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Higher Education: Drop the Term "Liberal Arts"

by Brandon Busteed

The term "liberal arts" no longer works as an effective means of communicating one of higher education's most precious assets.

"Liberal" is politically charged, and "arts" has a negative connotation regarding improving graduates' job prospects, which is the main reason why Americans and currently enrolled college students value higher education.

Putting the words *liberal* and *arts* together is a branding disaster, and the most effective way to save or defend the liberal arts may be to change what we call them. Note, the problem isn't with the substance of a liberal arts education but with the words we use to describe it.

Here's an example of the problem: A recent Pew Research Center study showed that the majority of Republicans say colleges and universities are *hurting* the country -- a finding that has left the higher education community stunned and scratching its head. Gallup decided to conduct its own research into this. What we've learned, in short, is that the majority of Republicans who have low confidence in higher education say it is because of their opinion that it's too liberal. It's essential to note that their reasons *aren't* primarily because college is too expensive or not leading graduates to good jobs -- which seemingly would have been potential explanations.

Although there is certainly a difference between the meaning of a liberal arts education and being "liberal" politically, it helps no one to fight to the death defending the term "liberal arts" in the context of today's climate. Let's face it: Other than people in higher education or liberal arts graduates themselves, who understands what the liberal arts are anyhow?

The history of the liberal arts is truly ancient, dating back to the classical age. A liberal arts education's original focus was on skills considered essential for a person to take part in civic life. Its modern definition has evolved, but the core purpose of preparing capable citizens certainly remains -- and remains important.

Today, the liberal arts are praised for teaching essential skills such as critical thinking, effective communication, collaboration and teamwork, and being able to confront and resolve differences and problems. There's little doubt these skills have tremendous value in today's workplace and are arguably fundamental tools for the jobs of the future. The liberal arts curriculum is as important today as it was in ancient times.

But it's time to disconnect the strong value undergirding the liberal arts from the weak words that define them. The words "liberal" and "arts" just don't resonate in the minds of far too many Americans, especially those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

In a representative poll of U.S. parents with children in grades seven to 12, respondents rated "no college at all" as a better path to a good job than a "liberal arts degree." In marketing tests conducted by Gallup, phrases such as "21st century skills" test far better than "liberal arts" -- despite their very similar descriptions.

And the No. 1 reason why the majority of Republicans and Republican leaners (who are about four out of 10 of all Americans) have lost confidence in higher education is their belief that it's "too liberal."

These feelings may stem from a number of factors, including the perceived liberal bias of professors, limitations on free speech on campus and the rejection of controversial speakers -- the last two of which have been prominently in the news the past two years. But there's little doubt that using the word "liberal" to describe higher education's most valued pedagogy doesn't help shift this attitude.

To defend the liberal arts, do so by describing their attributes and arguably essential -- and practical -- benefits, not their name. Let's either give the liberal arts a new name -- or no name at all. To turn the tide on waning public support for higher education, this would be a big step.