

In the rush to specialize, liberal arts' value abides

What should we expect from a college education in the second decade of the 21st century? Some things we have always expected: an understanding and appreciation of great ideas and enduring truths, and an awareness of the ways in which they enrich our experience as human beings. This is part of what it has meant historically to be an educated person.

But we also expect that a college education will prepare students to make their way in the world. Like their parents and grandparents, our graduates will live and work in a world full of challenges and opportunities. Increasingly, however, they must be able to succeed in a world marked by change and unpredictability. We cannot know the specifics, but we can all but guarantee that the graduating class of 2015 will have to comprehend new areas of knowledge and adapt to new ways of making a living over the course of their lives.

It used to be that college graduates could reasonably expect to enter into careers that they would follow for most if not all of their working lives. Even today, many programs of study are designed to equip their graduates for a particular line of work that appears to offer good employment prospects and career opportunities. But it's uncertain, in many cases, that those opportunities will exist even when the students now in these programs graduate from college — and it is almost inconceivable that they will persist throughout the graduates' working lives.

To succeed in the changeable and uncertain world they will face, college graduates need more than just career preparation. They need to develop broadly based skills and abilities that they can turn into personal and professional success in areas of opportunity that we cannot even define at present, because they haven't been invented.

In this changeable and uncertain world, the general academic and intellectual abilities long prized by the liberal arts and sciences have come to assume an increasingly important role. These include critical thinking, complex reasoning, reading, writing and speaking, the ability to master new and unfamiliar knowledge and to apply well-learned information in new contexts.

These are the same kinds of abilities also increasingly prized by business and civic leaders, who recognize that the specific information needed for success in particular careers is always changing and that it is more important for college graduates to be able to deal with the change than to master the information. This is especially true, of course, for those graduates who do not plan to pursue a particular career, but who want to find their own path after graduation, whether as entrepreneurs, social activists, political leaders, artists, or in some other direction that we can't foresee.

Learning limitations

The ability of universities to prepare graduates for their lives ahead has been subject to frequent criticism. The most recent comes from a study conducted by two sociologists, Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia, and published in the book "Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses" (University of Chicago Press). Arum and Roksa collected data from more than 2,300 college students at a variety of U.S. colleges and universities, using a well-known and widely accepted test of higher-order academic skills called the Collegiate Learning Assessment. Overall, the results reveal little or no improvement on the CLA over the first two years of college among a significant minority (around 35 percent) of college students.

There are, however, some bright spots in this otherwise gloomy picture.

From my perspective as dean of a College of Arts & Sciences, the most interesting result of this study is that students studying in the traditional liberal arts (the humanities, social sciences, sciences and mathematics) show significantly more improvement on the CLA than do those studying more career-focused disciplines such as business, education, engineering or the health professions.

This advantage of the liberal arts is independent of other important factors known to affect college success, such as high school preparation and family background. Equally well-prepared students, coming from equally advantaged backgrounds, show more improvement on higher-order academic skills if they study the liberal arts than if they study business, education or other professional fields.

Arum and Roksa identify a number of reasons why the liberal arts have this advantage in educating students to develop the important abilities they will need to succeed in the uncertain world facing them after graduation. Among

them, not surprisingly to professors in the arts and sciences, is the amount of time students spend studying alone (not working in groups) and the amount of reading and writing assigned in courses. It's also likely, although the study data do not address this, that the very nature of the liberal arts is conducive to the development of these abilities.

Our disciplines concern themselves with large and often uncertain questions that require exactly these kinds of general academic abilities to resolve. Not surprisingly then, students who work hard to master those disciplines find themselves able to address a wide range of other problems, including some that we can't even define yet.

A broad base

In the uncertain world that our graduates will inhabit, the career-focused abilities taught in professional programs of study may well be of limited utility, because those careers will no longer exist, or will exist only in unrecognizable forms. It is the broad, nonspecific intellectual abilities fostered by the study of history, sociology, philosophy and literature that will truly equip college graduates to make their way successfully after graduation.

So when Uncle Horatio asks, "Hey, kid, what are you going to do with a degree in English literature?" our graduates' answer should be, "Just about anything — including things not even dreamed of in your philosophy!"



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