

LAS 101

DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES RIVER FOREST, ILLINOIS

Bret Rappaport, J.D., Adjunct Professor of English

Rough Draft January 29, 2015

Final Draft Due: February 12, 2015

Assignment:

A 3-5 page paper, double spaced, stapled, Times New Roman font.

Prompt:

Is a liberal arts education worth it? This is a question that not only has been asked for decades, but is still being asked today. It has all the more relevance because you are attending a liberal arts college, whose existence and mission speak to the value of a liberal arts education.

I have attached the following articles that argue in favor of a liberal arts education:

Mark McNutt, *There is Value In Liberal Arts Education, Employers Say*,
US News & World Report, Sept. 22, 2014

Jessica Kleiman, *Why Getting a Liberal Arts Education is Not a Mistake*,
Forbes, April 26, 2014

Sal Gentile, *Is a Liberal Arts Degree Worth?*
PBS on Line, October 27, 2011.

I have attached four articles that argue that a liberal arts education is a waste:

Andrew J. Coulson, *Liberating the Liberal Arts – and Making Higher Education Affordable*. Cato.org August 31, 2012

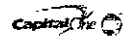
Scott Gerber, *How Liberal Arts Colleges are Failing America*.
The Atlantic, 2014

Scott Jaschik, *Obama becomes latest politician to criticize a liberal arts discipline*
Inside Higher Ed, January 31, 2014

You must read all six articles – read as a reader and as a writer. In your paper you must take a position either in favor of a liberal arts education or against the value of a liberal arts education. You must use at least two of the three articles as evidence to support your claim, and you must refute at least one of the articles that is contrary to your position.

Grade:

The paper is worth 100 points, and you will be graded on both substance and style with particular focus on the six lessons of Unit 1 – writing as sustenance.

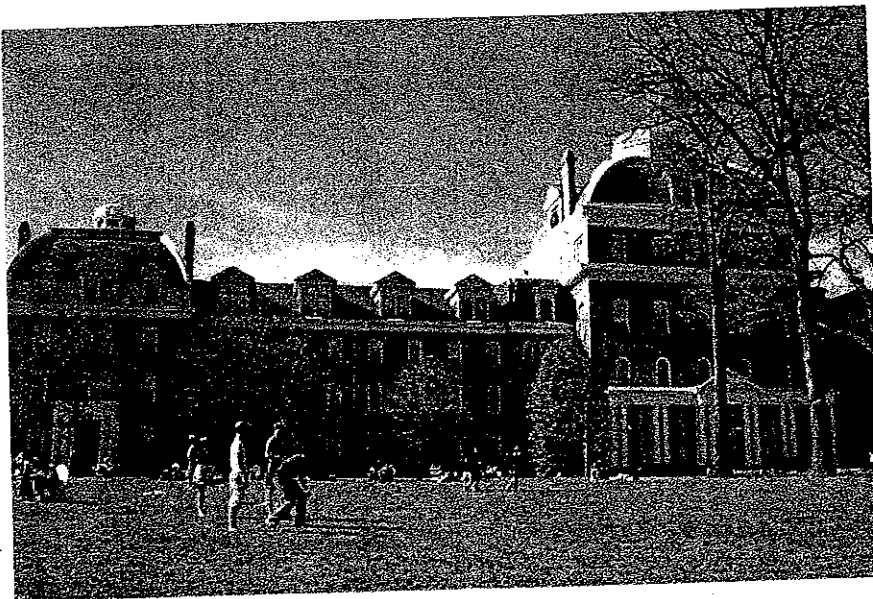


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There Is Value in Liberal Arts Education, Employers Say

Return on investment may be less obvious, but hiring managers seek liberal arts-related skills.



The lawn by Parrish Hall at Swarthmore College is a hub of activity.

By Mark I. McNitt Sept. 22, 2014 | 12:01 a.m. EDT + More

COLLEGE OF TOMORROW

With significant attention being paid to the utility of an education within STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math), liberal arts grads may find themselves asking: What is the value of their liberal arts education?

The prevailing wisdom and research indicate a growing emphasis on and necessity for career-ready degrees such as computer science, engineering and finance – often included as part of STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

At the same time, employers readily identify the creative, communicative and problem-solving acumen traditionally associated with liberal arts majors as the most valuable attributes of new hires.

