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Why the Imperative for the Liberal Arts?

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We asked Mary Dana Hinton, president of the College of Saint Benedict and an advocate for the liberal arts, about their role in 21st-century education. This summer, the College of St. Benedict and Saint John's University will host Liberal Arts Illuminated: Pathways, Possibilities, Partnerships, a three-day conference (July 11–13) on the importance of keeping this tradition alive. She speaks about why that matters to her, and why it should matter to all board members.

How has the role of liberal-arts colleges changed?

The liberal arts are as relevant now as they have ever been. Liberal-arts institutions collectively represent approximately 12 percent of all four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. They enrolled more than



520,000 undergraduate students in fall 2014, 10 percent more than in fall 2004, even though the number of high school graduates has declined in recent years. To be sure, liberal-arts colleges continue to play a vital role in American higher education.

But our vitality as institutions is hard-earned, and we face significant challenges to our ability to thrive. The current conversation about the purpose of higher education suggests that liberalarts colleges, and the study of the liberal arts more generally, are out of step with the times and the future. A liberal-arts education is cast as a frightful investment for families who worry about the economic return on education, a fear amplified by the idea that workforce preparation and a clear and direct link between academic study and employment ought to be the overriding objectives of a college experience. Those arguments take their toll, driving

our students to consider an increasingly narrow set of academic majors and experiences that seem to promise economic gold at the end of the collegiate rainbow.

Are liberal-arts institutions sustainable in this age of technology and STEM fields?

Never has it been more important that liberal-arts colleges take back and more boldly assert their own value narrative. Our commitment as liberalarts institutions extends to the generative uses of knowledge for practical, ethical, and even moral purposes—each more important than ever in our increasingly complicated world. The liberal arts, broadly construed to include all of the sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, and the fine arts, educate toward liberation, toward the ability to excel within any context, toward the ability to expand one's own world. We educate for transformation, leadership, and community, not simply or exclusively for the development of instrumental skills.

How should boards view liberal-arts colleges?

Leaders of liberal-arts colleges, including board members, presidents, and faculty, must embrace the liberal arts as foundational to both transformational personal development and extraordinary professional preparation. One cannot exist without the other. The genius of liberal-arts colleges is their ability to marry the two at a scale that allows our students to explore new paths, consider and integrate new ideas, and find themselves and their voices. We educate for service, for lifelong professional success, for active citizenship, and, not least of all, for community. These are neither soft nor intangible skills. They transcend the technical and immediate and provide a lasting foundation for long-term career success. The skills of the liberal arts never become obsolete.

What is the role of boards in innovating and sustaining the liberal arts?

Board members play a unique role on our campuses. They can share our message and stories in the corporate, political, and public arenas; help the public understand the clear and compelling value of our work in order to serve as ambassadors for our liberal-arts graduates; and support administrators, faculty members, and policy makers as they wrestle with the challenges and issues facing liberal-arts colleges, discover our collective voice, and provide readily available evidence to demonstrate the value of the liberal arts in practical terms.

The liberal arts can survive and thrive. They must. Visit www.liberalartsilluminated.com for more information and to register to join us.

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