Breadth and Depth of Knowledge: The Value of Liberal Arts in Higher Education

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Students in higher education benefit from many types of learning. Understanding the influence of college experience on future success is the key to understanding the benefits and drawbacks of different types of institutions. In the United States, both financial and social pressures have put liberal arts education in jeopardy (Logan & Curry, 2015). A liberal arts education is valuable because it teaches students to think critically, communicate effectively, and continue learning (Lederhouse, 2014; Liberal arts, n.d.). Liberal arts in higher education is not only valuable to individual students but also to the country and economy.

Despite research that indicates the values of liberal arts, return on investment is a frequently cited concern because of the current economic situation, general concern over the financial model of higher education, and the higher prices of liberal arts colleges (Logan & Curry, 2015). Research from Richard Detweiler shows positive results for students studying liberal arts (Jaschik, 2017). To fully understand the significance of liberal arts, the history of it must be examined. However, the future of liberal arts education lies with research and the perspective of the non-researcher constituents, namely students and their families.

**Historical Context of Liberal Arts**

Liberal arts education in medieval times consisted of logic, rhetoric, grammar, geometry, music, astronomy, and arithmetic (Liberal arts, n.d.). Today, liberal arts can be categorized as the study of literature, languages, philosophy, history, mathematics, and science (Liberal arts, n.d.) and described as preparing humans to make ethical and well-reasoned decisions (Lederhouse, 2014). The existence of liberal arts education in the United States is evidence of its adaptability, because of the migration from Europe and survival through the Revolution and subsequent wars (Logan & Curry, 2015). The ability of liberal arts education to adapt to changing social environments is why it has such great value to higher education today.

The purpose of liberal arts in American higher education today is to develop general knowledge, intellectual capabilities (Liberal arts, n.d.), and moral virtues (Lederhouse, 2014). Commonly stated missions of liberal arts institutions include producing graduates who are lifelong learners, leaders, and culturally aware (Jaschick, 2017). Finding a balance between breadth and depth of information is the key to achieving these missions (Logan & Curry, 2015).

**Perspectives of Liberal Arts**

Students today have demonstrated a shift from learning for the sake of learning towards learning for career preparation (Logan & Curry, 2015). This can be attributed to the economically oriented climate of the country (Logan & Curry, 2015). The problem with this educational orientation is that it narrows the perspective of the student which reverberates through higher education. Those reverberations force curricular changes (Logan & Curry, 2015) which further limit perspective and opportunities for students. Students, families, and the federal government want to assess the value of education and determine their return on investment (ROI). Typically, employment statistics are used (Logan & Curry, 2015), which ignores the process by which students are learning by focusing on one narrow outcome. In order to understand the relationship between education and career, personal life must also be considered. Complete understanding of that complex relationship is found through examining what students are doing in college and the way they experience it (Logan & Curry, 2015) as well as complex measures including personal fulfilment, altruistic features, lifelong learning, and leadership (Jaschik, 2017). Researchers consider variables such as relationships with faculty, discussions of philosophy or ethics, professionally oriented classwork (Jaschik, 2017), and employer preferences regarding depth and breadth of employee education (Logan & Curry, 2015). Researchers take a broader perspective on the value of liberal arts education than the general consumers and investors of higher education.

**Existing Research and Future Directions**

Research on liberal arts in education confirm and expand on understanding of its’ benefits. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (2014) reported that 80% of employers felt that student should study broadly in liberal arts along with sciences. This demonstrates a connection between liberal arts education to positive career outcomes, but students and families want to know that the student will be able to locate gainful and relevant employment immediately after graduation. Therefore, statistics about long term employment and financial advantages are not as attractive, and statistics on personal well-being and engagement within employment are even less attractive.

Gallup, Inc. demonstrated that only 30% of employees in the United States report job engagement and that 29% of people are not thriving in purpose, social, financial, community, or physical well-being (Gallup, Inc., 2014). This research examined the college experience and found that the most substantial factors in high workplace engagement and well-being is the perception of the individual that college prepared them fully for post-college life (Gallup, Inc., 2014). By showing that more than job satisfaction and engagement matter to an individual’s well-being, this study also demonstrated that education should address more than narrow and simplistic employment outcomes, which a liberal arts education does.

Although liberal arts graduates earn a lower average income than other graduates, that is only true for a short period of time after graduation, graduates who took 50% or more of their coursework in non-major related fields are more likely to earn more than $100,000 than other graduates later in life (Jaschik, 2017). Continuing to show long term financial benefits of liberal arts is beneficial, primarily due to the shift in reasons why students are going to college and by addressing one of the major concerns: finances. There is vast potential in liberal arts education to extend educational access. As cultural awareness is one of the common goals in liberal arts education (Jaschik, 2017), many institutions are seeking to make their education affordable to diverse students, including first generation students.

**Conclusion**

Liberal arts education provides learners a breadth of knowledge which supports success in future careers and well beyond. In the United States, the misconception that liberal arts education provides a lower return on investment becomes concern because of the economic situation of the country, as well as widespread critique over the sustainability of the financial model of higher education (Logan & Curry, 2015). In order to understand the importance of a liberal arts education, the history of it must be examined, but the future of this type of education is in research and the perspective of the investors: students, their families, and the federal government. Liberal arts has a long history which has endured across geography, revolution, and time. Today, it is the study of three branches of knowledge: humanities, mathematics and sciences, and social sciences (Liberal arts, n.d.) and graduates of liberal arts education are meant to be very well rounded individuals. Employers would rather hire well rounded graduates, having both a breadth and depth of knowledge (AAC&U, 2014). The value of liberal arts is much more complex than a single job, it involves overall well-being and long term success in life (Gallup, Inc., 2014), and research has clearly linked these things to a liberal arts education (Jaschick, 2017; Logan & Curry, 2015).

Liberal arts education is about breadth of knowledge, and produces more effective, successful, and well rounded citizens. The value of liberal arts education is that the student learns about everything and therefore are better equipped for many more careers, cultural changes, political situations, and life in general than someone with an education focused on primarily one subject.

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