



America's Best Colleges

In Defense Of A Liberal Education

Carol Geary Schneider 08.10.09, 4:20 PM ET

All college curricula are not created equal. Some are extraordinary, helping students make sense of a complex and interdependent world, developing their analytical and problem-solving skills, challenging them to engage the unsolved problems of the world around them and prodding them to think through the ethical, civic and societal implications of a given course of action.

Programs that provide this kind of liberal--and liberating--education are found in every kind of institution in the U.S: public, private, two-year, four-year, even in some high schools. But these kinds of educational experiences reach only a portion of the student body, and a large fraction of American college students are getting nothing even close to this standard from their college studies. Why not?

Some courses of postsecondary study are narrowly framed by design. Such programs provide technical training and job skills, but little insight into the larger issues of science, society, human community, global cultures or the values and institutions that provide the foundation of democracy. Such programs may enable graduates to acquire jobs, but they by no means prepare students to navigate a world in which whole industries and whole sectors of the economy are being rapidly upended and rapidly recreated.

Other courses of study are simply fragmented and incoherent. Faculty--growing numbers of whom hold fragmented part-time appointments--develop their courses in isolation from one another while students are left to their own devices to discern any possible connections. ("I took mathematics and psychology as part of a linked pair of courses," one not-atypical undergraduate told me. "But there weren't any connections. How could there be? Math and psych have nothing to do with one another.")

These problems of conceptual incoherence are greatly magnified by the peripatetic nature of today's college enrollment patterns. Of those who do finish a degree, the majority will attend more than one campus and sizable numbers will piece together the right number of credits at three or even more institutions, frequently over a period of many years. It's possible to support integrative liberal learning under these conditions, but not if we place the entire burden of responsibility on the students themselves.

Employers see the differences between graduates who benefited from a quality liberal education and those who left college with narrow or incoherent courses of study. As [focus groups and national surveys](#) commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) make plain, employers overwhelmingly want colleges to spend more time teaching students how to analyze, how to integrate and how to apply their learning to new challenges and new settings. They want a stronger emphasis on global cultures and developments, science and technology, cultural diversity and ethics.

It's not a multiple-choice world, employers say. Don't send us graduates who only know how to solve multiple-choice problems. They are asking for what educators call a modern liberal education. "More big-picture thinking," as one business leader put it, but with more "real-world applications."

Readers of a certain age may wonder if this isn't contradictory. After all, for a very long time, liberal or liberal arts education portrayed itself as the very antithesis of "real-world" learning. The ivory tower was celebrated, and the liberal arts curriculum often endorsed "learning for its own sake." But that was then, and this is a new era.

Today, educators all over the U.S. are reinventing liberal education in ways that blend the best strength of the liberal arts and sciences--rigorous analysis, engagement with complexity, sophisticated communication skills--with the best strengths of the professional and career programs, including their constant focus on real-world contexts and decision-making in situations where the answer isn't clear cut.

This 21st-century approach to liberal education--endorsed by hundreds of institutions through AAC&U's LEAP initiative (Liberal Education and America's Promise)--prepares students to take advantage of economic opportunities and contribute successfully to a fast-changing workforce. But a liberal education also engages students with the wider world and deliberately cultivates both the capacities to make sense of complexity and the commitment to consider responsibilities to the larger community. It prepares graduates not just to ride out this economic storm, or the next one, but to chart a journey through them.

Americans must face up to the truth: If we re-package a 20th-century trade-school model and pretend that it should guide 21st-century higher education, we will be doing students--and the nation--a great disservice. A great education is the key to America's promise. But a great education and narrow technical training are not one and the same.

Liberal education--an education that builds human capability--is, and has been since America's founding, the kind of education best suited to a free people and an open economy. And in a turbulent world, the new hands-on designs for liberal education are our best investment in America's long-term promise and continued prosperity.

Carol Geary Schneider is president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.