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# The Quest for Critical Thinking

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## INTRODUCTION

Few phrases are bandied about as much in higher education circles these days as “critical thinking” is. Professors say they teach it; politicians and people hiring graduates say they want to see it. But it is difficult to define with precision. Perhaps as a result, colleges mean different things when they use the phrase and when they evaluate their courses and programs to consider whether they are teaching critical thinking.

In the essays that follow, professors, presidents and everyone in between consider topics related to critical thinking. These pieces touch on what should be in the curriculum, how students (and their families and future employers) should think about education, and how to balance educational ideals with practical concerns, such as finding jobs.

*Inside Higher Ed* will continue to publish essays and write articles about these issues. We welcome your suggestions and reactions to this booklet.

--The Editors

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## A World Without Liberal Learning

By Michael Roth

*Michael Roth considers what higher education would become if it consisted only of vocational training.*

“**W**hat would the United States look like if we really gave up on liberal education and opted only for specialized or vocational schools? Would that really be such a bad thing?”

The interviewer was trying to be provocative, since I’ve just written a book entitled *Beyond The University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. What exactly would be the problem, he went on, if we suddenly had a job market filled with people who were really good at finance, or engineering, or real estate development?

Apart from being relieved that he hadn’t included expertise in derivatives training in his list of specializations, I did find his thought experiment interesting. Would there be real advantages to getting students to hunker down early into more specific tracks of learning? In that way they would be “job ready” sooner, contributing more quickly to the enterprises of which they are a part, and acquiring financial independence at the same time. Would that really be such a bad thing?

The debate between those who want students to specialize quickly and those

who advocate for a broad, contextual education is as old as America itself. The health of a republic, Thomas Jefferson argued, depends on the education of its citizens. Against those arguing for more technical training, he founded the University of Virginia, emphasizing the freedom that students and faculty would exercise there. Unlike Harvard University and its many imitators, devoted to predetermined itineraries through traditional fields, he said, Virginia would not prescribe a course of study to direct graduates to “the particular vocations to which they are destined.”

At Mr. Jefferson’s university, “every branch of science, useful at this day, may be taught in its highest degree.” But who would determine which pursuits of knowledge would prove useful?

Jefferson, a man of the Enlightenment, had faith that the diverse forms of learning would improve public and private life. Of course, his personal prejudices limited his interest in the improvement of life for so many. However, his conception of “useful knowledge” was capacious

and open-ended – and this was reflected in his design for the campus in Charlottesville. He believed that the habits of mind and methods of inquiry characteristic of the modern sciences lent themselves to lifelong learning that would serve one well whether one went on to manage a farm or pursue a professional career. It is here we see the dynamic and open-ended nature of Jefferson’s understanding of educational “usefulness.”

His approach to knowledge and experimentation kept open the possibility that any form of inquiry might prove useful. The sciences and mathematics made up about half of the curriculum at Virginia, but Jefferson was convinced that the broad study of all fields that promoted inquiry, such as history, zoology, anatomy and even ideology would help prepare young minds.

The utility was generally not something that could be determined in advance, but would be realized through what individuals made of their learning once outside the confines of the campus. The free inquiry cultivated at the university would help build a citizenry of independent thinkers who took responsibility for their actions in the contexts of their communities and the new Republic.

Jefferson would have well-understood what many business leaders, educators and researchers recognize today: that given the intense

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**“In America, liberal education has long been animated by the tension between broad, open-ended learning and the desire to be useful in a changing world.”**

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Source: College of DuPage

interconnection of problems and opportunities in a globalized culture and economy, we require thinkers who are comfortable with ambiguity and can manage complexity. Joshua Boger, founder of Vertex Pharmaceuticals (and chair of the board at Wesleyan University), has pointed out how much creative and constructive work gets done before clarity arrives, and that people who seek clarity too quickly might actually wind up missing a good deal that really matters. Boger preaches a high tolerance for ambiguity because the contemporary world is so messy, so complex.

Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO, one of the most innovative design firms in the world, has lamented that many designers “are stuck with an approach that seems to be incapable of facing the complexity of the challenges being posed today.” He calls for a flexible framework that leaves behind static blueprint preparation for “open-ended, emergent, evolutionary approaches to the design of complex systems can result in more robust and useful outcomes.”

Like many CEOs across the country,

Brown recognizes that more robust and useful outcomes will come from learning that is capacious and open-ended -- from liberal education.

At the Drucker Forum in 2013, Helga Nowotny, president of the European Research Council, described what she called the “embarrassment of complexity” – efforts based in data analysis to dissolve ambiguity that lead to more conformity and less creativity. She called for an ethos among business and government leaders that would instead “be based on the acknowledgement that complexity requires integrative thinking, the ability to see the world, a problem or a challenge from different perspectives.” That’s a call for integrative thinking based in liberal learning.

In America, liberal education has long been animated by the tension between broad, open-ended learning and the desire to be useful in a changing world. Calls for dissolving this tension in favor of narrow utilitarian training would likely produce just the opposite: specialists unprepared for change who will be skilled in areas that may quickly become obsolete.

So, what would America look like if we abandoned this grand tradition of liberal education? Without an education that cultivates an ability to learn from the past while stimulating a resistance to authority, without an education that empowers students for lifelong learning and inquiry, we would become a cultural and economic backwater, competing with various regions for the privilege of operationalizing somebody else’s new ideas.

In an effort at manic monetization without critical thinking, we would become adept at producing conformity rather than innovation.

The free inquiry and experimentation of a pragmatic liberal education open to ambiguity and complexity help us to think for ourselves, take responsibility for our beliefs and actions, seize opportunities and solve problems. Liberal education matters far beyond the university because it increases our capacity to shape a complex world. ■

*Michael Roth is president of Wesleyan University. His new book is Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters (Yale University Press).*

## It's the Faculty's Job, Too

By Patricia Okker

*The career center can't do it all -- professors in liberal arts fields must also take responsibility for their students' job prospects, Patricia Okker argues.*

**B**etween a presidential proposal rating colleges based in part on what graduates earn, studies linking specific majors to earning potential, and seemingly endless reports analyzing the return on investment of higher education, never have the economic implications of a college education been more important.

Faculty members in the liberal arts are, not surprisingly, resistant to the notion that an education can be reduced to a starting salary. Education, we insist, should prepare one for life — for work, for play, for relationships, for responsible citizenry. And when our students do ask questions about their job prospects, we are encouraging, if not precise. We remind students vaguely that critical thinking skills are highly sought-after by employers and then we refer students to our campus's career centers to work with trained career professionals, whom we largely do not know.

Is this enough?

For years I thought it was enough, but with tuition and student debt loads continuing to rise and a public that seems increasingly impatient with the liberal arts, I'm no longer so inclined.

For the last ten years or so, I've been piecing together, often clumsily, a different answer with and for my students that has developed into

a three-credit course on career exploration. Based on the premise that students can apply the writing and research skills they've developed in the liberal arts to launch their job searches, this course defends the choice of a liberal arts major, while at the same time confronting the challenging job market these students face.

It is an approach that has required me to become much more involved in my students' job searches. It is not enough, I now realize, to refer students to career centers or to write glowing reference letters. It is not enough offer platitudes about problem-solving skills.

The course almost always begins by having students identify as precisely as possible the skills they have developed in their majors. When talking with English majors, for example, students almost always start with obvious skills such as research, writing, and critical thinking. But quickly they start unpacking these general categories, and we talk about using databases efficiently, the difficulties of synthesis, and the unappreciated skill of paraphrase.

We talk about interpretation, understanding historical context, writing for particular audiences, and explaining complex theoretical perspectives. Someone inevitably acknowledges that he has learned to

discuss difficult subjects like racism and sexism. Someone else confesses that she used to be “bad” at peer review, but now knows how to give -- and receive -- constructive criticism. Someone else talks about developing an aesthetic sense, of appreciating a line of poetry for its sheer beauty.

The different directions this conversation can take have been instructive. The English majors almost always say something about how they have learned to disagree with others, without insisting that one person's interpretation is right, another wrong, and they appreciate their ability to do so without resorting to the shouting matches they see on cable television.

But students in other disciplines, I've learned, are not so quick to claim the English major's love of ambiguity. During one discussion, two political science majors bristled at the notion that there are no right answers. We, the political scientists proudly declared, learn to win debates. We learn to find the weaknesses in other people's arguments, and we learn to defend our own positions. Not a bad skill, we all realized, for future policy makers, many of whom will work in a political context in which there are, unquestionably, winners and losers.

