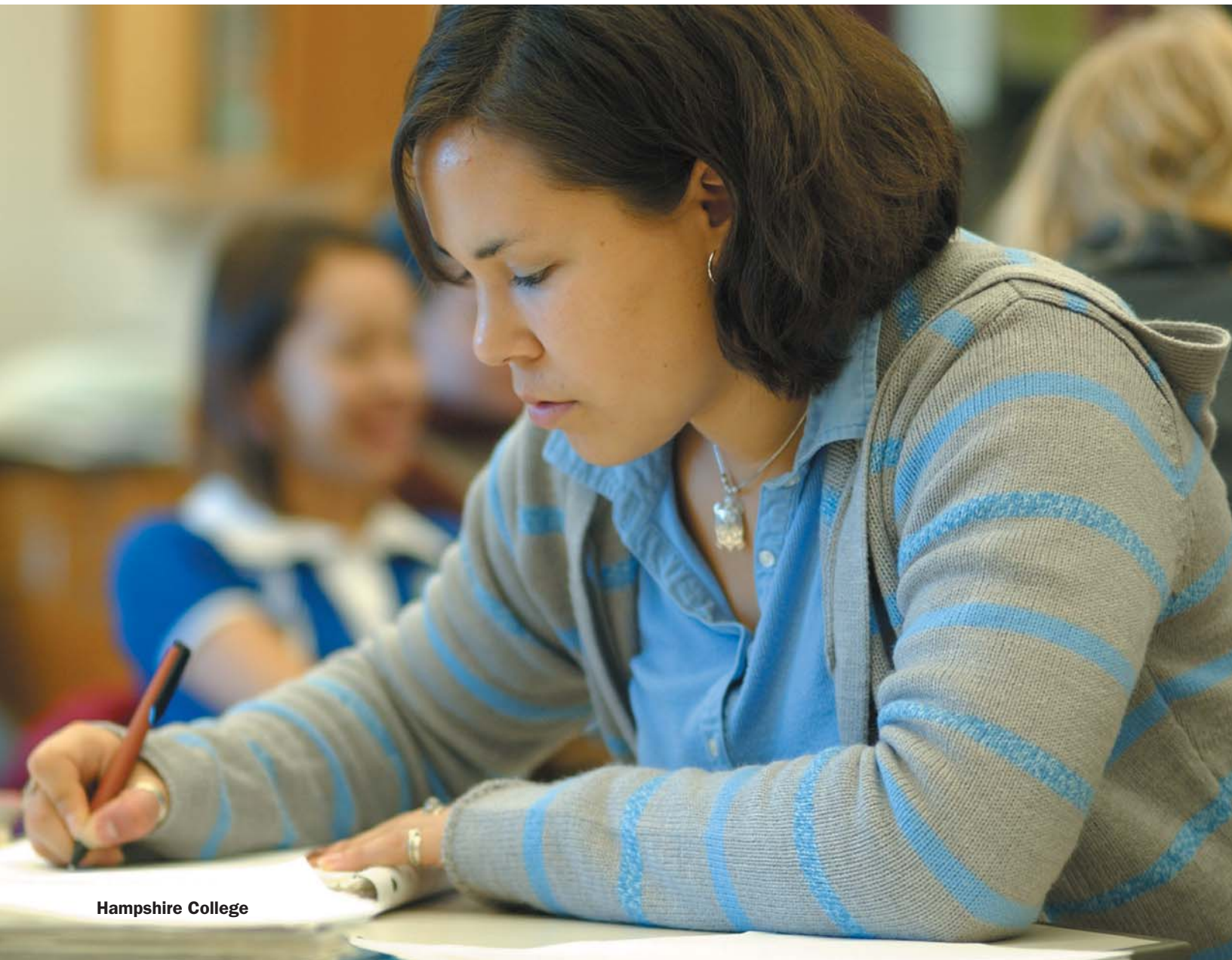




Specialist-Rich Workplace



Hampshire College



Some executives may say otherwise, but an actual awareness of liberal education's value is often missing in today's hiring environment



Indiana University

evolving to meet the actual demands of twenty-first-century workplaces. It is hard work.