With a sluggish job market and companies still reluctant to reinvest in their workforces, the job prospects for all college grads have actually never been clearer: College graduates with career-ready degrees are best positioned to get hired and earn the quickest return on their educational investment.

It's no surprise that technology degree holders continue to be most in demand. But what about graduates with liberal arts degrees?

A report published Sept. 17 may give liberal arts grads a glimmer of circumspect hope.

College seniors who applied for a full-time job and received at least one offer increased by 2 percent in 2014 to nearly 48 percent, thanks to stronger-than-expected job placement for liberal arts degree graduates, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

While the report may seem like good news for liberal arts grads, the overall growth in job offers may not indicate an improved job market for all liberal arts majors, according to Edwin Koc, director of research, public policy and legislative affairs at NACE.

[DEBATE CLUB: Is a College Degree Still Worth It?]

"Liberal arts improved pretty much across the board," he says. "But the big jump was for education majors." Koc believes that education majors from a variety of specialties combined to boost overall hiring.

Unfortunately, the improved hiring rate for liberal arts degree graduates may be less about job growth and more about a rebound in state budgets following massive spending cuts in K-12 education in recent years, Koc notes.

"Job placement for education majors has been really, really down," he says. "Since the recession, education majors have had the worst [job] offer rate we've seen, up until this year. And our guess is that it's the opening up of those job opportunities in K-12 education that really made the difference this year for liberal arts graduates."

Despite the caveat, the more obvious career tracks for liberal arts grads – visual and performing arts and communications – gained nearly 25 percent in 2014 over 2013, which is good news for those seeking jobs in public relations and entertainment, the report indicates. But it still leaves many liberal arts grads unemployed and questioning if a liberal arts degree was worth the investment.

Job Placement, 2014 Compared to 2013

College seniors who applied for a full-time job and received at least one offer increased by 2 percent in 2014 to nearly 48 percent, thanks to stronger-than-expected job placement for liberal arts degree graduates, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

Major or Field	Percentage Increase ▼
Mathematics	6.8
Environmental Science	7.5
Communications	9.5
Education	11.5
Visual and Performing Arts	15.4

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers. [Get the data](#)

Psychology degree graduate Samantha Schuster, who graduated in 2012 from DeSales University, expected her bachelor's degree to earn her a full-time job, but it didn't. With pressure to repay student loans and no job prospects, Schuster says she was forced into yet another big investment: graduate school. She sometimes wonders if she made the right choice.

1 2 >

TAGS: STEM jobs, job searching, Swarthmore College, UC-Berkeley, STEM

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Forbes

Work in Progress (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/>)

Career talk for women

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

FORBESWOMAN (FORBESWOMAN) 4/28/2014 @ 4:15PM 36,311 views

Why Getting A Liberal Arts College Education Is Not A Mistake

 Jessica Kleiman (<http://blogs.forbes.com/people/jessicakleiman/>), Contributor

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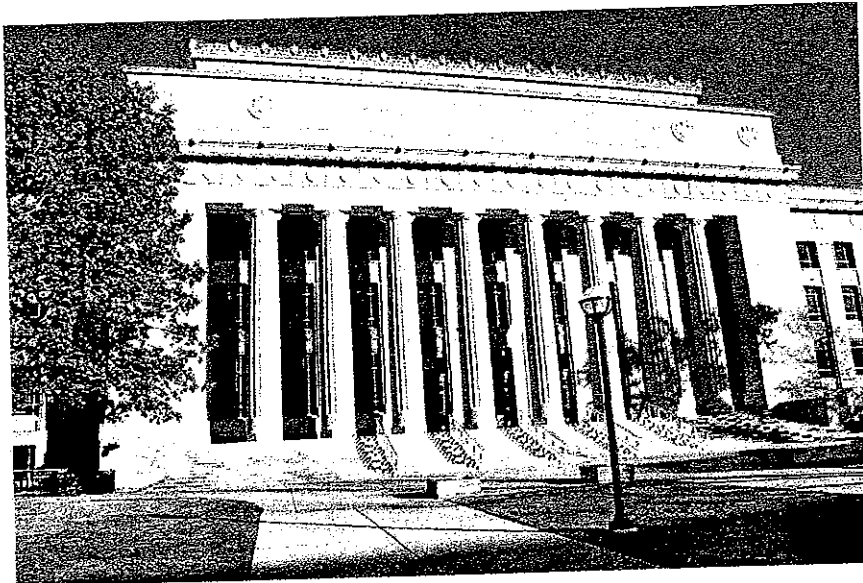
Last weekend, I read an [op-ed](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/20/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-to-get-a-job-at-google-part-2.html?ref=opinion&r=0) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/20/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-to-get-a-job-at-google-part-2.html?ref=opinion&r=0>) by Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times* which featured Part 2 of an interview with Laszlo Bock, the head of hiring at [Google](http://www.google.com) (<http://www.google.com>). Bock has some strong opinions on whether or not prospective employees really need to go to college. His philosophy: Those who choose to attend a university after high school should think long and hard about what they want to do for a living and select his or her major wisely, focusing on skills that will land them a job post-graduation.