I always end this class activity the same way: by asking students to erase those skills we've written on the board that are not transferable to a professional setting. There is almost always a long pause, but someone inevitably offers up something: “Peer review. No one here is ever going to get a job peer reviewing poems.”

Before I even have a chance to use the eraser in my hand, however, someone else chimes in with some version of this story: “I’m probably not going to peer review a poem again, but I will have to give constructive criticism. I had a boss once who didn’t know how to give feedback, and it was awful. I know I can give criticism better than he did.”

In all the times I’ve done this exercise, we’ve never erased a single thing.

This activity is no magic bullet. Students still need to identify skills specific to their individual experiences and affinities, and they need lots of practice articulating these strengths to potential employers. But it can

be a start, a way of helping students link their majors with career options. Because it challenges students’ own perceptions of themselves as having chosen a “useless” major, it also serves as a particularly helpful launch to an entire course devoted to preparing for a job search.

But it is a path that works only if we, the faculty in the disciplines, willingly assume a role in career counseling. As fabulous as the career professionals I’ve worked with over the years are — and they are incredibly knowledgeable and talented — they cannot nor should be solely responsible for helping students recognize the discipline-specific skills they have developed.

Rather than refer students to career



Source: American University

professionals, we need to partner with these counselors, in our classrooms and in their career centers. Only if we work collaboratively can we give our students in the liberal arts the career guidance they need and deserve. ■

*Patricia Okker is professor of English and interim deputy provost at the University of Missouri at Columbia.*

## A False Choice

By Gloria Cordes Larson

*Students and the colleges that teach them need not focus on only hard and soft skills, writes Gloria Cordes Larson.*

There has been extensive hand-wringing about what can be done to help young graduates succeed in today’s tough labor market – especially in the spring, as high school seniors decide on their college offers, and college seniors prepare to graduate and face the world. Unemployment and underemployment rates among recent college graduates in the United States – largely a result of the recession’s lingering damage – are too

high. And we’ve all seen the headlines questioning the value of college and the surveys that show employers bemoaning the “preparedness gap.”

But I am full of optimism.

As a university president, I spend far too much time among skilled, talented, motivated young people to be anything but hopeful about the future of higher education and the capabilities of the millennial generation – those born roughly between the early 1980s and

the early 2000s. And honestly, surveys by my institution, Bentley University, of recruiters and students don’t reflect these headlines.

It’s perplexing. Is there such a disconnect to good jobs with this generation? And if there is one, let’s figure out how to resolve it instead of repeatedly touting the problem. So we chose to dig a little deeper and try to uncover the real issues. How do key stakeholders actually view the preparedness issue? And, more important, what will it take to ensure that millennials are fully prepared to succeed in the workplace?

We commissioned KRC Research to conduct a comprehensive survey of over 3,000 stakeholders, including employers, higher education leaders,

students, parents, and recent college graduates. The survey found consensus in surprising places -- from rating recent graduates' level of workforce preparedness to defining exactly what preparedness means.

One of the most interesting set of findings revealed that businesses are conflicted about the skills they want in their new employees and, consequently, are sending mixed messages to the marketplace. A majority of business decision-makers and corporate recruiters say that hard and soft skills are equally important for success in the workplace. (Hard skills are tangible ones, such as a student's technical and professional skills, while soft skills include communicating well, teamwork and patience.)

Yet when asked to assess the importance of a comprehensive set of individual skills, business leaders put soft skills at the top of their list and industry and job-specific skills at the bottom; only 40 percent of employers say that the latter are important to workplace success. But while employers say soft skills are vital to long-term career success, they prefer to hire candidates with the industry-specific skills needed to hit the ground running, even if those candidates have less potential for future growth.

In the face of such conflicting information from employers, how should students and educators respond? Should they emphasize soft skills or hard skills?

The answer: This is a false choice. Students don't need to -- and shouldn't have to -- choose between hard and



Source: College of DuPage

soft skills. It's important for colleges to arm students with both skill sets -- whether a student is majoring in business or literature. By developing curriculums that fuse liberal arts and professional skills and by providing hands-on learning experiences, we can give our students the range of skills that are critical for the modern workplace.

This "fusion" was one of the popular solutions tested in the survey, and many schools are doing it already. Brandeis University, a private university with a liberal arts focus, says that its new undergraduate business program is already one of its most popular majors. (Brandeis points out that most of its business majors are double majors.) At West Virginia University, the College of Business and Economics and the School of Public Health have partnered to create

a dual-degree program that will infuse business skills into the field of public health. At Georgetown's McDonough School of Business, students in the freshman "Ethics of Entrepreneurship" seminar take on a semesterlong project designed to help them flex their critical thinking and writing muscles in a global and social framework.

Bentley has also adopted several strategies to ensure we are preparing our students for success. Virtually every student here majors or minors in business, while simultaneously pursuing a core of arts and sciences courses that focus on expanding and inspiring traditional "business" thinking. We recently expanded on our popular liberal studies major, an optional second major combined with a business major, by launching six-credit "fusion" courses co-taught by business and arts and sciences faculty.

Combinations include a management course (Interpersonal Relations in Management) with an English course (Women and Film) to explore how women are perceived in film and how this can affect management styles; and a global studies course (U.S. Government and Politics) with an economics course (Macroeconomics) to teach how politics and economics work together and to demonstrate that understanding both is often essential to doing either one well.

All this study must be combined with hands-on, “experiential” learning – the pathway to hard skills. This is where business organizations can play an important role.

Santander, the global, multinational bank, created a scholarship program to support academic, research, and technological projects – we are proud

to be one of the 800 institutions in its program. Corporate partners can also help shape curriculums to teach skills as they are actually practiced in the workplace. EY LLP (formerly Ernst and Young) worked closely with us to merge accounting and finance for freshmen and sophomores, since those disciplines are inextricably linked in the business environment.

These strategies aim to equip students with both hard and soft skills and they can be adopted and adapted by many colleges. A challenge in higher education is that some academic models can be so discipline-specific that students miss out on cross-disciplinary opportunities to integrate their knowledge. But it doesn't have to work this way.

Like other colleges and universities that are innovating and experimenting,

we are seeing returns on this curricular investment.

One way to measure this: our survey of the Class of 2013 shows that 98 percent of responding graduates are employed or attending graduate school full time (this includes information from 95 percent of the class). Retention, number and availability of internships, and repayment of student debt are also key metrics.

I encourage my higher education colleagues to refocus their attention on the ways we can work together to strengthen our education models. Millennials, a group that includes our current students, are counting on us to prepare them for successful careers and life. And in the long run, it is an economic imperative that we do so. ■

*Gloria Cordes Larson is president of Bentley University.*

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## Personal Economy and the Liberal Arts

By Lee Burdette Williams

*Yes, it matters what our students major in -- but it may matter less than their maturity and perseverance and other interpersonal skills, writes Lee Williams.*

I recently sat through another compelling defense of the liberal arts, although I hardly needed to be in the choir again. I sing loudly from the song sheet, being both the recipient of a liberal arts education and an employee of a college deeply committed to this work. I am surrounded every day by the very evidence that its defenders offer

in support of the necessary existence of this uniquely American construct.

But I am troubled by what is not often said. I interact daily with students who will soon be on the job market as well as recent graduates who have entered that same tough market, and I have come to realize that the arguments in favor of, or against, the wonders

of a liberal arts education tell only half the story. There is an equation at work in determining the likelihood of success, and it is an equation too often overlooked in our defense of the liberal arts: the one that calculates the value of character and personal skills.

I can hardly count the number of times I have heard successful people share with audiences that they are liberal arts graduates. These speakers are often on the dais because of their success. “I was an English major -- British lit to be specific!” “I majored in philosophy, double-minored in French and chemistry!”

And look at them now: accomplished, articulate, passionate. They are in business, in education, in social



services, politics and medicine. They are entrepreneurs, thought leaders, successful artists and authors. "Look!" they say. "A liberal arts education can lead to great career opportunities and even more. My liberal arts background has prepared me to constantly retool, to be a lifelong learner, to ask big questions and solve big problems."

It absolutely can, but it is not enough. Nor is it enough to major in business, or engineering, or anything, for that matter. It is no longer enough to lay claim to a particular educational background. Professional success and personal satisfaction can certainly come to someone who majored in political science or sociology, but not just because of that major, or in spite of it.

These people on the dais were most likely the students who, regardless of major, just did things well. They came to class having done the reading. They turned in assignments and participated appropriately in group work. They spoke up when asked a question, and listened when others spoke, and in doing so, learned something. They did not miss three classes after a fight with a boy/girlfriend. They did not bail on a group project because their classmates made them uncomfortable. They managed bad news with some degree of equanimity.

