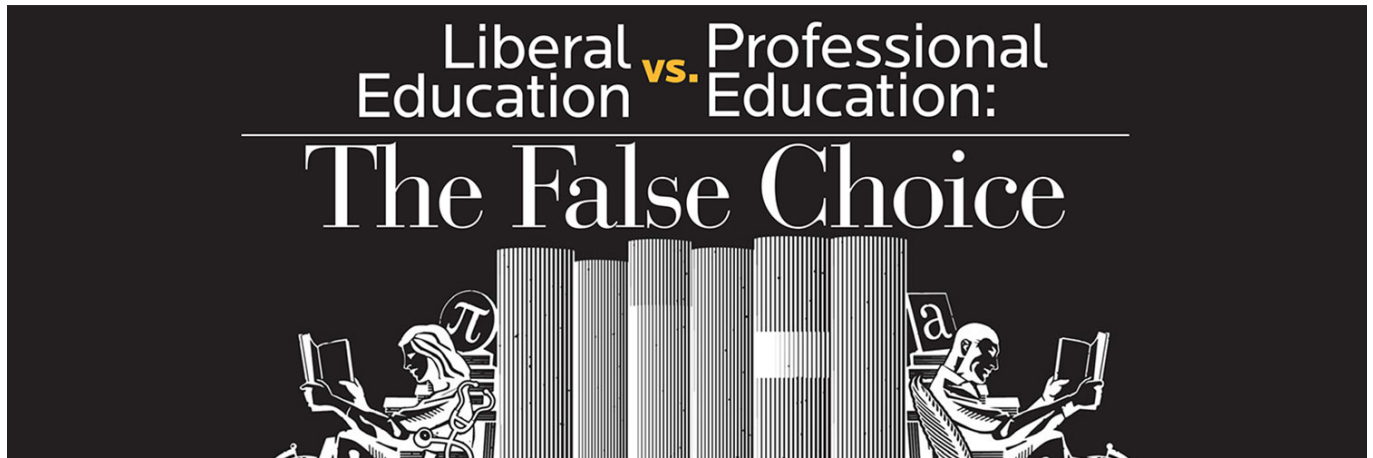


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# Liberal Education vs. Professional Education: The False Choice

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### TAKEAWAYS

A false choice is emerging both on campuses and off between a “liberal education” on the one hand and “professional training” on the other.

There is confusion about what the liberal arts are or what a liberal education means, and some policy makers see liberal education as unrelated to the workplace, and, therefore, undeserving of public funding.



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A false choice is emerging both on campus and off between a "liberal education" (or the study of the "liberal arts") on the one hand and "professional training" on the other. Increasingly, the view that an unbridgeable chasm exists between the two has made the lack of support for liberal-arts disciplines—including, for example, philosophy, communication studies, and anthropology, to name just a few—a front-burner issue for many universities and the boards that oversee them.

This false choice between liberal learning and professional studies can be seen on campuses in students' oft-stated desire to get their general education courses out of the way so they can pursue a major. The same dichotomy can be seen in parents' dismay over their child's decision to major in English, anthropology, or history instead of pursuing a more "practical" degree. Off campuses, this false choice undergirds the statements of governors across the nation calling for reduced funding for the humanities and social sciences in favor of support for more practical studies in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM fields), or professional areas.

For example, in 2011, Governor Rick Perry (R) of Texas challenged his state's universities to develop a \$10,000 four-year bachelor's degree. One of his solutions to the high cost of a college degree was to prioritize state funding for teaching over research and to fund studies in STEM fields over philosophy, history, and other humanities disciplines or social-science programs like political science and sociology. That same year, Governor Rick Scott (R) of Florida adopted Perry's "solutions" when he called for Florida legislators to shift state appropriations and offer \$10,000 degrees to students with STEM and other "job-friendly" degrees while charging higher tuition for degrees in the humanities and social sciences.

Similarly, North Carolina governor Patrick McCrory (R) announced in January 2013 that he would try to fund state universities based on "post-graduate employment" rather than enrollments. In a radio interview with former U.S. Secretary of Education William J. Bennett, McCrory said that state support should "not be based on butts in seats but on how many of those butts can get jobs." (Perhaps ironically, Bennett and McCrory both received their B.A. degrees from liberal-arts colleges—Williams College and Catawba College, respectively—that still require each student to take general studies in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.)

What explains this growing movement to deemphasize and discredit liberal education? First, there is a lot of confusion among parents, students, the general public, and even board members about what the liberal

arts are or what a liberal education means. (See box below.) Second, some policy makers see liberal education as unrelated to the workplace, and, therefore, undeserving of public funding in these days of tight state budgets. And, finally, many persons mistakenly assume that a liberal education teaches “politically correct” or “liberal” political or social views.

Tragically, such attitudes display little understanding of what liberal education is and the centrality of liberal learning skills and perspectives in helping college graduates succeed in today’s global economy. And because of the misconceptions of what liberal education is and the widespread lack of knowledge of the benefits of a liberal education for students—regardless of majors or careers—boards of some public universities are being asked to reduce or eliminate funding of the very courses of study that give American students an edge over their global peers.

