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The Value of a Liberal Arts Education: A Self-Evident Truth

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We hold this truth to be self-evident: The best preparation for 21st Century workplace challenges is to earn a liberal arts degree or a professional degree that is grounded in and inspired by the liberal arts.

Employers have once again reiterated their strong preference for hiring college graduates with a liberal arts background because this type of quality education promotes the ability to think critically, communicate clearly, solve complex problems, and apply knowledge in real-world settings. In a recent report commissioned by the [American Association of Colleges and Universities \(AAC&U\)](#), 74% of employers say they would recommend a liberal arts education to young people making college choices.

One of the most telling results from this national survey of business and non-profit leaders is that they seem to place more value on liberal arts than they do on a college major. The report showed that, although the majority of employers agree that having both field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of knowledge and skills is important, 93% of employers indicated that a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than the prospective employee's undergraduate major.

Employers also indicated that they would give hiring preference to those who demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, the capacity for continued new learning, and the ability to contribute innovation in the workplace — all of which also are part of the mix of essential learning outcomes delivered through a strong, engaging liberal arts curriculum.

Employers also endorsed the high impact educational practices known to produce these outcomes.

I appreciate the results of this new study titled "[It Takes More than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success](#)" because it gives us another reason to advance a conversation about the value of higher education that is grounded in and inspired by the liberal arts.

But, the results aren't actually "news". Higher education leaders and associations have been making this case for decades.

So, why is it that the loudest voices in the national conversation about the value of a college education talk about "education for job preparation" and the "return on investment" that individual graduates will earn from their college degree?

Why is it that the national agenda seems to be myopically focused on questions associated with how we can make college more accessible and affordable rather than on the more complex and difficult questions about how we can and should fund the kind of high quality education employers are asking for and also make sure that a higher percentage of our population can afford to attend and is prepared to succeed in this type of an educational environment?

All of us — higher education leaders, reformers, and policy makers, alike — know that our nation cannot produce the type of workforce we need if we focus on technical skills at the expense of liberal education. There must be a balance. And, we also know that the public and individual “return on investment” for a high quality education shows up in more than just a young graduate’s paycheck. We will see it in stronger families, thriving communities, more civil public discourse, innovations that serve the public good, and, of course, in an increased tax base and a higher GDP, as well.

I know that the [White House College ScoreCard](#) initiative has just recently gotten underway and that the work on that project is on-going. The initiative is off to a good start by scoring college costs, the percentage of students who graduate, the percentage of students who repay their loans, the typical amount a student borrows, and the kinds of jobs student get when they graduate and how much they earn. These are all important variables for students to consider when making college choices.

But, the College ScoreCard needs to be expanded to comprise measures of quality education, as well. The ScoreCard could include items like: the percentage of students who engaged in research-based analysis; the percentage of students who study abroad; the number of hours a typical student devotes to community service; opportunities for collaborative learning; the number of required writing intensive courses; and, opportunities to develop leadership skills.

Initiatives like the College ScoreCard have an “agenda setting” power. They tell the American people why we, as a nation, value higher education. And, they tell prospective college students what they should think about before making a college choice.

Let’s elevate the higher education conversation above “how much money can I make” to the much more important questions of “what kind of contribution will I be able to make to my family, my employer, my community, my country and my world?”

Once we help our young people refocus on those questions, we all win.

Jayne Marie Comstock