

What Admission Officers Know (and Faculty Need to Know) about Public Perceptions of Liberal Arts Colleges

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LiberalArtsOnline is a monthly publication that promotes inquiry and reflection on liberal arts education.

Who in higher education has not heard a liberal arts education get derided as a degree program that produces the well-read unemployed or underemployed? Liberal arts majors are fodder for many clichéd jokes that stress, and often exaggerate, the supposed economic advantages of majors in business and engineering. Certainly there are fast food cashiers, coffee shop wait staff, copy clerks, and parking attendants with liberal arts degrees—not essential to get or do those jobs. Certainly the economy is not always welcoming to classics, English, and philosophy majors seeking entry-level employment. Liberal arts graduates thus bear the extra responsibility of fulfilling the words of legendary University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins, who annually told entering freshmen that a liberal arts education would not prepare them to do anything in particular, but would prepare them to learn how to do anything they wanted.

My own parents, who are not college graduates, infused me with the special anxiety first-generation college students bring to the selection of a major. College, according to their view, was a practical endeavor aimed at getting one launched toward a promising career. Their favored majors offered preparation for specific fields, such as accounting, architecture, engineering, optometry, or pharmacy. Majoring in a liberal art such as English or history seemed to make no sense unless a person intended to become an English or a history teacher. So predictably my parents blanched as my major migrated from the practical business administration through the questionable but still defensible territory of economics and psychology to that most impractical of final destinations—English literature.

During that protracted family argument, it was not clear to me, and in this regard perhaps I speak for other first-generation and low-income college graduates, that I could have cited as evidence supporting my choice successful attorneys, business leaders, scientists, professors, inventors, and physicians holding bachelor's degrees in the supposedly risky majors. I had no idea that there was at least one example in a prominent business started in my home region of Burlington, Vermont: the Bruegger's Bagel chain founded by Grinnell College speech and theatre graduate Nordahl Brue. At the time I also could

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have pointed to Vermont's United States Senators Patrick Leahy, a graduate of political science at Saint Michael's College and Robert Stafford, a graduate of Middlebury College; plus my native state of Connecticut's then governor, Ella Grasso, a Mount Holyoke economics and sociology graduate. Who knew then that I would end up gainfully employed in what is arguably a quintessential liberal arts profession: admission counseling.

The liberal arts and sciences do not just suffer in regard to hidebound attitudes about career preparation. They are seen by some as archaic, as focused solely on great books, or concerned exclusively with the humanities and arts, or fixated on ideas from the past rather than the present. It is no wonder that liberal arts majors are now in the minority even at numerous liberal arts colleges (Delucchi, 1997). Just 40% of the bachelor's degrees earned in the United States are in liberal arts fields (Bok, 2006). Liberal arts courses, departments, and programs at universities and colleges alike must battle these stereotypes. But I have found that the liberal arts college, in particular, perhaps because of its intrinsic institutional devotion to the liberal arts and undergraduate education, faces a unique set of challenges. Admission counseling, which I learned at Bennington College, Oberlin College, Reed College, and Vassar College, has provided me a front-row seat from which to view the small liberal arts college. In my nearly twenty years directly involved in the college admission process, including time as a guidance counselor, I have come to understand how woefully misunderstood the liberal arts college truly is.

Some of the questions and concerns liberal arts college admission officers hear with frequency, particularly in regards to science and technology, might surprise the professors on our campuses. Questions such as, do you have sciences? often followed by, can I get preparation for medical school? are not unusual. Some institutions where I have worked, namely Oberlin and Vassar, have felt compelled to create special brochures highlighting their science departments, at least in part to combat the arts-and-humanities-only image that sticks to many liberal arts colleges like a lamprey eel.

Even after admission officers assure students and parents that liberal arts colleges do indeed offer majors in the natural and physical sciences—even in some cases engineering (Lafayette College, Swarthmore College, Union College, and Trinity College), or neuroscience (Allegheny College and Oberlin), or interdisciplinary, science-inclusive courses like prairie studies at Grinnell College and ethnobotany at Connecticut College, or specialties like marine science at Eckerd College and astrophysics at Ohio Wesleyan University—they get hit

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with skeptical questions about the scope and sophistication of science and computing facilities. It is as if there is a lingering stereotype of the liberal arts college science lab circa 1949, whose chief equipment consists of dusty human skeletons and stuffed birds in glass cabinets. Parents, especially, seem incredulous to learn that liberal arts college campuses are often virtually wireless with computer-assisted instruction in art, languages, music, and every social science. To such audiences, I am often tempted to quip that the abacus, slide rule, and punch card only went out of fashion at liberal arts colleges in the past five years.