Then they graduated, and succeeded in whatever place they found themselves -- showing up for work, doing what was asked, accepting criticism, improving.

As a dean of students I interact regularly with students on two

ends of a wide spectrum. On one end are student leaders -- student government officers, resident advisers, peer leaders, team captains. On the other end are students who are struggling mightily. Perhaps it's a lack of resilience that has led them to my office, realizing they are going to fail a class or two or all of them. Or they have behaved in some way that troubles me so much that I invite them in for a conversation about what has happened. Sometimes they are at the table in my office because they are sadly disconnected from the social fabric of this small college, leading a faculty or staff member to alert me to the possibility of them dropping out, flunking out, or worse.

The conversations I have, or try to have, with these students provide me with a deeper understanding of the other side of that equation, and what is missing from it, leading me to a conclusion that in all the discussion and defense of a liberal arts education, something vital to a student's prospects is not being discussed. Liberal arts plus... how can I say this? Liberal arts plus decent interpersonal skills -- the ability to converse, to make eye contact, to speak in complete sentences, to recognize one's responsibility, to listen to another perspective -- equal fairly decent job prospects.

A major in European history is neither a solid predictor of, nor an ample plan for, career success. either is it a death knell. Without the other side of that equation, however, a liberal arts major is simply not enough. In fact, I've started to see this as basic math,

with four simple equations:

1. A marketable major (in these times, STEM majors and some professionally focused majors) + good interpersonal skills (which include reliability, ability to work with others, a decent attention span) = very likely professional success.
2. A liberal arts major + those same interpersonal skills = fairly likely professional success.
3. A marketable major without interpersonal skills = possible professional success (some skills are valuable enough for employers to overlook certain deficits).
4. A liberal arts major without interpersonal skills = not much chance of professional success.

An equation leading to a good life must balance the economy of the liberal arts with a personal economy -- one that demonstrates emotional intelligence, self-awareness and maturity. I say this while acknowledging the affection I have for those students who do struggle to interact in appropriate ways, for those who cannot navigate the stressful pathways of classes and peer groups and inconveniences that fill the landscape of college life. I don't think it's a liberal arts degree that dooms or defines a graduate. I think it has a lot more to do with their personality traits than their transcript. And I'm weary of the implication that a choice to major in the liberal arts is what will keep my students unemployed, or underemployed, when I see so many of them landing good jobs and starting what I know will be interesting, though occasionally uneven, careers about



Source: Rice University

which they care deeply.

My advice to the many students who start college as “undecided” is always the same advice I received as an undergraduate: Major in something you enjoy and do it well. Do things well. Show up on time, and do what you say you’re going to do. If you run for a student government office, come to meetings and follow through on what you’ve promised. If you have a campus job, take it seriously. Do things well, I tell students, and doors will open for you. (I should pause here and acknowledge that I didn’t actually figure this out until much later, and wish at times I could go back in time and show up for a meeting prepared, or not skip my shift in the student center, but I was young and naive and a sociology major in a different, less-stressful economy with student loans that felt manageable.)

I often find myself working with students who are utterly unable to take responsibility for themselves, who are done in by the smallest disappointment. What does that bode for their future

employers? I would not hire them to feed my fish, and I know them. I care about them. I am responsible for them. So what chance do they stand with a prospective employer who is seeking an entry-level worker to interact with customers, or work as part of a team? Sometimes I find myself hearing from a parent who is calling or emailing to do something for a student -- schedule a meeting with a staff member, fill out a form -- that should be easily within the student’s ability. Will that parent do the same with an employer?

About a fifth of my 1,500 students are varsity athletes, and another 70 or so are members of club sports teams. They struggle with the same emotional and academic challenges as their non-athlete classmates, but most also manage to figure out a way to get to practices and games, to keep their grades high enough to maintain their eligibility. The club sports leaders have to schedule their own games, arrange their own transportation, decide who plays, design and order their own

uniforms, collect dues and lobby the student government for funds. If I could find a way for all of my students to have that sort of experience, I think it could more than make up for their “unmarketable” liberal arts degrees as they enter the work force. And yet, athletics is often criticized as a distraction from academics.

We routinely place students in positions of responsibility on our campus -- to manage money, to respond to behavioral issues, to serve on search committees and host a candidate for lunch -- and I know what many of them are capable of. I don’t always know their majors, but I know their prospects. They will find themselves in a job, maybe not the job of their dreams at first, but they will be able to manage the small, and then slightly larger, tasks placed before them. And they will think back, I believe, to some of the challenges they faced on the campus of this small college, which they often claim is not “the real world.” But it is the real world

in many ways -- fraught with hassles, battles, disappointments, requiring self-advocacy, empathy, patience -- and it is preparing them for the work world in ways that their academic coursework may or may not be.

These are student leaders -- the resident assistant who has to learn to confront a belligerent peer at 2 a.m., or encourage a scared new student who has been eating too many meals alone. It's the student body vice president who has to wrangle a roomful of talkative and occasionally self-interested senators and move them toward a decision. It's the student center building manager who has to think on her feet when a pipe bursts and begins to flood the game room, mobilizing her peers to move furniture before it gets ruined. But it's also the students who don't characterize themselves as "leaders." They just figure out how to register for a career services workshop on internships, how to interact with an alum at a networking event, how to competently, if not spectacularly, put one foot in front of the other as they move toward graduation.

I had the opportunity to teach a class this past semester. It was a small seminar with eight students, seven of them seniors. They were all different majors, and I'm not sure I could tell you who was what. They were, though, smart and verbal and engaged in the discussions we had. They spoke, and they noticed when another person was

trying to speak. They brought to the class their other academic interests, one of them using something learned in a religion and sexuality class to interpret one of our texts. Another explained to the class a landmark affirmative action case she learned about in her Constitutional law class. A third offered her own experience as a resident adviser to provide context to a discussion on race relations on campus.

They are justifiably worried about their job prospects, especially since they have spent a semester with me reading about the various crises of American higher education and its roots in the global economy. I'm sure their parents are worried, too.

But I'm not as worried. I'm not sanguine, because it is difficult to find a job these days, but I believe that once they get into a work setting, they will do fine. And their chances of getting into that work setting are better than average, because they can make eye contact and put several sentences together in service to their ideas. Not all of their classmates can do the same. Those are the ones I worry about.

We need to lessen our obsession with the obvious value of a liberal arts education and instead focus on the values of personal maturity, accountability, a sense of proportion and perspective. We need to be certain our students know how to give a good firm handshake, look someone

in the eye and introduce themselves. We need to reinforce the importance of deadlines. We need to address (dare I say it?) personal hygiene and appropriate dress. We must make sure they can get to their feet at a college-sponsored dinner and thank guests for coming, or introduce a speaker at a lecture, or send a thank-you note to the director of an office that has provided them funds to attend a conference.

Is this the work of higher education? Some would argue it absolutely is not, that postsecondary education is about mastering content and developing all-important critical thinking skills, about becoming self-taught, curious researchers and life-long learners. To those who would argue those points, I would say yes -- it is all about those things, and I am grateful for the liberal arts education that helped me develop those skills. But I would then suggest, respectfully, that as maddening as it might be to spend valuable teaching time engaged in building the personal economy of our students, it is perhaps the best way to support the successful launch into that life we want for them.

Because in the hard work of balancing this complicated equation, even the best liberal arts education will not remedy the lack of the most basic interpersonal skills. ■

*Lee Burdette Williams is vice president for student affairs and dean of students at Wheaton College (Mass.).*

## The Humanities Are an Existentialism

By Dan Edelstein

*If we only focus on the practical skills students acquire by studying the humanities, we lose sight of their most useful value of all: to help us live meaningful lives, writes Dan Edelstein.*

Whether or not the humanities are truly in crisis, the current debates around them have a certain gun-to-the-head quality. “This is why you -- student, parent, Republican senator -- shouldn’t pull the trigger,” their promoters plead. “We deserve to live; we’re good productive citizens; we, too, contribute to the economy, national security, democracy, etc.” Most of these reasons are perfectly accurate. But it is nonetheless surprising that, in the face of what is depicted as an existential crisis, most believers shy away from existential claims (with some exceptions). And by not defending the humanities on their own turf, we risk alienating the very people on whose support the long-term survival of our disciplines depend: students.

