

A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE LIBERAL ARTS: *Feedback from Deans and Provosts*

A Report From Wake Forest University

BACKGROUND

In November 2001, Wake Forest University conducted research regarding the liberal arts among deans and provosts of colleges and universities throughout the United States. The purpose of the research was to understand better what liberal arts educators think about the future of the liberal arts. The study was designed by the Dean of the College, the Associate Provost, University Advancement, Admissions and an independent consulting firm, The Planning Edge.

Approximately 275 provosts and deans from liberal arts universities and colleges were contacted by email and asked to answer a web-based survey on the liberal arts. Eighty-nine completed the survey, for a response rate of over 30%. Responses came from 28 states. Three-quarters of respondents represented private schools and one-quarter represented public schools. Slightly over half of the respondents were from doctoral/research universities and 40% were from liberal arts colleges. Large and small institutions were represented, with 46% from institutions with fewer than 3,000 students, 29% from institutions with 3,000 to 10,000 students, and 25% from institutions with over 10,000 students.

Topics addressed in the research included:

- The importance of specific attributes of a liberal arts education
- Possible drawbacks to a liberal arts education
- The impact of specific trends on student interest in the liberal arts
- Emphasis on the liberal arts and specific elements compared to five years ago
- Required elements and offerings of a liberal arts degree
- Recommended changes in the liberal arts curricula to ensure they remain relevant and important.

The research was intended to stimulate thought, not necessarily to recommend specific actions. It is hoped that the input from this group of educators can provide insights into issues that campuses may want to address.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While there is a range of opinions and comments, as might be expected from a diverse group of liberal arts educators, this research suggests that educators have a relatively consistent set of beliefs and activities regarding the liberal arts. Changes have occurred in some areas, but the focus of the liberal arts appears not to be changing.

A clear theme throughout this study is the importance of the **role** that the liberal arts play in developing **critical thinking skills, the ability to communicate one's own thoughts, and the ability to learn and conceptualize**. These skills will enable students to deal with questions and issues that arise in the future, many of which cannot be predicted today.

Over 90% of educators think that two trends that will most **positively impact student interest** in the liberal arts are:

- **Employment needs that will require broad thinking skills** and
- There will be an increased interest in **lifelong, continuous learning**.

Close to 90% of educators also think the growth of **international opportunities and cultural diversity will have very positive impacts on student interest** in the liberal arts.

Two-thirds of educators think that **employers do not appreciate the benefits** of a liberal arts education. In fact, the lack of appreciation of the liberal arts by employers is the most significant drawback of a liberal arts education. "Marketing" the benefits of a liberal arts education to employers, parents and students can enhance interest in the liberal arts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED. . .

Trends that educators think have the most **negative impact on the liberal arts deal with “money”** and the short-term perspective that **tangible skills are needed from day one** on the job. “Money” issues include salary expectations (of parents and students), higher starting salaries associated with other four-year degrees, the cost of college and the resulting outstanding debt, and the economy in general. To the extent that liberal arts students develop tangible skills, and can explain their skills, these negative trends may be ameliorated.

About one-third of educators think other trends having a somewhat negative impact on interest in the liberal arts are the growth of distance learning and “for profit” institutions.

Educators recognize that technology will continue to impact liberal arts in the future. Close to **90% of the educators have been placing more emphasis on the integration of technology** into liberal arts. International opportunities, globalization and diversity will also have more impact in the future, and as a result, **two-thirds of educators have been placing more emphasis on the importance of international studies**. They are less likely to have changed emphasis in flexibility of the curriculum, the overall emphasis given to liberal arts, or core courses or language requirements. In terms of required courses, 70% require foreign language, half require literature of diverse cultures, and a quarter or less require religion, philosophy or attendance at cultural events.

DETAILED FINDINGS

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECIFIC ATTRIBUTES OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

Educators rated the importance of specific attributes of a liberal arts education. Eleven attributes were included in the research because they have been traditionally viewed to be of importance. Therefore, the answers provide a ranking of important attributes, rather than a sorting out between important and non-important attributes.