Yet as Richard L. Morrill, former president of the Teagle Foundation, says in *Strategic Leadership in Academic Affairs: Clarifying the Board’s Responsibilities* (AGB, 2002), a key fiduciary responsibility of college and university boards is not only to financially support liberal education at their institutions, but also to oversee the success of liberal learning and its integration with students’ majors. Thus, it is not just the funding but the *quality* of liberal education about which board members should have a vested interest and ultimate fiduciary oversight.

## WHAT IS “LIBERAL EDUCATION” AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Liberal education is not a new concept. The idea of receiving a liberal education through the study of the liberal arts first emerged in classical times and focused on grammar, logic, and rhetoric (later called the *Trivium*). In Roman times, every free (*liber*) citizen was expected to study these three core liberal arts in order to participate in civic affairs such as legal proceedings, public debates, and even service in the military. Nearly all of the colleges and universities founded in the 18th and 19th centuries in America adopted an expanded classical liberal-arts curriculum. Today, those traditional liberal arts curricula have blossomed into dozens of disciplines, including not only English, history, philosophy, and political science, but also economics, biology, chemistry, and physics—and many more.

Liberal education (often also known as “general education,” or the part of a liberal education curriculum that is shared by all students, regardless of major) is required on most college and university campuses. It seeks to provide a broad array of intellectual and practical abilities that enable all students:

- To practice analytical thinking and communicate well in written and oral modes;
- To frame issues in historical and multicultural contexts;
- To work independently and in team settings;
- To assume both vocational and civic roles and responsibilities; and
- To apply their knowledge and skills in complex problem-solving in an evermore complex and rapidly changing world.

These abilities and skills are the very ones that employers seek today—that is, *they are “practical” skills for virtually all professions*. Of the business and industry leaders who responded to a survey conducted by the

Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), 93 percent said that a college graduate they hired should have a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems—all skills provided by a good liberal education. More than nine in 10 business and community leaders stressed the importance of college graduates demonstrating ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning—again, core goals of a liberal education.

AAC&U captures the practical importance of a liberal education when it says, “liberal education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change....[It] helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.” Educators and employers alike agree that vocationally oriented “practical degrees” can quickly become obsolete in today’s rapidly changing environment, while the skills developed through an education in the liberal arts are enduring.

In their 2007 report on “College Learning for the New Global Century,” AAC&U concludes, “Employers are urging more—and better—liberal education, not less.” Examples cited included the judgment of Edward B. Rust Jr., chairman and CEO of State Farm Insurance Companies, who noted that only 50 percent of high-school and college graduates pass State Farm’s employment exam that “requires them to demonstrate critical thinking skills and the ability to calculate and think logically.” He continued, “These skills, plus the ability to read for information, to communicate and write effectively, and to have an understanding of global integration, need to be demonstrated.... [skills] employees need if they are to be successful in navigating the workplace.” Likewise, Siemens Corporation CEO George C. Nolen said of his management team, “A solid foundation in the liberal arts and sciences is necessary for those who want to be corporate leaders.”

What’s more, students with liberal-arts degrees go on to immediate employment or further study in their chosen fields at about the same rate as students graduating with professional degrees. For example, 98 percent of the 400 to 450 students who graduate each year from the University of Mount Union in Ohio where I serve as a board member are employed or are accepted into graduate studies within three months of their graduation. While about half of these students major in traditional liberal-arts disciplines and half in professional studies, all graduates take about 25 percent of their coursework in the liberal arts through general-studies courses. The post-graduation results at similar liberal-arts institutions are comparable. And a recent report, “How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment,” found that liberal-arts majors who have an undergraduate or advanced degree earn on average more money by their mid-50s than people who studied in pre-professional or professional areas. Again, simply put, to pose liberal learning and professional studies as opposites, conceptually and practically, creates a false choice.

## **THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF LIBERAL AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES**

Despite the fundamental value of liberal education, a number of factors have contributed to the increased focus on pre-professional and professional studies and less attention to liberal education at most colleges and universities in America. One factor is that a far greater portion than ever before—in fact, a majority—of the contemporary workforce will engage in some postsecondary education and, therefore, see it as

essential for the employment. While at the turn of the 20th century only 5 percent of high-school graduates (nearly all men) received a “classical” bachelor’s degree, today over 70 percent of high-school graduates attend postsecondary institutions. Thus, today, 25 percent of America’s workforce has a bachelor’s degree, and 40 percent has earned at least an associate’s degree.

Second, the increasing diversity of contemporary students also plays a role in the increased focus on pre-professional and professional studies. Now more women than men, and more students above the age of 25 than those of traditional college age, attend American colleges and universities. And within a few decades, more Hispanic, African-American, and other “minority” students will attend college than Caucasians. Should we be surprised that these “non-traditional” students—who come from an increasingly broad socioeconomic spectrum and who, in the past, would have worked after graduating from high school rather than attend college—often seek “practical” or professional education from the institutions they attend? And as state appropriations shrink, more students from across the total economic spectrum must pay more of their college education costs. In response, they want their bachelor’s degree to provide access to employment that will pay their college loans and provide a good living.