While I certainly agree that college nowadays is a costly investment and that graduates need to find ways to stand out to prospective employers in a highly competitive job market, I have a problem with Bock's theory. Namely, he is asking kids of 18 or 19 to pick an area of academic concentration based less on their interests than on what fields are hiring the most people. In fact, two of those knowledge sets—computer science and computer engineering—are what a company like [Google](http://companies.google/) ([/companies/google/](http://companies.google/)) might value, but what about all the non-technology companies in the world who look for able talent? Are people who choose to pursue a liberal arts degree any less skilled or desirable in the marketplace?

When referencing an article he read a few years ago in the *Wall Street Journal*, Bock says that a student who had switched from electrical and computer engineering to a major in psychology and would focus on a career in public relations and human resources versus technology “was making a mistake.” When I went to college in the 90s, you were allowed to enjoy the experience—it was about being part of something, soaking up life on campus, meeting new people, participating in extracurricular activities, and choosing to study something that excited and interested you. When I landed an internship at a magazine the summer after my sophomore year, I was the only one of all my friends to have an internship at such a young age. Back then, most people—if they did one at all—interned the summer before their senior year to get a taste of an industry before deciding what kind of career to pursue. Now, every entry-level resume I receive has a laundry list of internships — so many that

I'm often amazed that these kids had any time to study at all. But in a way, the internships on a job-seekers' resumes makes them more desirable candidates than what they studied or what GPA they graduated with. The valuable, real-world work experience that internships provide often arm young job candidates with knowledge, skills and resourcefulness that college classes cannot.

I certainly understand that having a computer science or engineering degree helps if you want to work in those fields—and talent is in high-demand, for sure, especially since there are so many young, tech-savvy programmers today that would rather launch their own app or website than go work for Apple (<http://www.apple.com>) or Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>). Some of them even forgo college—and that's okay. It's a personal choice and, as we all know, many enormously successful people—from Steve Jobs (<http://www.forbes.com/steve-jobs/>) to Mark Zuckerberg (<http://www.forbes.com/profile/mark-zuckerberg/>) to Oprah—were dropouts (though I'd be curious to know how many more have failed and now have no degree to fall back on).



Angell Hall taken November 6, 2010 (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

But what is most unsettling about the advice given in the *Times* article is that we, as a culture of competition, are so hyper-focused on career success that we lose sight of all the other things that make a person interesting, well-rounded and, ultimately, a good hire. How sad would it be if, in 10 or 20 years, colleges had to shut down their English, Comparative Literature and History departments because students were only choosing to study topics that would help them land a job at Google?

With thousands of college students across the country nearing Graduation Day, I think about the incredible liberal arts education I received at the University of Michigan (<http://www.umich.edu/>). While the school has a well-respected computer engineering program and a stellar business school, I chose to study Communication and English, two subjects that perhaps do not meet Mr. Bock's approval. That said, the classes I took—ranging from philosophy and sociology to cultural anthropology and, yes, even statistics (though I must admit I got through Michigan without ever taking a Calculus class)—fueled my curiosity, strengthened my critical thinking and writing skills and made me knowledgeable on a variety of subjects. And my internships at a magazine, a PR firm and a record company gave me the practical experience to

Forbes
pursue a career in writing and communications. I didn't feel I made a "mistake" in choosing that path. In fact, I am now an executive vice president of communications at a media company--so I guess that degree came in handy.

