

# Liberate liberal arts from the myth of irrelevance

TODAY'S EMPLOYERS WANT WORKERS WHO ARE THINKERS.

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More than 1.7 million college seniors proudly walked across the stage this spring to get their degrees, the majority of them having majored in the fields of business, computer science, health sciences, and engineering. Surely such a focus on highly specialized career paths is good news for the US economy, as the nation seeks to reaffirm its economic competitiveness.

America's employers aren't so sure.

In its most recent employer surveys (2007, 2008, and 2010), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) found that the vast majority of employers say they are less interested in specialized job proficiencies. Instead, they favor analytical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills – the broad intellectual and social competencies available through a liberal arts education.

This is not to say there are no jobs requiring highly specialized technical skills in today's economy. America's community colleges are adept at providing excellent technical training for students preparing to be tomorrow's nurses, computer technicians, and tool and die operators, among other occupations. Even in those instances, these students are better prepared for success when their critical thinking, writing, and presentation skills are well developed.

The point that employers and liberal arts educators are making is that today's technological world – where knowledge doubles every 18 months and industries are created in less time – requires workers with the transferable skills they need to be ready for as many as 11 different jobs in a lifetime. As David Kearns, the late Xerox chief executive officer once noted, "The only education that prepares us for change is a liberal education. In periods of change, narrow specialization condemns us to inflexibility."

## Students flock to specialized majors

If the preferred educational path to ensure adaptability is a liberal arts education, most college students today aren't buying it. In the mid-1950s, 25 percent of all college students enrolled in the liberal arts, a figure that fell to 8 percent by the early 1970s, and to approximately 3 percent in 2000.

No wonder so many college students are taking specialized majors – 70 to 80 percent of college freshmen list the following as their reasons for attending college: earning more money, finding a job, and preparing for a career. This preoccupation with the short term, unfortunately, is based on an old labor-market model that presumes job specialization is the key to success. This model doesn't work in a modern economy where adaptability is the key.

Since the time of Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, a liberal arts education has been perceived

as the domain of intellectuals, a time for reflection and the development of the mind. More than 2,000 years later, America's Founding Fathers were still reading Greek and Roman classics in the original Greek and Latin languages. Even today, it appears that the aging myth that a liberal arts education is abstract and not appropriate to prepare students for careers is still the prevailing view.

However, when you consider today's modern, technology-driven workplace, a liberal arts education begins to make more sense. Every employee in a successful business must be able to think creatively and act quickly, sometimes alone, but more often in concert with other equally competent people.

Technology skills, the talent to gather and analyze data, the capacity to consider alternative options in solving problems, and the ability to communicate one's viewpoint orally and in writing must be found across all layers of an organization.

Ethics, social responsibility, and a broader perspective on today's modern global society are also important, not only in the workplace but to ensure that citizens act responsibly on the world stage. All these competencies can be found in a liberal arts education.

A workforce with such an education will be better equipped to meet the ever-changing conditions of the 21st century. As the AAC&U has noted, "In an economy fueled by innovation, the capabilities developed through a liberal education have become

America's most valuable economic asset."

It is time to "liberate" the liberal arts from being portrayed as disconnected from the real world. This historical perception is largely inaccurate today, as more and more institutions of higher learning are seeking ways to bring relevance and application to the liberal arts.

A breakthrough model of the liberal arts in the 21st century is emerging, one that is more relevant to the real world than ever before.

For one thing, liberal arts institutions are now organizing themselves so that all aspects of a student's life on campus – academic, social, cultural, extracurricular – are integrated, with residential and student life functions supporting a student's academic goals and activities. Another realization is that providing students with practical, hands-on experiences is not antithetical to a liberal arts education.

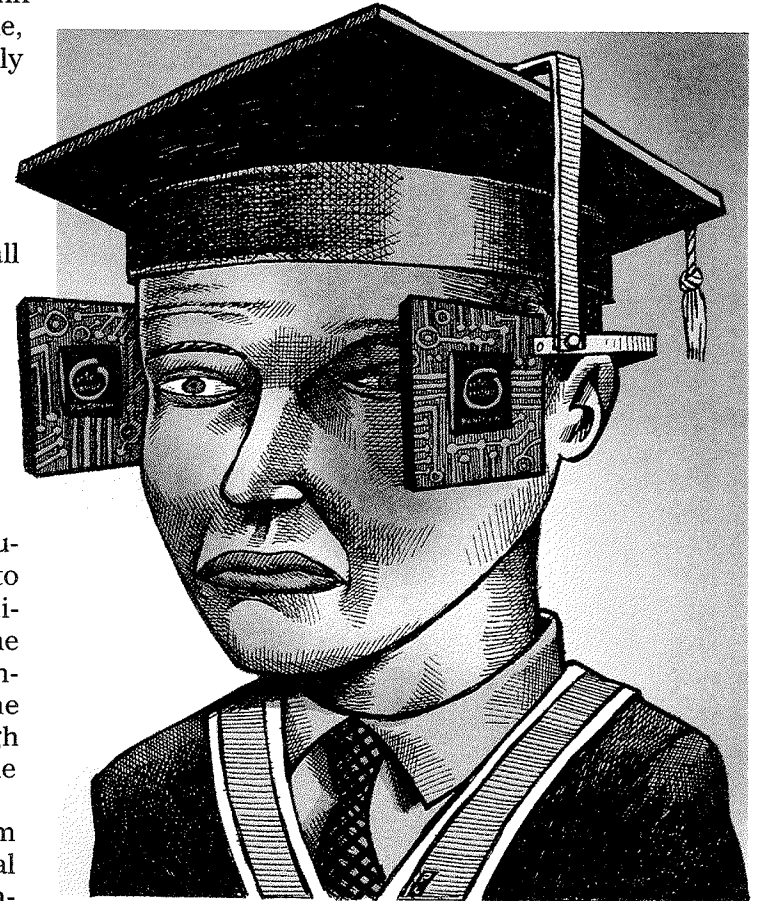
## Liberal arts majors also build wind turbines

At my own institution, designated as "Connecticut's public liberal arts university," we have created such an expectation for our students. They are building wind turbines for schools in Jamaica; researching the sanitation systems of Ghana; interning in Washington, D.C.; exploring the coral reefs of Tahiti; building Habitat homes in West Virginia; and serving as math tutors for middle-school children in our hometown of Willimantic

– to name a few "experiential learning" opportunities. Students taking advantage of them not only gain practical knowledge and skills, but also confirm their career choices as they are given a real-world context for their classroom learning.

There are positive signs that this new liberal arts model is gaining a foothold across the country. One sign is data showing renewed interest in traditional liberal arts majors.

W. Robert Connor, former president of the Teagle Foundation, which supports liberal arts education,



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indicates that the number of majors in the social sciences and the humanities has increased from its historical lows or stayed constant in more recent years.

While hardly a seismic shift, this renewed interest in the liberal arts holds promise. In addition, educational leaders are making a strong public case for liberal arts education. The AAC&U, for instance, is conducting a 10-year promotional campaign for a liberal arts education and its relevance today.

As a member of the Presidents' Trust, a leadership group within the AAC&U, I hope more citizens realize that the economic and social transformation occurring in the United States requires workers who are able to adapt to change and the complexities of the modern world. The broad academic competencies of a liberal arts education, tempered by preprofessional opportunities for students to apply their learning in real-world settings, can help create a workforce ready for the economic challenges of the 21st century and a citizenry ready to lead America forward.

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**A new model of liberal arts is emerging, one tied to work experience.**