One reason why our defenses can have a desperate ring to them is that we’re not used to justifying ourselves. Most humanists hold the value of the objects they study to be self-evident. The student who falls in love with Kant, Flaubert, or ancient Egypt does not need to provide an explanation for why she would like to devote years of her life to such studies. To paraphrase Max Weber, scholarship in the humanities

is a vocation, a “calling” in the clerical sense. It chooses you, you don’t choose it. The problem with this kind of spiritual passion is that it is difficult to describe. To paraphrase another 20th-century giant, Jimi Hendrix, it’s more about the experience.

It’s not surprising, then, that when we humanists feel (or imagine) the budget axe tickling the hairs on the backs of our necks, we don’t have ready-made apologia with which to woo or wow our would-be executioners. And because a calling is hard to explain, we turn instead to more straightforward, utilitarian defenses -- “but employers say they like English majors!” -- which, while true, don’t capture the authentic spirit that moves the humanities student.

There is of course sound logic to this approach. Government and state funding is a zero-sum game, and politicians are more likely to be receptive to practical arguments than to existential propositions. But in the long run, it takes more than state and university budgets to maintain the health of the humanities. It also takes students. And by constantly putting our most productive foot forward, we may unintentionally end up selling ourselves

short (disclosure: I, too, have sinned). The fundamental reason why students should devote hours of their weeks to novels, philosophy, art, music, or history is not so that they can hone their communication skills or refine their critical thinking. It is because the humanities offer students a profound sense of existential purpose.

The real challenge that we face today, then, lies in explaining to a perplexed, but not necessarily hostile audience -- and perhaps even to ourselves -- why it is that the study of literature, anthropology, art history, or classics can be so meaningful, and why this existential rationale is equally important as other, more utilitarian ones. This line of argument stands in opposition to proclamations of the humanities’ uselessness: to declare that the humanities are of existential value is to affirm that they are very useful indeed.

So how might we go about defining this existential value? A good place to start would be with existentialism itself. A premise of existentialist philosophy is that we live in a world without inherent meaning. For atheists, this is often understood as the human condition following the death of God. But as Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” even believers must recognize that they ultimately are the ones responsible for the production of meaning (in fact, many early existentialists were Christians). Abraham had to decide for himself whether the angel who commanded him to halt his sacrifice was genuinely a divine messenger. In



Source: Spelman College

Sartre's memorable formulation, man is "condemned to be free"; we have no choice but to choose. While it may feel as though a humanities vocation is a calling, you still have to decide to answer the call.

The realization that meaning isn't something we receive from the outside, from others, but that it always must come from within us, from our conscious, deliberative choices, does not make us crave it any less. We are, existentialists insist, creatures of purpose, a thesis that psychological research has also confirmed.

Now what does this have to do with the humanities? It's not that obvious, after all, how reading *Madame Bovary*, *the Critique of Pure Reason*, or *The Book of the Dead* can fill your life with purpose. At the same time, we also know that some people do find it deeply meaningful to peruse these works, and even to dedicate their careers to studying them.

What is it, then, that lovers of literature -- to consider but them for the moment -- find so existentially rewarding about reading? In a recent book, my colleague Joshua Landy

argues that one of the more satisfying features of literature is that it creates the illusion of a meaningful world. "The poem forms a magic circle from within which all contingency is banished," he writes apropos of Mallarmé's celebrated sonnet en -yx. The order we discover in literary works may be magical, but it isn't metaphysical; it comes from the sense that "everything is exactly what and where it has to be." Art offers a reprieve from a universe governed by chance; what were merely sordid newspaper clippings can become, when transported into artful narratives, *The Red and the Black* or *Madame Bovary*. Landy suggests that fictions produce these illusions through a process of "overdetermination:" the ending of *Anna Karenina*, for instance, is foreshadowed by its beginning, when Anna witnesses a woman throwing herself under a train.

If art offered only illusions of necessity, it would hardly satisfy existential longing. Pretending that everything happens for a reason is precisely what the existentialists castigated as "bad faith." Yet there's an obvious difference between enjoying a

novel and, say, believing in Providence. We don't inhabit fictional worlds, we only pay them visits. No lover of literature actually believes her life is as determined as that of a literary heroine (even Emma Bovary wasn't psychotic). So why does the semblance of an orderly universe enchant us so?

Well-ordered, fictional worlds attract us, it seems, because we, too, aspire to live lives from which contingency is kept at bay. Beauty, wrote Stendhal, is "only a promise of happiness." As Alexander Nehamas suggested, in his book of this title, the beautiful work of art provides us with a tantalizing pleasure; beauty engages us in its pursuit. But what do we pursue? "To find something beautiful is inseparable from the need to understand what makes it so," he writes. Behind the beautiful object -- sonnet, style, or sculpture -- we reach for the idea of order itself. The promise of happiness made by art is a promise of purpose.

But a promise of purpose is still a bird in the bush: it can disappear when you put down the book, or leave the concert hall. For the philosopher Immanuel Kant, art only provides us

with an empty sense of purpose; or as he put it, in his distinctively Kantian way, “purposiveness without purpose” (it’s even better in German).

It’s true that few existential crises have been resolved by a trip to the museum or the download of a new album. But Kant may have underestimated how the sense of artistic purpose can also seep into our own lives. For instance, as Plato and every teenager know well, instrumental music can give voice to inexpressible feelings without the help of language. These emotional frameworks can convey a potent sense of purpose. When my youngest daughter spent six weeks in the neonatal ICU with a life-threatening condition, my mind kept replaying the second movement of Beethoven’s seventh symphony to tame my fears. Its somber, resolute progress, punctuated by brief moments of respite, helped to keep my vacillating emotions under control. As in films, sometimes it is the soundtrack that gives meaning to our actions.

The promise of order found in beautiful works of art, then, can inspire us to find purpose in our own lives. The illusion of a world where everything is in its place helps us view reality in a different light. This process is particularly clear -- indeed, almost trivial -- in those humanistic disciplines that do not deal primarily with aesthetic objects, such as philosophy. We aren’t attracted to the worldviews of Plato, Kant, or Sartre, purely for the elegance of their formal structure. If we’re swayed by their philosophies, it’s because they allow us to discover

hitherto unnoticed patterns in our lives. Sometimes, when you read philosophy, it seems as though the whole world has snapped into place.

This is not an experience reserved for professional philosophers, either: at the conclusion of a philosophy course that my colleagues Debra Satz and Rob Reich offer to recovering female addicts, one student declared, “I feel like a butterfly drawn from a cocoon.”

So where art initially appeals to us through intimations of otherworldly beauty, a more prolonged engagement with the humanities can produce a sense of order in the here and now. One could even say that Plato got things the wrong way around: first we’re attracted by an ideal universe, and then we’re led to discover that our own reality is not as absurd as it once seemed. And while particularly evident with philosophy, this sensation of finally making sense of the world, and of your own place in it, can come from many quarters of the humanities. In a delightful interview (originally conducted in French), Justice Stephen Breyer recently exclaimed, “It’s all there in Proust — all mankind!” Other readers have had similar responses to Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and many more.

But exploring the humanities is not like a trip to the mall: you don’t set off to find an off-the-rack outfit to wear. Proust can change your life, but if you only saw the world through his novel, it would be a rather impoverished life. Worse, it would be inauthentic: no author, no matter how great, can tell you what the meaning of your life

is. That is something we must cobble together for ourselves, from the bits and pieces of literature, philosophy, religion, history, and art that particularly resonate in us. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” T.S. Eliot wrote at the end of *The Waste Land*. No poem offers a better illustration of this cultural bricolage: Shakespeare answers Dante, and the Upanishads disclose what the Book of Revelation had suppressed.

So here we find an existential rationale for a liberal education. To be sure, the humanities do not figure alone in this endeavor: psychology, biology, and physics can contribute to our perception of ourselves in relation to the world, as can economics, sociology, and political science. But the more a discipline tends toward scientific precision, the more it privileges a small number of accepted, canonical explanations of those aspects of reality it aims to describe. If 20 biology professors lectured on Darwin’s theory of evolution, chances are they’d have a lot in common. But if 20 French professors lectured on Proust’s *Recherche*, chances are they’d be quite different. The same could be said, perhaps to a lesser extent, for 20 lectures on Plato’s *Republic*. The kinds of objects that the humanities focus on are generally irreducible to a single explanation. This is why they provide such good fodder for hungry minds: there are so many ways a poem, a painting, or a philosophy book can stick with you.

In his diatribe against the way the humanities have been taught since the

'60s, Allan Bloom harrumphed, "On the portal of the humanities is written in many ways and many tongues, 'There is no truth -- at least here.' " But the point of a liberal education is not to read great works in order to discover The Truth. Its point is to give students the chance to fashion purposeful lives for themselves. This is why authors such as Freud, whose truth-value is doubted by many, can still be a source of meaning for others. Conversely, this is also why humanities professors, many of whom are rightfully concerned about the truth-value of certain questions or interpretations, do not

always teach the kinds of classes where students can serendipitously discover existential purpose.