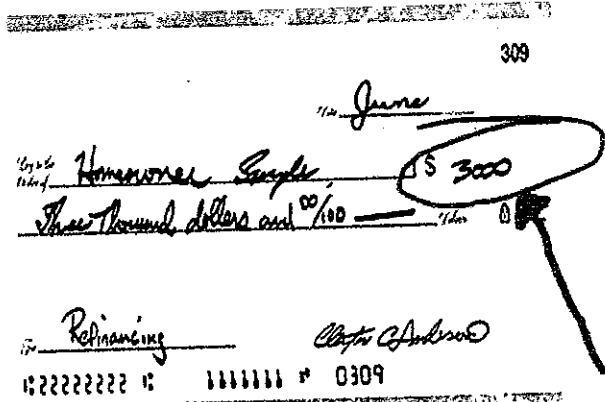
As technology is ever-growing, finding good programmers, developers and web designers can be a huge challenge, so I'm all for growing that talent pool. But as the job market improves, other industries will need skilled new employees as well, and if students entering college are being told to focus on the fields that have the most opportunities, then every other type of job will ultimately have too few candidates to choose from.

My advice: Do what you love, study what interests you, get good internships, connect with as many people as possible who might help you land a job, be willing to work hard and be resourceful--and you'll be fine, whether or not you know how to build an app or program a computer.

Jessica Kleiman is EVP, Communications at SANDOW and co-author of "Be Your Own Best Publicist: How to Use PR Techniques to Get Noticed, Hired and Rewarded at Work" (Career Press). She was the commencement speaker (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2013/05/09/how-to-get-and%E2%80%A6r-graduation-2/>) at University of Michigan's 2013 Communications School graduation.

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Is a liberal arts degree worth it?

By Sal Gentile
October 27, 2011



With debt from student loans nearing or, by some accounts, surpassing the amount of debt from credit cards in 2011, there's been a lot of talk lately about whether a traditional liberal arts education is worth the cost. The 20-somethings who fill the ranks of the Occupy Wall Street movement, for example, have been ridiculed for their gold-plated fine arts degrees, which can cost as much as \$100,000. Rick Scott, the Republican governor of Florida, has derided public funding for anthropology and other humanities disciplines as a waste of taxpayer money. "I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state," Scott said in a radio interview earlier this month.

Very few people would disagree with the notion that government should invest more in what are known as the STEM fields: science, technology, engineering and math. Given that traditional jobs in processing, sales, marketing and other types of back-office operations are either being out-sourced or replaced by technology, it would certainly seem beneficial for Americans to become more familiar with the sciences. Research on the quantitative value of a liberal arts degree is mixed — some studies say engineers earn a lot more money, others say the difference evens out over the long run — but at the very least, knowing how new technologies like Siri work can only be a plus on your resume.

That said, several experts are pushing back on the idea that diverting public funds from the liberal arts to science and engineering departments will make America more competitive in the long run. Michael Crow, a science policy analyst and president of Arizona State University, wrote in Slate last week that the role of public universities should not be purely vocational.

"The objective of public universities should not be to produce predetermined numbers of particular types of majors but, rather, to focus on how to produce individuals who are capable of learning anything over the course of their lifetimes," Crow wrote. "Every college student should acquire thorough literacy in science and technology as well as the humanities and social sciences."

In support of his argument, Crow offered an interesting hypothetical: "Inspired engineering, in other words, could come as a consequence of familiarity with the development of counterpoint in Baroque music or cell biology. Or even the construction methods of indigenous tribes." To the educational pragmatist, this scenario might seem far-fetched. How might a background in polyphonic melodies inform the design of, say, a bridge or aqueduct? If Scott or any other jobs-minded governor is looking for ways to cut the fat out of the public education system, the study of melodic counterpoints in post-Renaissance music would seem to be a prime candidate for the chopping block.

Except some of our most revered, influential innovators — and, not incidentally, job creators — took their inspiration from disciplines that are arguably even more obscure than music. Steve Jobs, who was neither a computer programmer nor a hardware engineer, famously told graduates of Stanford University in 2005 that one of the most influential and lasting experiences in his brief tenure at Reed College was his dabbling in calligraphy.

