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In Defense of Liberal-Arts Institutions

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MARCH/APRIL 2014

These are interesting times for higher education. I was struck by the thought that “the better we get, the worse it gets.” When I consider the spectrum of issues before any board of trustees in this fraught era, the sheer complexity of the higher education enterprise is the most salient feature.

Like all of our peers, we at Eckerd College face the imponderables and complexities of a dramatically changing environment. The very idea of the liberal arts and the Western intellectual tradition as the touchstone of modern life is under attack by the chattering commentariat. The result is the denigration of the liberal tradition we support as “majoring in art history”—Washington’s invective aimed at positioning the classical liberal tradition as a nonproductive and obsolete academic dead end. The new focus of these solons of barbarism is to measure the value of a college degree by looking at W-2s of graduates five years after graduation.



Demographic changes that involve a declining but increasingly heterogeneous college age cohort, declining or flat personal incomes that make the need for financial aid all the greater, the commoditization of the college degree, and the declining preparedness of all but the best entering freshmen that will call for more institutional intervention further squeeze the traditional academic financial model. Cost ceilings, lower census numbers, higher costs—the better we get, the worse it gets.

Competition among private institutions can only increase over the coming years. All things being equal, those colleges with substantial resources will have a better time of it. However, institutions that do a superior job of making the case for the liberal-arts, values-based education should also survive, if not prosper. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data and other outcomes-related

metrics will become more and more vital in quantifying and justifying the value of what we do.

In the case of my institution, our future lies in distilling our brand to ever more potent formulations, ones that will, admittedly, appeal to only a limited market. I am reminded of the comment by Bob Lutz, the former vice-chairman at Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors, who asked something along the lines of, “What have you got if you produce a car that 90 percent of the market hates, but 10 percent absolutely loves?” The answer, he said, is “a huge hit.” I suspect this kind of a dynamic, a focused appeal to liberal arts-type students, will have to become more and more operative in our competitive space.

A growing number of entering students come with either attainment deficits or cognitive deficits that require some degree of accommodation. Consequently, the ability for institutions to hand-build their education around individualized learning accommodations will be crucial. The extent to which we can accommodate students with ADD, dyslexia, and Asperger’s, for example, will say much about our ability to deliver a valued learning proposition to our market. Often those students are some of the smartest and most creative on campus, but they require special resources.

Naturally, such learning support services are proliferating among colleges and universities of all ranks and qualities. We need to not only keep up with this trend, but also to translate it into another aspect of the learning experience that transforms lives through one hand-built education at a time. We may need to look at multimedia and multi-modal methods to deliver content as well as to assess progress in this new, more complex landscape. We need to make learning innovation a distinction of higher ed.

Institutions such as Eckerd College are strong enough to meet the challenges of a new and unprecedented complexity. These are long-term, existential questions. From intercollegiate athletics to gender parity in our student population to student loan financing, the list is endless. But if our institution and our sector

cannot prevail, then who can? Let's invert our meme, for that's the true measure of our institutions: The worse it gets, the better we will get.

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