The most important attributes deal with helping students **develop critical thinking skills, develop abilities to “think and communicate one’s own thoughts,”** and **learn how to learn and conceptualize**. Similarly, helping students **deal with issues for which there are no single answers** and providing a **broad picture of the world around them** are very important areas.

Also important, but not quite as important, are helping students to appreciate **different perspectives**, to become **more self-aware and develop core values** and to be **exposed to major ways of thinking**. Developing self-confidence and fluency in a foreign language are the least important attributes.

Importance of Specific Attributes	Very %	Somewhat %	Slightly %	Not at all %
Develops critical thinking skills	96	3	1	0
Develops abilities to "think & communicate one's own thoughts"	94	6	0	0
Teaches a student "how to learn" & conceptualize	92	8	0	0
Develops abilities to deal with issues/questions with no single answer	88	9	3	0
Provides a broad picture of world around you	87	11	2	0
Provides greater appreciation of different perspectives	82	16	2	0
Develops a more self-aware & informed citizen	71	26	3	0
Develops core values & sensitivity to ethical issues	66	33	1	0
Acquaints students with the major ways of knowing that have characterized human achievement	66	24	10	0
Develops self-confidence	43	54	3	0
Develops fluency in a foreign language	33	45	16	6

POSSIBLE DRAWBACKS TO A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

Educators think the biggest drawback to a liberal arts education today is that **employers do not appreciate the benefits provided by a liberal arts education**. Of the other possible drawbacks, virtually no educators view any of the options as *very much* of a drawback to the liberal arts. About a third believe that **not providing enough specific job skills, having insufficient grounding in technology, and providing only limited depth of understanding in many areas** are drawbacks to the liberal arts to some extent.

How Much of a Drawback to a Liberal Arts Education	Very + Somewhat %	Very %	Somewhat %	Slightly %	Not at all %
Employers do not appreciate the benefits of a liberal arts education	62	18	44	22	16
Does not provide enough specific job skills	32	3	29	25	43
Does not provide sufficient grounding in technology	30	1	29	43	26
The curriculum can only provide limited depth of understanding in many areas	30	0	30	34	36
Does not keep up with the changing needs of today's workforce	22	3	19	33	45
Required courses are too specific	16	3	13	21	56
The curriculum is too general	12	0	12	25	62
Students need too much additional training once they begin working	11	1	10	36	50

THE IMPACT OF SPECIFIC TRENDS ON STUDENT INTEREST IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

Educators think that trends that have the **most positive impact** on student interest in the liberal arts are **employment needs that will require broad thinking skills, international opportunities, the need for lifelong learning and growing cultural diversity**.

Educators also believe that **student interest in a broad based education** will be positive for the liberal arts. **Employer perceptions of the liberal arts** elicited a mixed response. As seen in the previous question, the biggest drawback today to a liberal arts education is that employers do not appreciate its benefits. Responses to this question could suggest that some employers will begin to appreciate the benefits of the liberal arts in the future.

Educators think rapid obsolescence of technology has a positive impact on the liberal arts, perhaps because the benefits of learning a specific technology or program will be short-lived, but the benefits of learning how to learn will be long-lasting.

Impact of Specific Trends on Student Interest in Liberal Arts	Very Positive %	Some Positive %	Neutral %	Some Negative %	Very Negative %	Net Positive %	Net Negative %
THE MOST POSITIVE...							
Employment needs that require broad thinking skills	52	41	6	1	0	93	1
International opportunities	50	43	6	0	1	93	1
Need for continuous, life long learning	47	44	9	0	0	91	0
Growing cultural diversity	41	49	7	3	0	90	3
Student interest in broad-based education	27	55	15	3	0	82	3
Employer perceptions of liberal arts	14	36	13	34	3	50	37
Fast obsolescence of technology	6	37	47	9	1	43	10
Growth of baby boom echo <i>Continued on the following table</i>	10	33	56	1	0	43	1

Educators think that the trends that have a **negative impact** on student interest in the liberal arts are **financial issues**, including salary expectations, college cost and outstanding debt, and the economy in general. They also think that the **demand for tangible skills from day one on the job** will have a negative impact on interest in the liberal arts.