"It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating," Jobs said. "None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life." Ten years later, his knowledge of serif and sans serif typefaces came rushing back to him as he designed the first Mac. If he had never dropped in on that calligraphy class, Jobs said, "personal computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do."

Jobs also famously spent seven months after dropping out from Reed trekking across India on a spiritual journey. Walter Isaacson, his biographer, recalled in a recent interview with "60 Minutes" what Jobs said when he returned from India: "The main thing I've learned is intuition, that the people in India are not just pure rational thinkers, that the great spiritual ones also have intuition."

India, of course, is now regarded, along with China, as one of our main upstart competitors, training mass numbers of engineers and computer programmers who will soon usurp American workers on the world stage. If, according to one of our most honored, iconic businessmen, intuition is among Indians' greatest professional strengths, should Americans cultivate intuition as well?

That question, of course, raises another: How does one cultivate intuition? It's a nebulous quality, perhaps as much nature as nurture. But a good place to start might be a strong liberal arts education -- with roots in philosophy and the study of literature, for example -- that teaches students how to be creative, critical thinkers, gives them a broad base of historical knowledge to rely upon when solving problems and, as Crow argues, equips them with the tools to continue assimilating new knowledge throughout the courses of their lives.

After all, advocates of the humanities argue, it's precisely *because* technology is fundamentally transforming our world that we should teach students to be broad systematic thinkers capable of absorbing the bounties of knowledge that arise from new wellsprings of discovery in fields like genetics, artificial intelligence and robotics. Plus, once artificially intelligent machines like Watson take over jobs in even advanced fields, like medicine, the jobs that will remain will require creativity and problem-solving, not just the rote memorization of specialized knowledge or proficiency in technical skills.

Certainly, we should all become more acquainted with the sciences. Understanding how artificial intelligence works, for example, will be fundamental to succeeding in the next economy. When Siri replaces the personal assistant, being able to work *with* Siri might be a good skill for a job seeker to have. But Jobs, the man who created Siri, took his inspiration for the sleek design of his products from the importance of simplicity in Buddhism. Perhaps a curriculum designed to create the next Steve Jobs would combine courses in software engineering and business administration with, say, a seminar in eastern philosophy.

Last modified: October 27, 2011 at 11:13 am

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AUGUST 31, 2012 7:14AM

Liberating the Liberal Arts— and Making Higher Education Affordable

By ANDREW J. COULSON



If you wanted a liberal arts education in 1499, you were probably out of luck. But, if you happened to be a 0.01 percenter, you might have been able to saddle up the horse and ride to Oxford or Cambridge. Because that's where the books were. Books didn't generally come to you, you had to go to them.

Today, every one of us has more works of art, philosophy, literature, and history at our fingertips than existed, worldwide, half-a-millennium ago. We can call them up, free or for a nominal charge, on electronic gadgets that cost little to own and operate. Despite that fact, we're still captives to the idea that a liberal arts education must be dispensed by colleges and must be acquired between the ages of 19 and 22.

But the liberal arts can be studied without granite buildings, frat houses, or sports venues. Discussions about great works of literature can be held just as easily in coffee shops as in stadium-riser classrooms—perhaps more easily. Nor is there any reason to believe that there is some great advantage to concentrating the study of those works in the few years immediately after high school—or that our study of them must engage us full-time. The traditional association of liberal arts education and four-year colleges was already becoming an anachronism before the rise of the World Wide Web. It is now a crumbling fossil.

Handing colleges tens of thousands of dollars—worse yet, hundreds of thousands—for an education that can be obtained independently at little cost, would be tragically wasteful *even if the college education were effective*. In many cases, it is not. Research by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa reveals that almost half of all college students make no significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, or written communication after two full years of study. Those are skills that any liberal arts education should cultivate. Even among the subset of students who linger for four years at college, fully one-third make no significant gains in those areas.

And yet, instead of recognizing the incredible democratization of access to the liberal arts that modern technology has permitted, and the consequent moribundity of this role of colleges, public policy remains mired in a medieval conception of higher education. Politicians compete to promise what they think young people want to hear: more and larger subsidies for college fees. Even if perpetuating a 15th century approach to higher education were in students' interests—which it clearly is not—increased government subsidies for college tuition would not achieve that goal. We have tripled student aid in real, inflation-adjusted dollars since 1980, to roughly \$14,000 per student, and yet student debt recently hit an all-time high of roughly \$1 trillion. And barely half of

students at four-year public colleges even complete their studies in six years. Aid to colleges is good for colleges, but it is an outlandish waste of resources if the goal is to improve the educational options available to young people.