There are more than existential reasons to study the humanities. Some are intellectual: history, for instance, responds to our profound curiosity about the past. Some are practical. To celebrate one is not to deny others. The biggest difficulty with defending the humanities is the embarrassment of riches: because humanists are like foxes and learn many different things, it is hard to explain them to the hedgehogs of the world, who want to know what One Big Thing we do well.

The danger is that, in compressing our message so it gets heard, we leave out precisely the part that naturally appeals to our future students. Yes, students and parents are worried about employment prospects. But what parents don't also want their child to lead a meaningful life?

We are betraying our students if, as a society, we do not tell them that purpose is what ultimately makes a life well-lived. ■

*Dan Edelstein is a professor of French and (by courtesy) history at Stanford University. He directs the Stanford Summer Humanities Institute.*

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## Future-Focused Assessment

By Mark Salisbury

*Measuring what students have learned and can do is hard enough, but we really should be trying to assess what our institutions have prepared them to learn later, writes Mark Salisbury.*

**A** central tenet of the student learning outcomes "movement" is that higher education institutions must articulate a specific set of skills, traits and/or dispositions that all of its students will learn before graduation. Then, through legitimate means of measurement, institutions must assess and publicize the degree to which its students make gains on each of these outcomes.

Although many institutions have yet to implement this concept fully (especially regarding the thorough assessment of institutional outcomes),

this idea is more than just a suggestion. Each of the regional accrediting bodies now requires institutions to identify specific learning outcomes and demonstrate evidence of outcomes assessment as a standard of practice.

This approach to educational design seems at the very least reasonable. All students, regardless of major, need a certain set of skills and aptitudes (things like critical thinking, collaborative leadership, intercultural competence) to succeed in life as they take on additional professional responsibilities, embark (by choice or by circumstance)

on a new career, or address a daunting civic or personal challenge. In light of the educational mission our institutions espouse, committing ourselves to a set of learning outcomes for all students seems like what we should have been doing all along.

Yet too often the outcomes that institutions select to represent the full scope of their educational mission, and the way that those institutions choose to assess gains on those outcomes, unwittingly limit their ability to fulfill the mission they espouse. For when institutions narrow their educational vision to a discrete set of skills and dispositions that can be presented, performed or produced at the end of an undergraduate assembly line, they often do so at the expense of their own broader vision that would cultivate in students a self-sustaining approach to learning. What we measure dictates the focus of our efforts to improve.

As such, it's easy to imagine a scenario in which the educational structure that currently produces majors and minors in content areas is simply replaced by one that produces majors and minors in some newly chosen learning outcomes. Instead of redesigning the college learning experience to alter the lifetime trajectory of an individual, we allow the whole to be nothing more than the sum of the parts -- because all we have done is swap one collection of parts for another. Although there may be value in establishing and implementing a threshold of competence for a bachelor's degree (for which a major serves a legitimate purpose), limiting ourselves to this framework fails to account for the deeply held belief that a college experience should approach learning as a process -- one that is cumulative, iterative, multidimensional and, most importantly, self-sustaining long beyond graduation.

The disconnect between our conception of a college education as a process and our tendency to track learning as a finite set of productions (outcomes) is particularly apparent in the way that we assess our students' development as lifelong learners. Typically, we measure this construct with a pre-test and a post-test that tracks learning gains between the years of 18 and 22 -- hardly a lifetime (the fact that a few institutions gather data from alumni 5 and 10 years after graduation doesn't invalidate the larger point).

Under these conditions, trying to claim empirically that (1) an individual



Source: California State University

has developed and maintained a perpetual interest in learning throughout their life, and that (2) this lifelong approach is directly attributable to one's undergraduate education probably borders on the delusional. The complexity of life even under the most mundane of circumstances makes such a hypothesis deeply suspect. Yet we all know of students that experienced college as a process through which they found a direction that excited them and a momentum that carried them down a purposeful path that extended far beyond commencement.

I am by no means suggesting that institutions should abandon assessing learning gains on a given set of outcomes. On the contrary, we should expect no less of ourselves than substantial growth in all of our students as a result of our efforts. Designed appropriately, a organized

sequence of outcomes assessment snapshots can provide information vital to tracking student learning over time and potentially increasing institutional effectiveness. However, because the very act of learning occurs (as the seminal developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky would describe it) in a state of perpetual social interaction, taking stock of the degree to which we foster a robust learning process is at least as important as taking snapshots of learning outcomes if we hope to gather information that helps us improve.

If you think that assessing learning outcomes effectively is difficult, then assessing the quality of the learning process ought to send chills down even the most skilled assessment coordinator's spine. Defining and measuring the nature of process requires a very different conception of assessment -- and for that matter



a substantially more complex understanding of learning outcomes.

Instead of merely measuring what is already in the rearview mirror (i.e., whatever has already been acquired), assessing the college experience as a process requires a look at the road ahead, emphasizing the connection between what has already occurred and what is yet to come. In other words, assessment of the learning that results from a given experience would include the degree to which a student is prepared or “primed” to make the most of a future learning experience (either one that is intentionally designed to follow immediately, or one that is likely to occur somewhere down the road). Ultimately, this approach would substantially improve our ability to determine the degree to which we are preparing students to approach life in a way that is thoughtful, pro-actively adaptable, and even nimble in the face of both unforeseen opportunity and sudden disappointment.

Of course, this idea runs counter to the way that we typically organize our students’ postsecondary educational experience. For if we are going to track the degree to which a given experience “primes” students for subsequent experiences -- especially subsequent experiences that occur during college -- then the educational experience can’t be so loosely constructed that the number of potential variations in the order of a student experiences virtually equals the number of students enrolled at our institution.

This doesn’t mean that we return to the days in which every student took the same courses at the same time in the same order, but it does require an increased level of collective commitment to the intentional design of the student experience, a commitment to student-centered learning that will likely come at the expense of an individual instructor’s or administrator’s preference for which courses they teach or programs they lead and when

they might be offered.

The other serious challenge is the act of operationalizing a concept of assessment that attempts to directly measure an individual’s preparation to make the most of a subsequent educational experience. But if we want to demonstrate the degree to which a college experience is more than just a collection of gains on disparate outcomes – whether these outcomes are somehow connected or entirely independent of each other – then we have to expand our approach to include process as well as product.

Only then can we actually demonstrate that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, that in fact the educational process is the glue that fuses those disparate parts into a greater -- and qualitatively distinct -- whole. ■

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## The Real Truth About Real World

By Heather Dubrow

*When we use the popular phrase as a contrast with academe, we insult our profession and confuse key issues, writes Heather Dubrow.*

**A**s pervasive as it is perilous, the recurrent use of two words — “real world” — crystallizes many problems confronting the academy today.

The term gestures toward all spheres beyond the so-called ivory tower; an advertisement in the New York City subways lauded the “real world” experience of teaching in the

New York Police Academy. But often this expression more specifically refers to the world of business. When it simply serves as shorthand to distinguish those realms from the university, the reference may be innocuous. And yes, professors and academic administrators indubitably benefit from learning from and collaborating with their counterparts outside those proverbial ivy-covered walls. As a faculty representative, I worked closely with the trustees of Carleton College on a presidential search; these



Source: Virginia Tech

interactions repeatedly demonstrated to me their shrewdness in evaluating people and the practical needs of any organization, thus dissipating lingering prejudices about the business world and reminding me that its variety complicates generalizations about it.

More often, though, contrasting the “real world” outside the academy with its putatively unreal counterpart within is pernicious for three interlocking reasons. First, the two words in question often frequently reflect and encourage self-denigration, even abnegation. Many people outside the academy regard its denizens in the way nuns are sometimes dismissively seen -- as exemplars of a life that in theory one may respect but in practice one greets with bemused condescension. Academics themselves sometimes on occasion refer to the “real world” because they have internalized such judgments. The strategic use of those two words in influential studies of

higher education can reinforce these prejudices and insecurities. Thus Louis Menand’s Marketplace of Ideas tellingly defends pre-professional and vocational courses, in contrast to the traditionally defined liberal arts curriculum, in terms of their fulfilling “real-world goals.”