Impact of Specific Trends on Student Interest in Liberal Arts	Very Positive %	Some Positive %	Neutral %	Some Negative %	Very Negative %	Net Positive %	Net Negative %
... THE MOST NEGATIVE							
Impact of distance learning institutions	0	6	59	34	1	6	35
Impact of "for profit" institutions	0	3	61	31	5	3	36
The variety of 4-year degrees that offer higher starting salaries	7	17	26	41	8	24	49
The economy	13	20	17	44	6	33	50
Parents' or students' salary expectations	10	18	15	43	14	28	57
Cost of college	8	11	20	55	6	19	61
Outstanding debt upon graduation	8	11	18	57	6	19	63
Demand for tangible or specialist skills from day 1 on the job	7	10	17	52	14	17	66

EMPHASIS ON THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SPECIFIC ELEMENTS COMPARED TO FIVE YEARS AGO

Educators think the **overall emphasis on the liberal arts** remains the same (73%) or has grown (24%) over the last five years. In particular, almost nine out of ten think there is more emphasis on **integrating technology** into liberal arts, and two-thirds emphasize **international studies** more. About a third are emphasizing **openness and flexibility of the curriculum** more. Most have not changed the emphasis on the number of core liberal arts courses required for all students, or the requirement of a foreign language.

Changes in Emphasis vs. 5 Years Ago	More %	Same %	Less %
Integration of technology into liberal arts	88	12	0
Importance of international studies	68	32	0
Openness and flexibility of the curriculum	31	62	7
Amount of emphasis being given to liberal arts overall	24	73	3
Number of core liberal arts courses required for all students	16	80	5
Requirement of a foreign language as part of the curriculum	13	74	11

REQUIRED ELEMENTS AND OFFERINGS OF A LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE

The majority (70%) of schools require a foreign language and half require literature of diverse world cultures. Only a minority require religion, philosophy or attendance at cultural or artistic events.

Requirements	Yes %	No %
Foreign Language	70	30
Literature of diverse cultures	52	48
Religion	28	72
Philosophy	25	75
Attendance at cultural/artistic events	12	88

Half of the institutions require **first year liberal arts seminars, interdisciplinary study and capstone seminars** and an additional 20% are considering adding each of these items. **Co-op learning opportunities** are offered by a third. Almost half do not plan to offer co-ops. **Supplemental business courses for liberal arts majors** are not common, with one-quarter of the institutions offering them and two-thirds not planning to offer them.

Two-thirds of the educators do not plan to begin **distance learning** opportunities, either for non-traditional students or using courses from other colleges.

Requirements & Offerings	Have & will continue %	May add %	May drop %	Does not have, won't begin %
Required 1st year liberal arts seminars	51	22	1	26
Required interdisciplinary courses or seminars	48	22	1	29
Required capstone seminars	47	27	0	26
Co-op learning opportunities	37	18	0	45
Supplemental business courses for liberal arts majors	24	11	0	65
Distance learning for non-traditional students	18	18	1	63
Distance learning courses from other colleges	10	25	1	64

RECOMMENDED CHANGES IN THE LIBERAL ARTS CURRICULA

When asked on an open-ended basis about suggested changes to ensure liberal arts curricula remain relevant and important, educators have a range of suggestions. About half of the respondents (42 of 89) provided comments to this question, with many comments reinforcing the current approach to liberal arts.

The most frequent comments relate to: (*Note: The number of comments are in parentheses*)

- **Continuing to develop broad skills, (15)**
- **Emphasizing international and cultural diversity, (10)**
- **Integrating technology, (7)**
- **Having more interdisciplinary work and team work, (5, 3)**
- **Marketing the benefits of liberal arts, (5), and**
- **Ensuring practical results (3)**

Comments support the current approach to and rationale behind the liberal arts. There are no suggestions for “wholesale change,” but rather for enhancements that can be accomplished within the current framework for the liberal arts.

The importance of teaching “how to think and communicate” versus “how to be able to execute a specific technique” is a clear theme. It is a theme that employers, parents and students may not appreciate enough, particularly given the demand to “be productive” on day one immediately after a student graduates.

Detailed information including open-ended comments, the survey instrument and classification data are available on-line at <<http://www.wfu.edu/college/survey/>>.



*1834 Wake Forest Road
Winston-Salem, NC 27109*

www.wfu.edu