberal arts courses across all four years of their development. Just as their understanding of management problems and issues grows and becomes more sophisticated, so too does their understanding of themselves as participants in and shapers of their society and cultures.

Time and again in surveys, CEOs of major corporations identify the qualities cultivated through liberal arts and humanities as some of the most essential for success. They report that the people who rise in organizations are those who show a well-rounded ability to think, be creative, and remain flexible in trying and uncertain situations.

Educators and the business community must work together to reinforce the value of a comprehensive education that combines the best of liberal learning with professional skills-based education. We must help students see that liberal learning is not irrelevant but central to their future.

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