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## Liberal Arts Schools Are Producing Tomorrow's Leaders

By Leo I. Higdon Jr.

Faced with a contracting economy, Connecticut's future depends on the talent of our next generation workforce. Today's college graduates will either manage as leaders amid a thriving, healthy economy or wring their hands in frustration as knowledge-based jobs continue to flow out of the state and out of the country.

Among college graduates, those who have experienced a comprehensive liberal arts program will prove to be critical to the continuing success of our work world. Companies — in Connecticut and across the country — should seek out liberal arts college graduates now to help them adapt to the changes businesses will see over the coming decades.

I am the president of a liberal arts college, so naturally there's an expectation I would argue that the benefits of a liberal arts education far outweigh those of a more vocational or career-oriented education. I also am a former investment banker who carved out a career on Wall Street that included hiring and managing young people to become top deal-makers. With my experience in higher education and business, I can say with confidence that a liberal arts education is the best preparation for life and career.

Our leading economists, labor experts and futurists have told us what to expect in the evolving world of work. In Connecticut, we're heading into a contracting economy. An increasing percentage of jobs will be knowledge-based, but there will be fewer jobs available, they say. The workforce is becoming far more diverse. Distinct geographical boundaries will fade as work and the talent pool becomes increasingly global.

As work is becoming more specialized, the tasks, concepts and strategies to be successful are more likely to change — dramatically and frequently. Because of uncertainty and complexity, organizational structures will need to be much more fluid. People must be adaptable, and react quickly to local and global opportunities, which puts a premium on communication and cross-cultural skills.

At the same time, we know today's new employees are coming in the door with a different level of expectations, and generational issues need to be taken in account when hiring. Millennials expect their

companies to be socially conscious, environmentally savvy and technologically advanced. They demand flexible work schedules, and they carefully consider a company's culture to find out if its values are ones they can embrace and if the firm's rhetoric matches reality.

One of the state's most valuable assets is its location in New England, surrounded by some of the best liberal arts colleges in the country.

Because liberal arts institutions teach students how to think, not what to think, liberal arts graduates will be the ones who adapt best as the pace of change accelerates. The employers who engage life-long learners — and provide support and recognition for them, ensuring professional development matches desired career paths, aspirations and, ultimately, job satisfaction — are the ones who will come out on top.

Only about 4-5 percent of college graduates every year are from liberal arts colleges, yet these are the students who have learned at some of the most demanding schools, and have some of the most comprehensive educational experiences. It's what makes them the best choice to lead the workforce.

A liberal arts education teaches students to be innovative thinkers who can question, reason and challenge conventional thinking. They have a global orientation that is taught in the classroom and put into practice through work and study abroad. They have high performance standards derived from the high expectations of their academic programs. Additionally, they are action-oriented, accustomed to identifying a problem and then solving it.

In the workplace, liberal arts graduates leverage their many talents — ethical mindset, global orientation, passion for learning, critical thinking and experience working in teams — into a positive influence on the company as a whole. Further, they recognize and understand the value of a diverse workplace.

It's no accident that the majority of CEOs come from liberal arts programs. For the United States to remain competitive in the global marketplace, companies must rely on today's liberal arts graduates.

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