These same realities apply, to an only slightly lesser extent, to the sciences and engineering. In those areas, colleges sometimes have equipment and facilities of instructional value that students could not independently afford. But even in the sciences and engineering, such cases are limited. It is perfectly feasible for an avid computer geek to learn everything he or she needs to know to work in software engineering by doing individual and group projects with inexpensive consumer hardware and software. This was even possible before the rise of the Web. My first direct supervisor at Microsoft was a brilliant software architect hired right out of high school... in the 1980s.

Though most politicians have been slow on the uptake, the public seems increasingly aware of all this. A Pew Research survey finds that 57 percent Americans no longer think college is worth the money. So why are they still sending their kids there? Habit is no doubt part of the picture, but so is signaling. People realize that colleges are instructionally inefficient, but being accepted to and graduating from an academically selective one signals ability and assiduity to potential employers.

So what's the solution? Alternative signaling options and better hiring practices would be a good start. Anyone who studies hard for the SAT, ACT, GRE, or the like, and scores well, can send the academic ability signal. But in the end, employers want more than academic ability. What they really want are subject area expertise, a good work ethic, an ability to work smoothly with a variety of people, and, for management, leadership ability. Any institution that develops good metrics for these attributes, and issues certifications accordingly, will provide an incredibly valuable service for employers. Students would then be free to study independently, occasionally paying for instruction where necessary, and then seek a certification signaling what they've learned. In the meantime, job candidates can create a portfolio of work on the Web showing what they know and can do (a "savoir faire")—which would be more useful to employers than most resumes.

What is certainly not useful is raising taxes still further in a time of economic difficulty in order to pad the budgets of colleges and encourage students to take on yet more college debt.

Topics: Education and Child Policy



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How Liberal Arts Colleges Are Failing America

By Scott Gerber

It's not easy to balance the advantages of a college degree with the deficiencies of a liberal arts education. But at schools like Babson College, entrepreneurship is a core part of the curriculum.



Reuters

When are Americans going to wake up and realize that the 60s and 70s-era nostalgia for the "value" of a college degree is just that -- nostalgia?

A degree does not guarantee you or your children a good job anymore. In fact, it doesn't guarantee you a job: last year, 1 out of 2 bachelor's degree holders under 25 were jobless or unemployed. Since the recession, we've lost millions of high- and mid-wage jobs -- and replaced a handful of those with lower-wage ones. No wonder some young people are giving up entirely -- a 16.8 percent unemployment rate plus soaring student loan debt is more than a little discouraging. Yet old-guard academic leaders are still clinging to the status quo -- and loudly insisting that a four-year liberal arts degree is a worthy investment in every young American's future.

Case in point: I was recently invited to keynote during a conference at the Lyles Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Fresno, Cal. As someone who works every day to give more people access to

entrepreneurship education, it's refreshing to talk to educators who are adapting their curricula in the interest of actually preparing students for a new economy. But one educator told me a story that made my blood boil, about a college president who recently terminated his institution's entrepreneurship education program.

Not because of budgetary constraints or poor enrollment, mind you -- but because he "didn't understand the tangible value of such a program."

Really? In 2012, it's the "tangible value" of four years of liberal arts that should be called into question.

We keep telling young Americans that a bachelor's degree in history is as valuable as, say, a chemical engineering degree -- but it's just not true anymore. All degrees are not created equal. And if we -- parents, educators, entrepreneurs and nonprofit leaders -- maintain this narrow-minded approach, then we are not just failing young indebted Americans and their families. We are harming the long-term vitality of our economy.

Unfortunately, the college president in the story above represents the norm. According to research conducted by Buzz Marketing Group and the Young Entrepreneur Council, 56 percent of students age 21-24 never had access to entrepreneurship classes at all; of those who did, 62 percent found them inadequate or poorly executed -- even though 92 percent agreed entrepreneurship education was vital to their success today. Talk about a disconnect.