Second, by implying that alternative values are unrealistic — indeed, naive -- these two words are likely to justify the increasing importation of certain troubled and troubling “real world” business practices. This shift has been tellingly encapsulated as the recent corporatization of the university, notably in Frank Donoghue’s *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*. The lamentable reliance on adjuncts is all too reminiscent of the emphasis on outsourcing in the business world. It is equally dangerous uncritically to copy hierarchies prevalent though not universal in business communities,

as the trustees at the University of Virginia learned to their cost. Higher education’s star system went to school on Wall Street (and quite possibly in Hollywood as well). And “scorecards” that rate universities by the amount of money their graduates make after graduation similarly impose the worst values of the corporate milieu.

Third, distinguishing the “real world” of business from the unreal world of the academy misrepresents for better and for worse the longstanding workings of our institutions of higher education themselves. The very term “real” is clearly slippery (“reality TV”? “The Real Housewives of Orange Country”?); but many connotations — not all of them grounds for rejoicing-- do in fact already apply to the academy. To the extent that the adjective gestures toward the competition among ambitious people, many academics and leaders of their institutions not only read books about those issues but also,

so to speak, wrote the book on them. The frequent references to “branding” within the academy demonstrate that marketing executives could teach certain admissions officers and other administrators nothing they have not long known about the half-truths that practice can foster.

But in fact the university is also a world committed to, indeed exemplary of, the “real” in more positive respects. Arguably our attention to using language carefully — teaching writing is surely a significant part of

the mission of institutions of higher education — in fact encourages conveying a real picture, expressing what one really intends to say. Our emphasis on critical thinking, notably the marshaling of evidence, trains students to distinguish the real from the specious and self-serving. Alternatively, even if one subscribes to the poststructuralist credo that language can never express reality, we can still encourage those students to discern and distinguish positions along a spectrum between reality and

deceit. In so doing, we achieve one goal central to a liberal arts education: building the very faculty of discernment — a capacity that, besides its many other potentialities, can and should encourage a re-evaluation of the expression “real world.” ■

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## What Is College For?

By Dan Currell

*Powerful forces threaten to re-order higher education. Predictions of massive destruction are overstated, but the coming storm will force colleges to figure out what they want to do, writes Dan Currell.*

**M**y college years were spent on a hill in a small town. I was in the company of 3,000 other people — students, faculty, staff — and we were set apart. The only thing on the agenda was to continue being Gustavus Adolphus College, whatever that meant. I didn’t know who first set that agenda, and I don’t recall a lot of active reflection on what it meant. What did it mean to be a residential, liberal arts college in the Swedish Lutheran tradition? We discussed that a little bit, but mostly we just did it.

Now I am a trustee. A lot has changed, but the basic character of the place hasn’t. Whatever it meant to be Gustavus in 1990 — well, it still means

that today.

On the horizon, I can see a lot more reflection about what exactly it means to be Gustavus. Everyone can sense the powerful forces affecting colleges; some would say they threaten to destroy the four-year residential model altogether. Some expect this to happen fast.

Perhaps higher education has adapted slowly to the Internet, especially compared to the private sector. But the practical benefit of being last in line is that you can learn from everyone ahead of you. (There’s a reason you didn’t want to go first when it came to giving oral presentations in fourth grade.) The parts of our society

most affected by the Internet have learned a few important lessons, and I think these lessons can help to set a vision of the future for colleges.

I believe the main lesson is this: the Internet didn’t kill off whole sectors of the economy — as it was predicted to — but it did force management to take the threat of rapid extinction very seriously. If the “old economy” conversation was about how to gain more customers for your service, the “new economy” conversation is about why any customers should want this sort of service to begin with. It’s a scarier conversation, and it forces companies to think harder about what they are for.

I hope colleges never discuss why their customers need their services. These are communities, not big box stores. But the college version of that conversation is this: What are we for? What’s the goal? Since there are now innumerable other (and cheaper) ways to be educated, why are we doing this?

The colleges with a compelling answer to that question — where all

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**“Educational services are increasingly bought and sold on an open market. If we don’t want colleges to become mere creatures of the market, the first step is to better understand the market.”**

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3,000 people know the answer – are going to be fine. At Gustavus, we are in the midst of a campus conversation on this topic.

In the mid-1990s the business world began to recognize a series of forces that were thought to threaten nearly every industry. By 1999, the forces had names: digitization (products and services become electronic); disintermediation (intermediaries disappear); and unbundling (products are disaggregated into discounted components). Doom was declared for incumbent companies, and the Pets.com sock puppet roamed freely at Super Bowl halftime.

Latching onto the emerging zeitgeist, GE’s CEO Jack Welch declared that his goal was to destroy his business before someone else did. He called the initiative destroy-your-business.com.

In the years that followed, much effort went into studying how innovation works – and how it often leads large companies to fail. In 2001, a study of the market for mechanical excavators and disk drives showed that markets are typically disrupted by cheap, inferior technologies aimed at customers who can’t afford the “full package.” When the cheap products get better, it’s curtains for the incumbents – they have been disrupted. Clayton Christensen, the author of the work, became the corporate world’s most famous

professor. He also made a compelling case that incumbent companies were nearly powerless to resist the undertow of this kind of disruption – they were stuck in what he called an “innovator’s dilemma.”

The forces that began threatening businesses 20 years ago took a long time to get to universities, but now they have arrived. Hundreds of massive open online courses (MOOCs) have rushed onto the scene, digitizing the teaching of world-class scholars and making their classes available to anyone for free. This followed Christensen’s model of a cheap (or in this case, free) and admittedly inferior substitute undermining a very expensive one. The prospect of disruption has unleashed a flood of anxiety and not a few prophecies of doom for expensive universities. The problem for universities looks much the same as it did for “bricks and mortar” businesses in 1999 – digitization would lead to disintermediation, which would lead to unbundling. That sequence could destroy the incumbents.

Of course, colleges and businesses are different, and most people who take higher education seriously want to keep it that way. But educational services are increasingly bought and sold on an open market. If we don’t want colleges to become mere creatures of the market, the first step is to better understand the market.

Viewed this way, the incumbent company experience since 1999 should be largely encouraging. It turned out that it’s harder for a bunch of web programmers to learn retail than it is for an established retailer to hire web programmers. The sock puppet lost. Petco now has over 1,000 locations, and PetSmart owns the defunct Pets.com domain name. (Pets.com lost a staggering \$300 million for its investors, though the sock puppet got a second life pitching auto loans.)

That said, the last decade has forced every company to focus relentlessly on its *raison d’être*, on knowing exactly what it is good for and adjusting its operations accordingly. That soul-searching is probably the most lasting effect of the digital revolution: managers are constantly forced back to the question, “What are we good for now?”

This will be the main effect for colleges, too, and it doesn’t come a moment too soon. Many of us agree that college is important; we have no broad agreement on why. Now that an education can cost more than a house, it seems like a particularly important question. Why is college important? What exactly makes it worth so much time and money?

Online education may force many universities to admit that they are not really in the transformation business. Is a 200-student lecture hall with a



Source: College of DuPage

graduate student at the front the path to transformation? In many cases, it's barely education. Colleges are better-positioned than most universities in this regard – but online education will still bring real pressure to demonstrate the distinct value of what a college can deliver.

Questions like this have now taken on a sharp edge, because there will be a heavy price to pay for getting the answers wrong. As with other industries, an analysis of the answer starts with digitization – and moves through disintermediation to unbundling.

## **DIGITIZATION**

Digitization turns a physical product into a data set. Most entertainment, financial, and information products have been digitized, which has dramatically reduced the cost to copy, store and transmit them. Most importantly, digitization can allow a product to rapidly evolve into something different – and better. This rapid evolution is the real threat to incumbents. And tantalizingly, a digitized product obliterates physical and proximal limitations: employees

can live and work in the Bahamas even if their services are consumed in Seattle.

The prime incumbent horror story for digitization is Encyclopedia Britannica. The obvious effect of digitization was to make encyclopedias lighter, easier to search and far cheaper to distribute. These were all improvements to Britannica's product. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, Britannica circa 1999 seemed to be in an enviable position.

But of course we now know that the main effect of digitizing encyclopedias was to transform the thing itself. Wikipedia hasn't quite killed Britannica – but it may just be a matter of time. Wikipedia was inferior and free a decade ago, but it is rapidly increasing in quality, scope and depth. It fits the disruption model perfectly.

The frightening thing about the Britannica story is how hard it is to think of a happier ending. Could the executives at Britannica possibly have imagined that their greatest risk was that tens of thousands of amateurs would spontaneously create a free substitute for their product?

The lesson to be learned from our first experiences of digitization is that digitization alone changes very little – but when it allows a product to rapidly evolve into something else, the effects can be violent and unpredictable. Digitization did not change the pet products business: dogs eat the same food they did in 1998. Digitization, however, changed what an encyclopedia is, and that made all the difference.

