



Twenty-first Century



Wright State
University



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liberal education framework increase**

in the Liberal Arts learn to tolerate ambiguity and to bring order out of apparent confusion. They have the kind of sideways thinking and cross-classifying habit of mind that comes from learning, among other things, the many different ways of looking at literary works, social systems, chemical processes, or languages.”

In the future, the inherent constructs of liberal education will be more applicable and in higher demand than they are today. Employers do not want, and have not advocated for, students prepared for narrow workforce specialties. Rather, the application of specialized knowledge will be more and more integrated within a broader range of sociopolitical environments that place a premium on judgment, communication, collaboration, and analytical skills. Virtually all occupational endeavors require a working appreciation of the historical, cultural, ethical, and global environments that surround the application of skilled work. As knowledge, technology, and global impacts escalate at dizzying rates, so too will the value and significance of the liberal education framework increase.

Challenges for liberal education

The primary question then is not whether a liberal education but, rather, what constitutes a liberal education in the twenty-first century. First, colleges and universities must continue to respond to the highest principles of an intellectually challenging education that exposes students to the broadest view of the wider world. As that world continues to evolve, institutions, departments, and professors will face the daunting challenge of adapting new curricula to the traditional college time and experience model.

The second new challenge is to ensure that graduates have specific, demonstrated competencies in the academic, applied, and soft skill areas that are essential to successfully applying the benefits of liberal learning. Students must be prepared to enter either graduate school or the workplace with the ability to apply the

skills developed through their broader learning experience. Thus, institutions are challenged to ensure that the curriculum is designed to foster student competency in the following areas: basic academics (writing, math, science, technology, and global integration); application skills (integrated and applied learning, critical thinking); and soft skills (teamwork, ethics, diversity, and lifelong learning preparation).

The definitions of liberal learning and of a liberal education for the twenty-first century include not only exposure to the breadth of civilized society in an increasingly complex world, but also the absolute assurance that students possess the requisite general education competencies to apply that learning in the constantly evolving world of work.

Educators, students, and employers will need to reinvigorate their age-old compact. Students need to know that attending a particular institution will, in fact, prepare them with the basic and specialized knowledge required for both their acceptance and their survival in an ever-changing workplace. Employers need to have greater clarity about and faith in the meaning of the degree from a particular institution. Educators need assurance that their curriculum and student learning standards are aligned with the expectations of the global marketplace. This compact is as old and as revered as higher education itself. What are changing are the substantive components that ensure relevance in a world with constantly shifting expectations.

Institutional challenges

Presumptions that course content, application, professorial pronouncements, or degree attainment reflect student competency are no longer adequate for the student, employer, or the academic institution. For liberal education to be effective and valued, institutions must clearly establish and give public visibility to the “quality achievements” required of every graduate of that institution. Establishing a clear system of standards, assessments, and remediation is the means through which



relevance of the standards and revitalizing them as expectations change.

The definition of both the content and the expected achievement levels of the standards is the sole prerogative of the individual institution. Indeed, this becomes a significant part of the institution's identity and reputation, and it is a visible reflection of its educational quality. Active public disclosure of the standards and visible demonstrations that all graduates of a specific institution meet them would significantly improve support for the institution from employers, policy makers, and the public.

On the other hand, this would create a higher degree of self-imposed accountability. Setting forth clear outcome standards requires that they are embedded in the curriculum and that both students and professors are clearly aware of, and culpable for, the content and the expected outcomes. Assessments must be aligned and reflective of the expected levels, and remedial programs must be readily available and effective. In the end, the institution itself becomes more publicly accountable to employers, students, and policy makers for the self-imposed assurances of relevant student achievement.

America's advantage

David Kearns (2000), the highly successful former chief executive officer of Xerox, believes that the tradition of liberal education is one of America's greatest advantages in the global marketplace. "We are reminded that the real challenge of today's economy is not in making things but in producing creative ideas. Today, the race goes not just to the swift, but to the inventive, the resourceful, the curious. And that is what is what a liberal education is all about."

Liberal education, with its mix of the full, rich breadth of intellectual inquiry, now enhanced with practical learning, is the essential foundation for success in every growing occupation. The challenge is to sustain that tradition while also ensuring that it both reflects

the changing expectations of a global economy and provides the essential skills necessary for applying the benefits of that education.

The advent of globalization has brought enormous changes to American business, government policies, and the lives of individuals. As a result, more Americans than ever are finding their way into postsecondary education in hopes of making the connection to the high-demand marketplace. To meet these growing expectations, higher education will have to form new partnerships, create new communication vehicles, and commit to a public system of continuous improvement.

Yes, the world is catching up. The men, women, and families in other countries have the same desires for quality of life and high standards of living as do Americans. The growing impact of global expansion will not be stemmed by legislative or regulatory protections. The test of America's commitment will be the degree to which we are willing to invest our policy and financial resources in an education system that ensures our citizens receive the practical and intellectual tools with which to successfully compete. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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