Yet another factor for administrators and board members to consider is that, over the past century, all disciplines, including those in the liberal arts, have increasingly become more specialized and professionalized. In a 2005 essay, AAC&U president Carol G. Schneider noted that some academics arts and sciences disciplines have become so “absorbed in their own scholarly questions” that they have drawn back from “overt concern with the broader aims of liberal education such as civic engagement, ethical reasoning, or integrative learning.”

One result is that most academic departments, even at select liberal-arts colleges, are better organized to prepare their majors for advanced study in their discipline than to provide courses that provide a strong liberal education for all students. As a consequence, it has become more difficult for students to integrate the various content and perspectives across areas of study and to apply them to the complex contemporary problems that corporate leaders Rust and Nolen say their workplaces will require them to address.

## **INTEGRATIVE LEARNING FOR TODAY’S JOBS AND WORLD**

The fact is that liberal education requires not only exposure to a broad range of liberal-arts courses, but also the development of students’ ability to integrate those varied perspectives to solve real-world problems. The time has come for college and university leaders, including board members, to ask if their campus’ liberal or general education, along with disciplinary depth, provides their students with a multi-disciplinary and holistic problem-solving approach to the complex local and global challenges we all face.

Many people within and outside the academy tend to link a liberal-arts education or liberal education with only the roughly 250 private liberal-arts colleges in America. However, liberal education, often under the rubric of “general education,” is also an essential curricular component of public universities large and small. Most two-year community colleges and four-year public universities provide liberal education through what are typically called general education courses. In addition, public flagship universities and land-grant institutions have missions that usually include undergraduate degrees in liberal-arts disciplines

along with pre-professional and professional studies such as agriculture, business, education, architecture, and engineering.

Public institutions like New College in Florida and Evergreen State College in Washington have demonstrated how public dollars can be used to produce very marketable graduates with interdisciplinary and integrative curricula that are grounded in a commitment to liberal learning. And Arizona State University (ASU), the largest American public university, with 70,000 students, has eliminated numerous traditional academic departments while creating more than a dozen interdisciplinary divisions and schools to achieve more integrative learning and foster better problem-solving skills among their students.

For example, ASU provides undergraduate majors in “sustainability” that require students to integrate humanistic studies like English or communications along with social-science studies in economics or political science with natural-science courses that focus on the environment. And majors must complete an internship that requires the student to engage with such a multidisciplinary notion of “sustainability.” Many other ASU undergraduate majors also combine scientific, economic, social, and humanistic approaches to complex problems such as poverty or poor public health and link them to the local Phoenix community whenever possible. This emphasis on “integrative learning” that addresses real and complex problems through significant interdisciplinary academic restructuring has led Michael M. Crow, the president of the university, to call ASU a “New American University,” a model that other institutions might emulate.

## A NEW DAY FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION

All college graduates need liberal learning skills and abilities regardless of their background, college major, or professional interests. This is why the AAC&U’s “practical liberal arts” initiative calls for liberal learning that is “well-rounded and integrated learning in the arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and professional studies that can be applied to contemporary problems.”

What does this mean for boards? As Teagle’s Richard Morrill says, those that are charged to oversee their college or university’s academic quality must seek to provide their students with a liberal education that integrates increasingly specialized disciplinary perspectives for an increasingly complex world. Morrill says simply, “The place [for boards] to begin thinking strategically about the academic program is with general education”—also known by its other name, liberal education.

He offers a number of questions for boards to ask, such as:

- What is the rationale for general education requirements, and do they constitute a coherent program of study?
- What proportion of a student’s total program is committed to general education?
- How does the institution assess the effectiveness of general education?

Such oversight of general or liberal education by boards is greatly needed—especially when funding for such education is being questioned. While it is left to campus administrators and faculty members to develop the integrative liberal-education curricula and modes of assessment, it is board members who

have the final fiduciary responsibility to see that such goals and programs are created and that such student learning is happening.

Interestingly, the notion of a liberal education can be seen as a contemporary version of the Roman notion that free citizens should be expected to study the liberal arts in order to participate in civil life and the learned professions. On another level, as Richard Morrill has written: “Learning is a rich mosaic of human possibilities that crosses the lines between the practical and the sublime....It connects knowing and doing.” Is this not the conception of liberal learning we must adopt as a primary goal and commit to fund in the boardrooms and on the campuses of both our private and public colleges and universities?

## OFTEN-CONFUSED TERMS

**Liberal Education:** An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. This approach emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility; strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills; and the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

**Liberal Arts:** Specific disciplines (i.e., the humanities, sciences, and social sciences).

**Liberal-Arts Colleges:** A particular type of institution—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, and whose curriculum is grounded in the liberal-arts disciplines.

**General Education:** That part of a liberal education curriculum that is shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing essential intellectual, civic, and practical capacities. General education can take many forms, and increasingly includes introductory, advanced, and integrative forms of learning.

Source: Association of American Colleges and Universities, [“What is a 21st Century Liberal Education?”](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR ►

Larry Shinn recently retired as president of Berea College in Kentucky.

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