That said, very few businesses were hurt as badly as Britannica. For example, money has been digitized – so what happened to banks? In 1999, there was no reason to think that banks should survive in their bricks-and-mortar form for more than about five years: depositors and borrowers could transact everything far more efficiently online and pocket the savings. In 1999, Britannica seemed to be in a better position than Wells Fargo.

How wrong that was. Retail banking products have been digitized but they are otherwise largely unchanged. Because we haven't yet figured out how to make virtual money do anything different than its predecessor,

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## **“If cheap, simple substitutes are supplanting some components of a college education, what important parts, if any, are left? And who is responsible for assembling the product and ensuring its quality?”**

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retail banking today would be entirely recognizable to George Bailey of *It's a Wonderful Life*. Money has been digitized, but it hasn't been transformed.

And what about the virtual company – employees doing their work from notebook computers on the beach? Digital products make remote work possible, but the financial sector – whose products now have no mass and no physical location - is still heavily co-located. Bankers may vacation in the Bahamas, but they still work shoulder-to-shoulder in New York and London. Perhaps the only sector more heavily co-located than banking, ironically, is technology: there are high places here and there, but the only true altar is in Silicon Valley, where code is written by software engineers sitting in adjacent cubicles.

In hindsight, it is no great surprise that universities have been affected so little by digitization. Some elements of a university (lectures, books, lab activities) can be digitized, but as of yet their core product hasn't changed. If MOOCs are the first step toward transforming what a class is – then yes, we are at a crossroads in higher education. If, however, they are simply a way of getting broader distribution for an existing form of teaching, they won't destroy colleges. In higher education as in other sectors, the litmus test is whether the product itself will change.

This brings us back to some key questions: What is the product really, and why does anyone want it? If cheap, simple substitutes are supplanting some components of a college education, what important parts, if any, are left? And who is responsible for assembling the product and ensuring its quality?

### **DISINTERMEDIATION**

Remember travel agents? They were the ultimate intermediaries. The Internet has nearly killed them by connecting consumers directly to airlines, hotels and cruise operators. That's disintermediation, and it has been happening in every sector since 1999. It is one of the forces that makes corporate strategists most nervous.

It was easy to foresee the death of the travel agent in 1999. But it was equally easy to foresee the death of real estate agents, publishing houses (readers buy direct from authors), music labels (same rationale) and a host of other intermediaries who are still alive and well in 2013. What happened? Why did so many intermediaries survive?

For the most part, industries still have intermediaries – just different ones. Consider the music business. Tower Records died pretty quickly – one intermediary down, score one for the consumer. The chain from production to consumption was getting shorter, and pretty soon consumers would buy their music direct from artists.

Right? Well – in principle, yes. In practice, rarely.

As it turns out, music labels (the intermediary everyone loves to hate) are still alive, and iTunes stepped in right where Tower Records used to be. There are just as many links in the music industry's distribution chain now as before. The price of an album hasn't dropped much, even though the cost of distribution is almost gone. As before, most artists are barely paid while the music industry generates billions in revenue. The most lucrative profits go to the intermediary with the best tollbooth. Right now, that's Apple, and the tollbooth is iTunes.

But surely this reshuffling has had some effect on the product itself or the way we consume it? Again, so little has changed. In “The Entertainer,” Billy Joel wrote “If you're gonna make a hit, you gotta make it fit, so they cut it down to 3:05” – a reference to the power of radio stations who didn't like to play long tracks. In the era of satellite radio, iTunes and Pandora, radio stations no longer rule the roost. So -- has the product been transformed? According to [thebillboardexperiment.com](http://thebillboardexperiment.com), the average length of a pop song has increased by all of fifteen seconds since the 1980s, and neither the sound nor the economics of the industry are all that different.

As with digitization, the question for disintermediation isn't whether it will



Source: Monroe College

happen, but whether it changes the product. Travel agents weren't driven out of the basic flights-and-hotels business just because they increased the price of a ticket. The problem was that Orbitz and Travelocity could do the job better at a lower cost.

So it turned out that disintermediation was a misleading term, because in few cases were the intermediaries really eliminated. In most cases they gave way to new ones who did a better job in some way, but this didn't make the transitions less painful. Most travel agents had likely never wondered exactly what value they created, or why their customers chose to use them, until it was too late.

Who are the intermediaries in higher education? Reed-Elsevier, Pearson and other content providers are obvious examples, and while they've altered and added to their strategies and offerings, for now their positions seem secure. But the college itself is an intermediary, too. Professors provide services that colleges and universities bundle together and sell. To be a little provocative, consider

the music business again: the content creators are rarely paid much, even though there is a lot of money sloshing around the sector. The excess money goes to the intermediary. In this case, the money pays for counseling, career services, athletic facilities, housing and so on.

So, the economic form of "What is college for?" is this: is the college creating enough value to justify its position as an intermediary between professors and students?

The question of whether colleges will be disintermediated likely turns on whether their service offerings can be unbundled. Unbundling was the third big force strategists were thinking about in 1999, and it has arguably been the most powerful one in the decade since.

## UNBUNDLING

Many products are made up of separate parts that consumers must buy together even though they won't likely use them all – they are bundled. A cable TV package, a Disney World pass, or a subscription to the Chicago Tribune – they are all bundles. Bundled

products are always more profitable than their a la carte siblings because they force a larger purchase and improve the economics of creating and selling the product. They also always involve some amount of cross-subsidy from one purchaser to another: those who only use a few parts in the bundle subsidize those who use everything, since everyone pays the same price.

In 1999, we saw that the Internet might force the unbundling of products and services. The most valuable parts of a bundle could be sold a la carte, which would be cheaper and more tailored for consumers who used only some pieces of the bundle. Because those were the consumers who cross-subsidized the rest, this seemingly innocent development could undermine well-established business models.

Indeed, unbundling was lethal in many sectors. Many newspapers sat on an economic foundation of classified ads: consumers made a small co-payment to get their comics and sports, and the real revenues came from commercial and citizen



Source: University of Washington

advertisers. Commercial advertisers had other options – radio, magazines, billboards. But private citizens had only one way to sell the lawn mower or get rid of an unexpected litter of puppies. Classified ad revenues were very important, but classified ads were a piece of the bundle that not everyone used.

What newspapers didn't know in 1999 was that classifieds aren't very effective. Craigslist and eBay made this clear – they were a far superior way of getting the job done, and they could operate even better outside of the newspaper bundle. Those two websites alone took the legs out from under the newspaper industry by stripping a key element out of its bundle. With classifieds stripped out of the bundle, the newspaper's economic model doesn't work.

Unbundling may be the greatest threat to colleges, and a far greater threat to universities. At first, the college bundle just brought together several different professors to offer an integrated degree. More recently, we have added athletics, student services, career services, disability support, counseling, housing, and a host of other elements into the bundle. Everyone pays for the whole thing, no

matter how much of it they use.

If something is cheap, it's easiest to buy the whole bundle even if you pay for many elements that you never use. At higher price points that becomes less sensible. If the sticker price for a private college education is now about \$200,000, that will buy a lot of private tutoring, lab time, and other a la carte educational services over the course of four years. All that's left is for the student to separately validate her achievements and the resulting competencies.

If this sounds far-fetched, consider that this is a major movement in high school education. We know it as homeschooling, and it is no accident that the trend has exploded since the advent of the Internet. As we now know, "homeschooling" is often a misnomer. It is really the a la carte construction of a secondary education by families sharing resources and working in cooperative networks. It's unbundled education.

We haven't seen unbundled education at the college level yet. This is surely in part because of the social status conferred by a traditional college degree. But it is also because colleges have kept education and evaluation tightly bundled together. The professor

teaches and evaluates progress; the college offers courses and confers a degree. As it now stands, the only way to get a degree is to actually attend a college of some sort.

It won't necessarily stay this way. There is no reason why education and evaluation will necessarily stay bundled together, and one can already see movement in the direction of the two splitting apart. Right now it comes up as a question of compatibility: what transfer credits will a degree-granting institution accept? A transfer student may have taken his courses on campus, or he may have taken them online. If it was the latter, at least in some cases, it's possible that he did little more than self-study followed by an exam or paper. This comes very close to separating education from evaluation. The next natural step is to accept credits from standalone online courses, at which point the degree becomes partly unbundled.

It might seem easy for universities to clamp down on this, but right now most colleges are in no position to be choosy when accepting transfer students, particularly if they can pay much or all of the sticker price.

