

## Liberal Arts Education a Key to Success

As university budgets get slashed with talk of layoffs and furloughs, and elected officials openly questioning the value of liberal arts majors, many have the impression that higher education is in shambles. One gets the impression that our universities are nothing but bloated institutions run by ivory tower elitists who teach courses that are irrelevant in today's world. If this were the case we should indeed be alarmed. We have spent our careers at universities and we can tell you that this is not the case.

By almost any measure, we in this country have the best universities in the world. Despite frequent reports that American high school students perform poorly in math and science, parents all over the world long to send their children to college in the United States. How have our universities earned this respect? Eight out of the top ten universities in the world, according to *U.S. News and World Report*, are in the United States and our public and private university system is the envy of the world, as we host more international students than any other country. Every state has many public and private colleges and universities that do a world-class job of education. Although people from around the world understand the preeminence of our universities, Americans tend to take them for granted. There are many things that make our universities great but we agree with Fareed Zakaria in his latest book (*In Defense of a Liberal Arts Education*) that one of them is their emphasis on the liberal arts.

“What can do with that major?” is a question we hear often. A student at a major's fair, accompanied by his/her parents, approaches one of the disciplines in the liberal arts such as anthropology. The student says, “That sounds like an interesting major,” as they look at the poster with pictures of students excavating archaeological sites or studying abroad in Brazil. A parent asks what can a person do with this major. We respond with great enthusiasm, “Anything! In any liberal arts major we teach our students to write, think, communicate, and work in diverse environments.” The parent frowns and takes the student off to inquire about business, engineering, or another vocation-based major.

These parents share the widely held opinion that a liberal arts degree does not lead to a career. This opinion does not reflect reality. According to a 2014 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, a significant number of highly paid Fortune 500 CEOs have liberal arts degrees; 4 out of 5 employers surveyed believe that students should be broadly trained in the liberal arts, and 93% of employers want job candidates who can communicate well and think critically, which is what we do best in the liberal arts.

A liberal arts education permits a student to acquire two kinds of knowledge. The first consists of a considerable body of facts. More important, it also entails knowledge that permits someone to analyze that information, think about it critically, make decisions, and take action. Moreover, our majors know how to communicate the fruits of their labors with words both spoken and written. Perhaps most important of all, liberal arts majors know how to adapt to new and changing environments. The liberal arts equip students with skills that will serve them in any job in a rapidly changing career landscape. Most of our great colleges and universities are based

on a core liberal arts education, which is one of the factors that make them great. We can't say it any better than Edgar Bronfman (*Inside Higher Ed*, October, 17, 2013), former CEO of the Seagram Corporation, who offered this simple advice to being successful in the business world, "Get a liberal arts degree."

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