One principle helps: dialogues change minds by appealing to common interests. Leverage this by showing how all students—those in traditional liberal arts and sciences or in professional fields—are immersed in learning work-specific “competencies” demanded by workplaces, and build measures for these competencies in courses. (“Competency” at work means effectiveness with high-percentage consistency. For example, bike riding is a skill, but know-how for biking fifty miles daily is a competency.)

Any “industrial strength” liberal education toolkit offers the analysis, persuasive writing, argumentation, and presentation skills useful in diverse groups, but these must be “work-ready.” They are taught, but students must make them competencies, not simply skills. They are crucial to workplaces hiring “knowledge workers.” In my consulting to Fortune 500 groups, for example, we “refresh” how people operate in major work units by reengineering a process. Here, key liberal education *competencies* are vital: first, multifaceted analysis of a current procedure; then reframing of that

process; finally, persuasion that convinces unsympathetic audiences to adopt new procedures for daily tasks—in short, analysis, synthesis, complex persuasion. Easy to say, difficult to do.

Experience in today’s work groups also shows the need to change employers’ older “mental models.” The key here is being clear about the goals of liberal education. Meanwhile, employer dialogues will yield the guides teachers can use to show students how to hone “work-ready” competencies. To some, these are “soft” skills, but in most workplaces, these are crucial competencies for “knowledge workers”:

- results-focused approaches for analyzing complex issues
- audience-specific skills in writing about complex topics
- techniques for marshaling persuasive mathematical evidence
- advanced skills in developing presentations for unsympathetic audiences
- guides for negotiation and conflict resolution in teams

Every working executive I know would pay dearly for graduates who are “work ready” in this sense.



goal: persuading employers to solve workforce needs by turning to liberal education (not “specialist program”) graduates. Reversing this imbalance demands faculty ingenuity.

Rebalancing, at first, means managing change. Essential here is a notion familiar to corporations: tempering fear of the “change monster,” a psychological process with predictable phases (Duck 2001). Experience with campuses, foundations, and corporations has shown me that many initially fear change; radical change, after all, might force an institution to lose its way. But everyone can learn to tame this “monster.”

Creatively adjusting college curricula is just as critical as launching dialogues with employers. Options include across-the-curriculum efforts to retarget competencies actually prized by workplaces and to establish measurable “learning outcomes” that pinpoint the value of liberal education for students themselves. All stakeholders can help here, including the largely untapped constituency of alumni.

We know educational leaders in engineering and business do make *their* “business case” to employers. They show how their graduates offer “value” that worksites need. In turn, their success explains why their corporate funding rises as funding for more traditional liberal arts and sciences disciplines “flatlines” or falls.

Campuses focusing on liberal education, or offering professional preparation, will succeed equally by nurturing competencies with competitive advantage for the workplace. This as yet untapped advantage is vital to organizations restructuring everywhere, and an advantage we can create through liberal education curricula.

We know schools can bolster the competencies of deft analysis, audience-sensitive writing, persuasive presenting, and negotiating. Can we use them as strategic assets and show employers that these are premier “work-readiness” toolkits? Time will tell. □

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



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First Report on Learning Outcomes Released

On November 4, at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, AAC&U released *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College*. The report draws together research from diverse sources to examine what we know—and how much we need to find out—about student achievement of important learning outcomes. To download a copy of the report, or to purchase printed copies, visit www.aacu.org/publications.

Dialogues on Liberal Education in Indiana and Nebraska

On September 21 and 22, LEAP partner campus Indiana State University held a campus-community dialogue, “The Good Life and the Good Community: The Value of Liberal Education in the Wabash Valley.” Planned in partnership with business and community leaders, the dialogue addressed the opportunities liberal education brings, how the commitment to liberal education already benefits the Wabash Valley, and how that commitment can be renewed to ensure that future generations have access to and value liberal education. In October, another LEAP partner campus—the University of Nebraska–Lincoln—launched a major curriculum review with a campus-wide dialogue about “General Education, Liberal Education: Promise and Practice.”

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