Of course, a more concerning possibility is that diplomas won't



matter that much in ten years. Some large and reputable employers -- particularly in the tech sector -- are now quite willing to hire people with demonstrable skills whether or not they have a college degree. To take two prominent examples, neither Microsoft nor Facebook is in much of a position to insist that their employees have all finished college since neither of their CEOs did. What they need are demonstrable technical skills, many of which are now separately assessed through third-party testing anyhow. For example, see [www.brainbench.com](http://www.brainbench.com). In those cases, a college diploma is already a "nice to have."

Granted, our culture is still very attached to the idea of a college diploma. But the idea that it might not be necessary, even (or perhaps especially) at the elite end of the labor market, is catching on. Apparently there's something about a \$200,000 price tag that will make you wonder how much you really want the product. And there's also the investment of time and energy.

Consider the Thiel Fellowship: fellows are given \$100,000 to skip college and pursue their entrepreneurial ambitions right away. The presumption behind the Thiel Fellowship is that college offers little more than some learning that the brightest students will pick up along the way as they build the next big thing. This reduces college to nothing more than the content-learning element; it ignores the maturing process, critical thinking, collective learning, ethical reflection and a host of other things

more important than the principles of organic chemistry.

A less radical possibility than ditching college altogether is the unbundling of evaluation from education. This would allow students to spend their college budgets as they see fit -- online courses, live tutorials, study abroad and internship experiences, seminar classes or whatever -- and test separately for the purpose of showing progress.

This kind of unbundling may seem a long way off, but at least one economic factor points in its direction. Bundles will tend to come apart when the cross-subsidy between different buyers of the same package becomes too great. In American higher education, we may soon reach that point. At most private colleges and universities, the gap between "full pay" students, median-tuition students, and heavily aid-dependent students is enormous.

Why would this cause the bundle to rupture? It's one thing to pay \$5,000 for an airline ticket from New York to Los Angeles, as business travelers sometimes do. That kind of premium pricing cross-subsidizes those on the same flight who have paid \$300, and it's what makes airlines viable (at least in the years when they are). But at some point on the pricing curve -- \$15,000, say -- the New York-based executive hires a NetJet to fly her direct to Burbank. The pricing isn't very different and the service is more tailored.

## WHAT NEXT?

What became of GE's destroy-your-business.com? Jack Welch said in a

2004 interview that in hindsight it was unnecessary. GE's existing businesses didn't need a separate initiative to prod them along -- they focused relentlessly on creating real value for customers, and they incorporated new technologies as they emerged. In fact, across the economy, nearly all incumbent businesses discovered that they offered far more value than what could be easily digitized. It had seemed for a moment in 1999 that the internet placed them in mortal peril, but there was just too much connective tissue holding their businesses together -- creative work, advertising, accounting, quality control, audit, personnel management -- for the Internet alone to kill them. Incumbent companies that focused relentlessly on their *raison d'être* came out of the digital revolution stronger than they went in.

If a college's true product is a transformed student, then the main effect of the next decade should be to redouble every school's commitment to that cause. The explicit goal of residential liberal arts colleges will again be to increase what a student knows and change who she is. If this is true, then the conversations left to be had are about the transformative mission of the school. What exactly is it? Deciding on a clear and important set of goals will not be easy, but colleges cannot afford to kick that can down the road. We each need to figure out what our college is for. ■

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## Thinking About the Public

By Paula M. Krebs

*Serving on the board of a state humanities council, where she judged proposals designed for public impact, left Paula M. Krebs rethinking the way she argues on behalf of the humanities in academe.*

**W**ith so much focus on higher education's obligations to job preparation, the humanities are perpetually playing defense, especially in public higher education. We academic defenders of the humanities generally take one of two lines: we argue that 1) our majors ARE work force preparation -- we develop strong analytical skills, good writing, problem-solving, etc., or 2) we have no need to justify what we teach because the value of the humanities, the study of what makes us human, is self-evident.

These arguments over the value of degrees in the humanities run parallel to a set of arguments I find myself making as part of a role I occupy, as a board member for my state council for the humanities. The National Endowment for the Humanities allocates about a third of its funding through the state councils, and the councils in turn fund humanities initiatives at the state level.

State humanities councils such as mine (Rhode Island's) re-grant our NEH allocation as well as the money we raise locally to community humanities projects. We've funded research on communities of Cape Verdean longshoremens in Providence, oral histories of Second World War vets in hospice care, talk-back events at local

theaters, seashore sound archives, a documentary film about a female 19th-century life-saving lighthouse-keeper, and lots of fascinating digital work, from archiving to app development. All the projects must involve humanities scholars — some of those scholars are affiliated with universities, and others aren't. All of it aims at helping Rhode Islanders to understand ourselves, our histories, and our many cultures.

When economic times are tough, an agency such as the NEH is vulnerable unless legislators understand and value the role of the humanities in a strong democracy -- just as university humanities programs are vulnerable in state funding contexts when legislators, boards of trustees, or voters don't have a clear understanding of the value of the humanities in the culture and in the workplace.

In a career spent in higher education in the humanities, most of it at a liberal arts college, I rarely had to justify teaching what I taught. The value of an English major was self-evident to my colleagues and my students. Sure, the occasional parent would squeak, "But how will she make a living?" But I never hesitated to reassure the anxious check-writers of the value of our product. Having worked in the worlds

of both journalism and Washington nonprofits, I knew how many good jobs demanded only a bachelor's degree, writing skills, research and analytic abilities, and common sense.

But then came the Great Recession and what many are calling the end of the higher education bubble. Questions about tuition increases, student debt, and colleges' lack of accountability (that is, the paucity of data on employment for recent graduates) get attached, in public perception, to the unemployment rate and to a re-emergence of the old post-Sputnik fears that the nation is not training enough folks in STEM fields.

Groups like the Association of American Colleges and Universities have been proactive in making the case for liberal learning as preparation for good citizenship, pointing to its employers' surveys. They have found that employers believe that the skills colleges should focus on improving are: written and oral communication; critical thinking and analytic reasoning; the application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings; complex problem solving; ethical decision making, and teamwork skills. These skills are not exclusive to the humanities, but they certainly line up with the student learning outcomes in humanities instruction at my institution.

It's not as if defenders of the values of a liberal arts education are ignoring economic realities: many liberal arts colleges are adding business majors, humanities fields are requiring internships and experiential learning, and colleges and universities are



Source: Monroe College

scrambling to make contact with successful alumni and to gather post-graduation employment data.

There's nothing wrong with linking liberal arts education in general, and the humanities in particular, to work. The humanities are inextricably linked to work and to U.S. civic life. When Lyndon Johnson signed legislation to bring the NEH into existence in 1965, it was in a context in which the federal government was pushed to invest in culture, as it had in science. NEH's account of its own history explains that the head of the Atomic Energy Commission told a Senate committee: "We cannot afford to drift physically, morally, or esthetically in a world in which the current moves so rapidly perhaps toward an abyss. Science and technology are providing us with the means to travel swiftly. But what course do we take? This is the question that no computer can answer."

Through my role in public humanities, I have come to understand that the humanities are what allow us to see ourselves as members of a civic community. Public history, public art, shared cultural experiences make us members of communities. This link has

not been stressed enough in defense of the academic humanities. It's past time to make this important connection -- to help our boards of trustees, our communities, and our legislators to know what the humanities brings to civil society and gives to students as they enter the workforce.

In the first class I ever taught as a teaching assistant, I did my first lecture on *Death of a Salesman*. My topic was work -- how Willy's job is his identity. I pointed to a student I knew in the 150-student lecture hall and told him that his surname, Scribner, probably indicated the employment of some ancestor of his, a "scrivener," like Bartleby. Then I asked who else had last names that might have indicated a job. We had Millers and Coopers and Smiths, and many more.

When those students' ancestors worked as barrel-makers or at their forges, they worked those jobs for life, and their sons afterward did the same. But how many of us do the job our parents did? How many of our students will do the same job in their 30s that they will do in their 20s? Narrow ideas about work force preparation will not prepare our students for the work of the

rest of their lives. Each job they take will train them in the skills they need to succeed in that particular industry. But a broad, liberal education will have been what made them people worth hiring, people who have learned the value of curiosity, initiative, problem-solving. Students in STEM fields and students in arts, social sciences, and humanities all will become members of communities, and a good background in the humanities will enrich their membership.

I loved the humanities as an English professor. But it was only when I became involved in public humanities that I began to understand their value not just for individuals but for communities. That's the public good. And that's why we cannot afford to let a narrow rhetoric of work force preparation push the humanities from our curriculums or defund the work of the National Endowment for the Humanities. ■

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