Now, I realize this is new -- and often difficult -- territory for traditional academic institutions. How does a school validate entrepreneurship? And what parent wants to hear they are paying tens of thousands of dollars for their child to be an "entrepreneur"?

Look no further than institutions like Babson College, consistently ranked #1 for entrepreneurship. Since current president Len Schlesinger signed on -- in the midst of the Great Recession, no less -- Babson's faculty has pioneered its own teaching method, applying entrepreneurial thinking and hands-on learning to every aspect of campus life. Unlike other collegiate leaders, Schlesinger saw the recession as an opportunity to expand. With Babson faculty on board, he ambitiously coordinated stakeholders on and off campus, and formed departmental task forces to review curricula.

Today, every freshman who walks into Babson goes immediately to work with a team to create, develop, launch and manage a new business (and they donate their profits to nonprofits). Students spend just 14 hours a week in class -- the other 154 are spent elsewhere, in special interest housing or working on student-led initiatives. Entrepreneurship is a lifestyle, not a course.

Programs like Babson's are worth emulating not merely because they create the next generation of business owners and freelancers (independent workers are an especially fast-growing category). These programs enable students to think entrepreneurially -- to seize opportunity, take risks and create wealth. Simply put, entrepreneurship education gives young people a toolkit to apply their field of study to the real world.

It also makes them more employable. A recent report from Junior Achievement Innovation Initiative and Gallup found that both employers and employees believe America's workforce must become more entrepreneurial if the U.S. is to remain competitive -- 95 and 96 percent, respectively. Only one in 10 believed entrepreneurship was an innate skill.

Meanwhile, some 40 percent of young Americans surveyed by Buzz Marketing Group and YEC started side businesses just to make ends meet. The question before us now is, why aren't we helping them succeed instead of watching them live paycheck to paycheck? Not all dental students dream of running their own practice, but they might not have a choice. Let's prepare them for that reality.

Importantly, I'm not suggesting we get rid of liberal arts departments -- I'm suggesting we create more employable English and film majors. "Well-rounded" and "self-sufficient" shouldn't be mutually exclusive concepts, and combining experiential learning with access to business role models and public/private partnerships can fundamentally transform the way we think about workforce development.

Len Schlesinger describes himself as an entrepreneur, and frankly, I think that's a role all college presidents should adopt. Here's a thought: let's fire every college president with the means and resources to embrace entrepreneurship who doesn't explore, support or start an entrepreneurship education program or partnership of some kind. Sure, that idea is bound to ruffle some feathers, but forgive me if I don't shed a tear for those leaders whose outdated policies (and our tacit willingness to accept them) helped create the situation we're in today.

Recession or no recession, if a CEO today were to ship product to market and some 50 percent of that product was inefficient, outdated or outright broken, that CEO would be promptly shown the door.

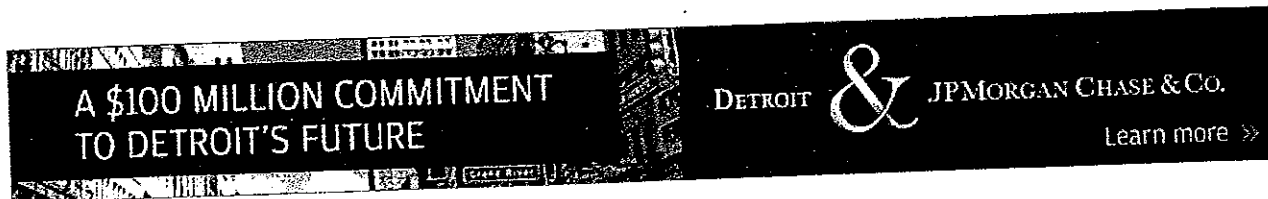
Nostalgia for yesterday is nice, but we need a new approach. As more and more "safe" jobs get automated, streamlined or downsized (remember when *law grads* were virtually guaranteed six-figure jobs?), let's start putting our money where our mouth is, and ask the people educating our children to graduate a new generation of self-sufficient, "well-rounded" thinkers and doers. And since most of us don't have a seat on a collegiate Board of Trustees, I suggest you vote with your checkbook.

