

It's Not Just the Economy...

LAST MONTH, in conjunction with the release of the new LEAP report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, AAC&U released findings from two surveys of senior-level employers and recent college graduates about their views of college learning in the global economy. (The report and the survey findings are available in full at www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap.) These two surveys elicited respondents' views about the right balance of breadth and depth in a twenty-first-century college education. The surveys further probed the degree of priority that respondents assign to fifteen specific liberal education outcomes, ranging from areas of knowledge such as "concepts and new developments in science and technology" to skills and responsibilities such as "teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings" or "civic knowledge, civic participation, and community engagement."

The findings reveal very strong support among both employers and recent graduates for the core LEAP assertion that, in this new global century, the skills and knowledge developed through a

P R E S I D E N T ' S M E S S A G E

liberal education have become essential to economic success.

From now on, we can say with

confidence that, when employers urge investment in "workforce development," they actually mean that we need to expand rather than reduce the nation's commitment to the knowledge and skills developed through liberal education. Succeeding in the new global economy will require more and better liberal education, not less.

On the other hand, these two surveys, and indeed all the research LEAP has conducted over the last two years, contain more sobering news for those of us who regard liberal education as the best preparation for knowledgeable and active citizenship. Civic learning—the focal topic in this issue of *Liberal Education*—seems to have become a curricular "also-ran" for employers, recent graduates, and—as AAC&U reported in the fall of 2005—for college seniors and faculty as well. More on these troubling findings below.

But first, the good news. Two-thirds of employers and 82 percent of recent college graduates (i.e., respondents who completed college between 1997 and 2001) soundly reject the proposal that college should focus "primarily on providing knowledge and skills in a specific field."

Fifty-six percent of the employers prefer an approach to college that builds well-rounded knowledge and skills along with competence in a specific field, with another 10 percent preferring that college focus primarily on providing a "well-rounded education." Only 22 percent of the employers and 13 percent of the recent graduates think that college should provide field-specific preparation alone. With the global economy highly dependent on creativity and innovation, respondents want college to emphasize broad learning and transferable skills.

When it comes to specific liberal education outcomes, the survey results are equally arresting. Majorities of both employers and recent graduates think colleges and universities should place more emphasis on key knowledge areas, including science and global issues, as well as on key capabilities, such as critical thinking and analytical reasoning, written and oral communication skills, and a sense of integrity and ethics. Strong majorities of employers also want to see more emphasis on information literacy, the ability to solve complex problems, the role of the United States in the world, and the ability to work with numbers and understand statistics. Only 34 percent of recent graduates share employers' preference for greater quantitative and statistic literacy, but 51 percent of the graduates would endorse more college emphasis on "proficiency in a foreign language."

Respondents also strongly endorse what AAC&U and our partner the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching have called “integrative learning,” or the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge to unscripted problems and real-world settings. Seventy-six percent of employers and 67 percent of recent graduates want higher education to place more emphasis on real-world experiences and applications.

All in all, the message is clear. Those who are already navigating today’s economy know that the bar is rising for both broad knowledge and higher-level intellectual and practical skills. To prepare graduates successfully for this more demanding environment, these forms of learning need to become shared concerns for the entire educational experience, from school through the final year of college. AAC&U’s new LEAP report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*, provides a road map for this more intentional approach to liberal education across the curriculum.

But a democracy does not prosper on its economic vitality alone. And in this sphere, there is abundant evidence that higher education has largely failed to establish—either in principle or in practice—what LEAP has called the essential connections between democratic freedom and college learning. In the current survey, less than half of both employers (48 percent) and recent graduates (46 percent) think that higher education should place more emphasis on “civic knowledge, civic participation, and community engagement.” A separate item on “democracy and government” ranked even lower, with 42 percent of employers and 39 percent of recent graduates recommending stronger emphasis.

The low standing of these civic topics might have been predicted for this particular survey, given its focus on college learning and the economy. But arrestingly, this also-ran status for civic topics shows up in all the research either done or consulted for the LEAP initiative. As we reported in 2005, in six separate student focus groups held across the United States, all groups selected civic learning as the *least* important personal priority for college when asked to rank high and low priorities for learning from a master list of learning outcomes. Similarly, according to the National Study of Student Engagement, only 41 percent of college seniors report that college contributed significantly to “contributing to the welfare of your community.” Concurrently, the Faculty Study of Student Engagement shows that only 54 percent of faculty consider it important or very important that their campus emphasize community service. Citing numerous studies, Derek Bok shows persuasively in *Our Underachieving Colleges* that these shortfalls are part of a larger pattern of civic inattention at the college level.

A democracy does not prosper on its economic vitality alone

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates persuasively that higher education leaders have a dual assignment in the years ahead. The first is to firmly resist the policy pressures for narrow learning at the college level on the grounds that a broad liberal education—across all college majors—is the *only* sound preparation for today’s economy. The second is to reclaim and vigorously advance the vital connections between liberal education and a sustainable democracy. Democracy, economic prosperity, and liberal education require one another to reach their fullest potential. And each addressed without attention to the others must inevitably fall short. These necessary connections set the course and the context for college learning in the new global century.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER