

**An Examination Of The Issues Facing
Career-Based Curriculum Policies In
Liberal Arts Colleges And Universities**
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Introduction

Liberal Arts colleges and universities have traditionally been recognized as educational institutions dedicated to providing students with curriculum intended to expand their knowledge beyond their major courses of study. To do this, Liberal Arts institutions have traditionally required core curriculum studies in literature, mathematics, science and humanities for all students. Recently, however, many Liberal Arts colleges and universities have changed their curriculum policies to reflect a changing educational market. This changing market, consisting primarily of high school graduates and their parents, demands that higher education be career-based, rather than broad based. Catering to such demands has led Liberal Arts colleges and universities to move away from their traditional goals of providing students with a well-rounded education. Ironically, several studies have shown that many business executives believe in well-rounded education and would prefer that their employees have a traditional Liberal Arts background consisting of extensive studies in mathematics, science, and philosophy. Executives have found that employees with such backgrounds are able to respond quickly and easily to the ever-changing business world.

The following document shall provide an examination of several issues currently being raised about Career-based Curriculum Policies in Liberal Arts institutions by various educators and business people, alike. This examination will provide a summary of the affects of Career-based Curriculum Policies within such institutions and attempt to stress the importance of attaining a traditional Liberal Arts education. In providing this information, one can recognize that many of today's college students may be victims of a poor policy that seemingly diminishes the integrity of higher education.

Background

Without contention, it can be said that the overall mission of most colleges and universities is to provide students with an education. Throughout the 1900's, one of the primary goals of higher education was to provide students with the means to think critically and act logically. This ideal of educating well-rounded thinkers was primarily the characteristic of Liberal Arts colleges and universities who could provide degrees in specified areas along with studies in mathematics, science, languages, and culture. Today, however, Liberal Arts colleges and universities have veered from strong Liberal Arts curriculum to a career-based focus. As a result, Career-based Curriculum Policies have led to the degradation of core curriculum policies that once defined Liberal Arts education.

There was a time in recent history when only a select population of students attended four- year college programs, while the remaining population entered vocational schools, career-training programs, or the workforce following high school. Today, attending postsecondary institutions is no longer left to the elite. There seems to be a college education suitable for every student of every level and ability. This surge of students is primarily a result of marketing. Marketing colleges and universities in such a way that the majority of the population believes they cannot obtain a job without a college education has led

to increased enrollment and thus increase funding. For that reason, colleges and universities have been forced to change their strategies from providing solid well- rounded education requiring core Liberal Arts Curricular to marketing an environment in which parents are ensured that their children will learn the skills necessary to attain a job.

A survey conducted by Hobart and William Smiths Colleges demonstrates support for this statement in that "75 percent of parents and 85 percent of those in college-ages believe the point of college is to get a practical education and land a job upon graduation" (*Fortune*, 1997). Consequently, many higher education institutions have made the decision to provide parents and students with the career-based education they want, thus ensuring desired enrollment and funding. (Masci, 1998) In providing the customer with what he/she wants, many Liberal Arts colleges and universities have allowed themselves to become more like corporate businesses interested in profits rather than institutions interested in educating students through stringent curriculum requirements.

Current State of Affairs

It must be recognized that not all colleges and universities have evolved into businesses. Instead, many institutions have recognized that providing an education may not always allow for proactive customer service. For those colleges and universities that have veered in the direction of becoming a business, the primary result of Career-based Curriculum Policy has been a decrease in the number of Liberal Arts courses required to graduate. In 1996, the National Association of Scholars (NAS) conducted a survey intended to demonstrate how the role of required courses in the nation's 50 most "selective colleges" (Masci, 1998) had diminished. This survey, titled "The Dissolution of General Education, 1914-1993," came to several startling conclusions. It found that only 12 percent of schools required at least one course in history to earn a degree in 1993, compared to 38 percent in 1964. Only 14 percent of the schools surveyed in 1993, compared to 38 percent in 1964, required completion of a course in literature in order to graduate. 90 percent of these schools required a course in natural science in 1964, while in 1993, only 34 percent held this requirement. And, the "proportion of mandatory courses needed for graduation averaged only 7 percent of all courses at the 50 schools in 1993, versus 36 percent in 1914" (Masci, 1998).

Partially responsible for the shift in core Liberal Arts Curriculum are the students themselves. Ethan Bronner, in "College Freshmen Aiming for High Marks in Income," states that "the personal interests and goals of students entering college have changed considerably over the years" (1998). Supporting Bronner's claim, "The American Freshman Survey," cited in Paul Neely's "The Threats to Liberal Arts Colleges," found that in the 1998 Fall semester, "74.9% of students said their goal was to be very well off financially [while only] 40.8 percent want[ed] to develop a meaningful philosophy of life" (1999). Neely expresses that in 1968, these numbers were reversed, with 40.8 percent selecting financial security, and 82.5 percent citing the importance of life's philosophy. (1999)

Traditional Goals of Liberal Arts Education

In "An Assessment of Extramural Activities that Encourage Support for the Liberal Arts," Kristy McNamara and J. Daniel Cover express the traditional goals of Liberal Arts education and identify them as eight skills. These skills include the following (1999):

Thinking and/or communicating clearly and effectively.

Understanding the physical universe, self, and/or society. Knowledge of other cultures and/or other times.

Awareness of moral, aesthetic and spiritual issues inherent in life and society. Searching for relationships among various forms of thought and feeling.

Awareness of the intrinsic value of thought and learning.

Independent action.

Tolerance and concern for others.

Many will agree that these skills effectively define the overall goals of most colleges and universities that provide any type of higher education. Unfortunately for them, most students seem less interested in learning skills that promote critical thinking and logical thought processes than learning those skills that can be applied directly to their career choice. Even more unfortunate is that many colleges and universities have followed suit by not demanding that students learn these skills before graduation.

In conjunction with this statement, Carol Iannone, a teacher at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, notes that institutions "seem to be more eager to please students than instruct them" (1998). She notes in her commentary on Mark Edmundson's article about the decline of higher education, that Edmundson, an English professor at the University of Virginia, believes "students are flooded by advertising, pictures, testimonials, videocassettes, and CD-ROMs all designed to lure them to campus" (Iannone, 1998). Iannone quotes his statement that "once safely enrolled, [students] are kept satisfied by permissive grading (especially in the humanities), easy requirements for majors, and the options of withdrawing from a class well after the semester has begun" (1998). She agrees with Edmundson's belief that this environment "spurs an atmosphere where almost no one fails, everything is enjoyable and everyone is nice. The only thing lost amid all this complacency is 'an education that matters'" (Iannone, 1998).

Both authors support the notion that "today's students are buyers in a buyer's market" (Iannone, 1998). In this case, it is believed that the authors intend to convey a buyer's market in which the seller, or institution, wants higher or increased guaranteed enrollment more than the buyer, or student, wants a well-rounded education in which hard work is the only way to earn a degree.

A Buyer's Market

The theory of a buyer's market in education is easily seen through the evolution of college catalogs. In the past, catalogs were graphically simple and implied that the university, itself, operated under the terms of its teachers. Jeffrey Wallin notes that catalogs from 40 years ago often displayed only pictures of educators providing instruction. (Goode, 1998) Edmundson writes, "those teachers believed, not without reason, that they were introducing students to what was best and most lasting in their cultural tradition, works that embodied such truth and beauty as human beings are capable of approximating" (Iannone, 1998). Today's catalogs, conversely, are much more "public relations" oriented in that they portray photos of students enjoying themselves on campus while talking with friends in beautifully landscaped courtyards. (Goode, 1998)

Changes in the methods colleges and universities use to attract students, such as catalogs, illustrate changes in education, itself. Wallin believes that today's education has evolved such that students believe "there are no truths above them, and no timeless works with which they must be acquainted, students now simply search for what pleases, much as they might at the local shopping mall. Since nothing is or can be defended as priceless, everything has its price and sooner or later, everything goes on sale" (12). In this case, Wallin believes that a price has been placed on the integrity of education.

Defining the Loss

The American Academy of Liberal Education (AALE) is a Washington-based organization founded in 1992 to "recognize American colleges and universities that offer their students a real and serious opportunity to become educated in the liberal arts and sciences" (Goode, 1998). Jeffrey D. Wallin, cited above, is president of AALE and has assisted in recognizing five schools for providing the high standards of education necessary for accreditation by AALE. Wallin believes that "American graduate education and professional training are second to none in the world" (Goode, 1998). At the same time, he believes that "quality undergraduate education" (Goode, 1998) is where American education has gone wrong. This lack in quality in undergraduate programs stems from Career-based Curriculum Policies that have driven core Liberal Arts requirements out of many specified degree programs. Stephen Goode summarizes Wallin's belief in his article, "The American Academy of Liberal Education," published in *Insight on the News*. Here Goode quotes Wallin(1998):

Students can become great accountants in the courses they take in college and can learn a great deal about political science, if they choose to major in that field. But where they come up short and where our colleges and universities are failing us is in offering students what used to be regarded as a colleges' duty: a general, rigorous and liberal education.

The colleges accredited by the AALE are those institutions that not only provide students with an effective program in their chosen field of study, but also ensure that students leave the institution with an education that fosters critical thought abilities and problem solving skills. These abilities and skills are those that result from studies in mathematics, lab science, languages, and Western Civilization as Wallin explains. (Goode, 1998)

Failures of Liberal Arts Institutions

Wallin mentions that those universities who continue to provide traditional Liberal Arts education often fall short of their goal by offering a wide range of courses to choose from. In doing so, these schools almost encourage the less serious student to choose the easiest of all math, science or philosophy courses available, to satisfy the course requirement as simply as possible. In this sense, Wallin states "we have failed our students by allowing them to take what they fancy" (Goode, 1998). Without reinforcement by colleges and universities that the value of a Liberal Arts education outweighs simply learning the skills involved in a specified career choice, these institutions are not living up to their responsibility. To do so, they must ensure that only quality courses are offered to their students.

Supporting these claims, Neely states that he believes "young people do not go to college to become fuller persons, better citizens, or more lively intellects . . . college education is justified by the additional lifetime income it will produce" (1999). In this case, Career-based Education would be most appropriate for those students looking only to attain solid income with an impressive career. However, educational institutions should not simply provide the customer, or student, with what he/she wants, it should

provide the student with the desire to learn much more than one topic of study. In doing so, colleges and universities may spawn a lifelong desire for learning which will support the overall success of the student. In steering Liberal Arts colleges and universities away from Careerbased Education traps, as Wallin describes them, the AALE hopes to "strengthen those undergraduate requirements that mean a student will get a liberal education" (Goode, 1998).

The Irony of Career-based Curriculum

Although Career-based Curriculum Policies seem to satisfy the demands of the customer, or students and parents in most cases, the students may actually find themselves less marketable in the business world. In fact, the survey conducted by Hobart and William Smiths Colleges cited above found that only 37 percent of the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) questioned in the survey stated they believe "the purpose of a diploma is to acquire work skills" (*Fortune*, 1997). The same study found that 90 percent of these CEOs believe that critical thinking is derived from an education with a core humanities curriculum and the ability to solve problems is derived from an education specializing in Liberal Arts studies. (*Fortune*, 1997)

David Masci found that "business executives ... value employees who are taught how to think and are prepared to pursue a long-term career-rather than being groomed for their first job" (1998). Roger E. Herman, a strategic business futurist, in his article titled "Liberal Arts: The Key to the Future," found that employers recognize the importance of Liberal Arts Curriculum that places value in critical and creative writing, speaking, and critical thought. (2000) These employers, Herman added, believe "too many of their employees have serious difficulty constructing written sentences and producing quality memos, letters and reports" (2000). In addition to writing skills, the ability to communicate effectively is yet another area where students, and thereby employers, benefit from traditional Liberal Arts education. (Herman, 2000)

Recognizing the importance of critical thinking and problem solving skills, employers may look for "broad based candidate(s), rather than the one-field specialist" (Herman, 2000). Herman believes that broad based candidates will bring with them the ability to "think, collaborate, create, problem solve, communicate and lead" (2000) and that the "demand will be high for individuals who have learned how to learn, have a strong multidisciplinary education, and are able to adapt easily to whatever comes their way" (Herman, 2000).

In the article "The Case for Liberal Arts," Roger E. Herman expands on his thoughts on Liberal Arts education by recognizing that those students "who specialized in accounting, engineering, computer science, pre-med, or theory professional orientations during their college days are discovering that there is something missing in their education" (2000). He believes that because they did not attain the adequate "knowledge, skills, background, and insight that a liberal arts education offers" (Herman, July 2000), Liberal Arts colleges and universities will begin to offer Masters Degree programs in Liberal Arts, itself. From his standpoint, Herman agrees that this is "logically the next step in the process of learning for those who have been educated in a single discipline" (July, 2000).

Beyond the Irony

Undergraduate Liberal Arts institutions that have opted for Career-based Curriculum Policies, may be failing students in other ways. In 1993, the Bureau of Statistics conducted a study that revealed only one in three college graduates were holding jobs in the field they had studied in college. (Hood, 1997) As a result of what Herman refers to as a "hopscotch model" (November, 2000), Masci believes that

those colleges and universities who are creating and enforcing Career-based Curriculum Policies are providing their students a disservice in knowing that many students will not continue to work in their originally chosen field. (1998) Herman believes the "idea of learning a specialty and staying in one field for an entire career is passe" (July, 2000). Employees are no longer working for one company throughout most of their lives. Instead, they are changing companies, and even fields, as often as every two to five years. Those who do not change companies will want to change positions just as often. In doing so, employees are recognizing increased income and position status at a much faster rate than would be possible with a single employer, or in a single business department. Therefore, career-minded students must realize that they, themselves, require an education that will easily allow them to accept new roles and responsibilities. (Herman, November, 2000) Consequently, colleges and universities must recognize their role in educating their students to this fact. Students must know that they are likely to change careers many times throughout their working lives. Institutions must, in turn, be able to address this fact by providing students with a variety of quality curriculum choices that allow students to branch out beyond their major course of study.

The Future of Liberal Arts Education

Because the business world is ever changing, Liberal Arts colleges and universities must return to Curriculum Policy that provides the foundation necessary for students to succeed in business, not just perform in business. To succeed in business, students must be able to take on new responsibilities, learn to work with new technology, and be able to solve business problems quickly and effectively. Liberal Arts colleges and universities must ensure that their curriculum requirements foster these skills in students through studies in history, culture and literature while expanding their strengths in communications and critical thinking. Liberal Arts institutions might also consider supporting the needs of those graduates who will return for Masters Degrees in Liberal Arts. A Liberal Arts Masters Degree will allow these students to join those professionals who are recognized by employers as able to take on new responsibilities and expectations with ease. (Herman, November 2000)

Summary

This paper provided an examination of several issues facing Career-based Curriculum Policies in Liberal Arts colleges and universities. Because students have demanded customer service from these institutions, such that primarily career-based courses are required for graduation, many Liberal Arts colleges and universities have shifted their focus from broad based course requirements to limited course requirements in specified subject areas. It is recognized through this examination that the primary motivator for colleges and universities to make this shift is their desire to increase enrollment, thereby, increasing funding. This potential for increased funding encourages colleges and universities to provide the customer service that students desire.

With this information in mind, it can be recognized that Liberal Arts institutional shifts from traditional Liberal Arts Curriculum to Career-based Curriculum Policies may remain intact as long as funding remains a primary concern for colleges and universities. However, further research must be conducted before this statement can be legitimately made. Research on course requirements of Liberal Arts colleges and universities themselves, as well as, additional information from academic journals would need to be obtained before correctly accessing the future of Liberal Arts institutions, as well as, the effects of Career-based Curriculum on their students.

Conclusion

Martha Nussbaum in her book *Cultivating Humanity: a Classical Reform in Liberal Education*

reminds readers that "campuses are producing citizens, and this means that we must ask what a good citizen of the present day should be and should know" (1997). Liberal Arts colleges and universities can ensure this ideal by returning to their traditional Curriculum Policies that require core classes in mathematics, science, and philosophy. The Career-based Curriculum Policies of many of today's Liberal Arts Institutions may not satisfy the needs of future students. Unfortunately, only after high school students and even their parents realize that "employers want liberal arts enrollments, [will universities be inspired] to strengthen their liberal arts offerings" (Herman, November, 2000) that would be required for graduation with a specified degree.

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