It seems to be a common belief that liberal arts college graduates are not equipped to be leaders, whether in business or social science or in the world of science, technology, and engineering—that to lead in those fields necessarily requires a degree from one of the major research universities. In fact, liberal arts college graduates have invented new processes and fields, such as semiconductors (Robert Noyce, a Grinnell College graduate who founded Intel), virtual universities (John Sperling, a Reed College graduate who started the University of Phoenix), aluminum (Charles Martin Hall, an Oberlin College graduate whose discovery led to Alcoa Aluminum), the German measles vaccine (Harry Martin Meyer, Jr., a graduate of Hendrix College), and the compact disc (James Russell, a Reed graduate). B.F. Skinner, a graduate of a liberal arts college (Hamilton) started the field of behavioral psychology. And Stephen Jay Gould, a graduate of another liberal arts college (Antioch), revolutionized the field of paleontology. But my favorite example (and symbol) of the significance liberal arts colleges wield in the world of science and technology is the fact that the Millikan tower, the architectural focal point of the California Institute of Technology campus, memorializes Robert Millikan, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist who graduated from a liberal arts college (Oberlin).

Equally complimentary to the liberal arts colleges are the moves being made by several science and technology institutions, as they scramble to educate the inventive engineers who will lead the U.S. to compete more effectively in the flat world described by Thomas Friedman (2006). The fledgling Olin College of Engineering, which intends to create the engineer of the future, has, for example, placed liberal arts courses on one side of its curricular triangle. Three thousand miles away, Harvey Mudd College touts as its distinctive advantage against competitors its liberal arts inclusive science and engineering curriculum. Does the world outside our circumscribed campuses know this? Not well enough, I suspect.

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Perhaps it is time to convene another group of presidents and deans to hold discussions about the future of science teaching and research at liberal arts colleges similar to the interchange that occurred at Oberlin in 1985. That meeting attracted media attention to and funding for science at liberal arts colleges. Admission officers, especially because we are often regarded as the tell-them-what-they-want-to-hear “sales force,” cannot be the chief or only source of persuasive information prospective students and parents glean about science and technology in the realm of the liberal arts college. The good story liberal arts colleges have to tell about science has more resonance when told by the science community and the media.

Research at liberal arts colleges in both the sciences and the humanities is similarly misunderstood. Despite numerous studies (HEDS, 2006) showing the disproportionate share of small liberal arts colleges among the nation’s top per capita source of future Ph.D.s (Bryn Mawr College, Carleton College, Oberlin, Reed, and Swarthmore are in the top ten), even the best students I encounter express surprise when learning that they will have the opportunity, perhaps may even be required, to do collaborative research in the arts, humanities, social sciences, or sciences as early as the sophomore or the junior year at colleges like Reed. There is a widespread and powerful fallacy that research is only done at big universities with massive laboratories and legions of graduate students. Small liberal arts colleges need to work harder to counter this mistaken belief.

Liberal arts college stakeholders, in other words faculty, college administrators, and alumni, know that the pedagogies and curricula at the heart of liberal arts colleges are well suited to teach students how to acquire knowledge independently, how to analyze data, how to construct a cogent argument, how to spot and refute specious reasoning, how to articulate ideas, how to ask penetrating questions, how to initiate research, how to find gaps in the existing experimental literature, and how to spot the issues that will need to be addressed in the future. Partisans of liberal arts colleges need to communicate more clearly to the public how such skills translate into the workplace.

We tend to assume that the public appreciates the inherent value of the active and collaborative learning that goes on in our classrooms and laboratories as well as the educational and personal development benefits provided by our small classes and teaching-oriented faculty. We expect that such features of the small liberal arts college are so well known and valued as to need little public relations reinforcement. Yet each admission recruiting cycle brings a new audience. Those audiences

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are increasingly from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, many from cultures where liberal arts colleges do not exist, some for whom any institution of higher learning is a new entity.

Those new audiences need to hear about the academic and personal transformation that occurs when a student works on a thesis, how at places like Reed that require a thesis for graduation, the thesis student becomes expert on a topic, eventually knowing more about it than her thesis advisor/professor. That inversion of expertise, where the teacher guides the student along the path of scholarship to a point where the student is teaching the teacher about what she has discovered, leads to an academic confidence unknown to students whose majors (or double majors) are a mere collection of required courses. Reed's required thesis also has an entrepreneurial component, because the thesis student manages the process of creation and discovery from start to finish, to the point of delivering a tangible product (a hardbound thesis) that becomes part of the College's permanent library collection, available to future students and faculty at Reed as well as within the Oregon/Washington interlibrary loan consortium. The thesis experience is the hallmark of a liberal arts college like Reed but an opportunity that is rare at most non-liberal arts colleges.

Every time I conduct an information session for Reed College, I see clear evidence that those of us who are on the front lines of liberal education must not be smug and assume that we are talking to a public initiated in the ways of the liberal arts college. If we do, the liberal arts college could become the exclusive domain of children of college professors or the offspring of parents educated at our type of institution. We need more than just those familiar customers to survive and thrive. We must learn to articulate the features and benefits of liberal arts colleges to new audiences predisposed to believe that large universities are, in all cases, the best educational choice. If we do not do so with clarity and constancy, the liberal arts college will risk becoming an ossified entity destined for historical footnote or museum status sometime in the future.

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