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This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/09/how-liberal-arts-colleges-are-failing-america/262711/>

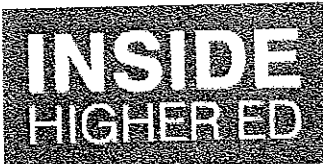
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Obama becomes latest politician to criticize a liberal arts discipline

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on January 31, 2014 - 3:00am

President Obama found common ground with Republican politicians Thursday -- in arguing that some liberal arts degrees offer poor preparation for a job. Obama took on art history, following in the footsteps of Republicans who have in recent years questioned the value of degrees in anthropology, English, philosophy and women's studies. (See chart below to keep track of which politicians have dissed which fields.)

The president's remarks came on a trip to Wisconsin, where he was promoting his proposals on job training and efforts to revitalize American manufacturing. Art history came up as a contrast, and the president's remarks^[1] suggest that -- almost as soon as he said the words -- he realized not everyone would appreciate them.

Here's what he said: "[A] lot of young people no longer see the trades and skilled manufacturing as a viable career. But I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree. Now, nothing wrong with an art history degree -- I love art history. So I don't want to get a bunch of emails from everybody. I'm just saying you can make a really good living and have a great career without getting a four-year college education as long as you get the skills and the training that you need."

There are all sorts of ironies about the president selecting art history as a discipline to question. He is a graduate of Columbia University, whose undergraduate college is rare in American higher education (outside of art schools) in requiring study of art history.^[2]

Then there is the fact that arts programs in American higher education (admittedly not identical to art history) -- fearful of the stereotype that they provide job training for Starbucks jobs -- have worked to study employment outcomes of their graduates. Their findings: Graduates of arts programs, while not all employed in the arts, are generally employed and have high levels of job satisfaction.^[3] using their arts knowledge in a range of ways. And then there is the study released just last week by the Association of

American Colleges and Universities [4] about the long-term success of liberal arts graduates in the world of work.

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, said via email that she found the president's rhetoric disappointing. "In recent years, we've sunk into a 'what's in it for me' approach to learning, making career earnings the litmus test both for college and for different majors," she said. "The president speaks well in principle about our responsibilities to one another in a democratic society.

"But he seems to have forgotten that college can build our desire and capacity to make a better world, not just better technologies. It was depressing to hear President Obama describe college mainly as vocational and/or technical training in the State of the Union address, and it's even worse to have him casually dismiss one of the liberal arts -- or even the whole idea of baccalaureate study -- because you can earn good enough money in a skilled trade. The fact of the matter is that human beings need bread and roses -- and people who help make things do it better, as Steve Jobs said and demonstrated repeatedly, when they study both the arts and technology."

Linda Downs, executive director of the College Art Association, posted a reaction [5] on the group's blog, offering support for any federal effort to promote access for more people to higher education. However, the blog post went on to say: "When these measures are made by cutting back on, denigrating or eliminating humanities disciplines such as art history, then America's future generations will be discouraged from taking advantage of the values, critical and decisive thinking and creative problem solving offered by the humanities. It is worth remembering that many of the nation's most important innovators, in fields including high technology, business, and even military service, have degrees in the humanities."

Politicians Bashing Liberal Arts

Politician	Discipline	Quote
President Obama	Art history	"I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree."
Mitt Romney, former governor and Republican nominee for president	English	"I wonder whether you get information coming into college that says you know, this course of study will lead to this kind of jobs and there's a lot of opening here as opposed to -- as you said, English -- and as an English major I can say this.... as an English major your options are uh, you better go to graduate school, all right? And find a job from there."

Governor Rick Scott, Republican of Florida	Anthropology	"If I'm going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I'm going to take that money to create jobs. So I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state. Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don't think so."
Governor Patrick McCrory, Republican of North Carolina	Gender studies	"If you want to take gender studies that's fine, go to a private school and take it. But I don't want to subsidize that if that's not going to get someone a job."

Teaching and Learning [6]

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/31/obama-becomes-latest-politician-criticize-liberal-arts-discipline?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/30/remarks-president-opportunity-all-and-skills-americas-workers>
- [2] <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/courses/art-humanities.html>
- [3] http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/05/03/graduates_of_arts_programs_fare_better_in_job_market_than
- [4] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/22/see-how-liberal-arts-grads-really-fare-report-examines-long-term-data>
- [5] <http://www.collegeart.org/news/2014/01/30/obama-and-art-history/>
- [6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/teaching-and-learning>