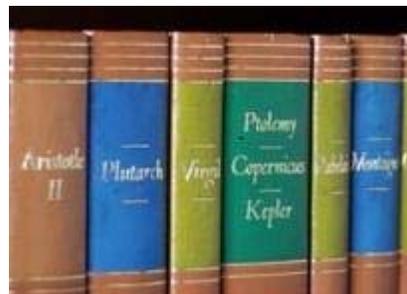


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## Can Liberal Arts Colleges Be Saved?

By [Victor E. Ferrall Jr.](#)

The 2004 [Carnegie Classifications](#) identified only 95 liberal arts colleges with no graduate school where 80 percent or more of all graduates are liberal arts and sciences, not career-based, majors. They accounted for a mere 0.8 percent of the total higher education enrollment in the U.S. In a 1990 Yankelovich survey, two-thirds of respondents believed the main reason to go to college was to get the skills necessary for a good job. A 2004 University of California at Los Angeles survey reported that three-quarters of all students gave as their reasons for going to college “to get training for a specific career,” “to be able to get a better job,” and/or “to be able to make more money.”



This year, a Special Commission appointed by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings “to consider how best to improve our system of higher education” completed a year long study. Its 55-page report of analysis and recommendations does not even mention liberal education or the liberal arts.

The 95 “true” liberal arts colleges, the pure practitioners of liberal education, are in trouble. The number of persons who view themselves as liberally educated is declining. The number who wish they were liberally educated is declining even faster and the number who think they know what a liberal education is, or even that they would like to know, is shrinking fastest of all. In recent years, liberal education’s slide has been masked to some extent by demographics, the upsurge in applicants for all higher education resulting from the flood of college age children produced by the baby boomers. The flood is coming to an end.

A career-directed education has become the goal of many, if not most, young people eager to get ahead. A purely materialistic motivation for getting an education is now the norm, not the exception. There is economic pressure on liberal arts colleges to add career-directed courses and programs to attract students. The most prestigious colleges are to some extent relieved from this pressure by their wealth and the fact that so many of their graduates know they will go on to graduate and professional schools and therefore feel less need to collect a commercial credential at the undergraduate level; to learn what Elia Kazan’s immigrant father called something “use-eh-full.”

Even the richest colleges, however, are not immune from pressure to expand their curricula in vocational directions in order to attract students who are more interested in getting a good job and making money than in Aristotle, Descartes and Rousseau, and to make sure top students are not lured away by so-called honors colleges at state universities.

Can liberal arts colleges be saved or are they, to take Paul Neely's apt analogy, becoming like high end passenger trains that went out of business because no matter how well they performed, consumers had come to prefer traveling by plane and automobile? Unless the case liberal arts colleges make for liberal education and for themselves is reformed, their curricula restored, and the across the board teaching excellence of their faculties secured, the answer in all probability is that those that survive will evolve into purveyors of career-directed, not liberal, education.

### **The Case as It Is Made Now**

Much of the Case currently made for liberal education is internally inconsistent, cynically cobbled together to pander to the preconceptions of high school students and their parents, unsupported and/or simply not credible. As the steady decline in the demand for liberal education shows, the Case is not persuasive to those who are not pre-sold, i.e. those who need to be persuaded. Consider the following Case elements:

*(1) Even though it won't get you a job, a liberal education really is useful because it teaches students how to think critically.*

The "critical thinking" mantra is an especially good example of embracing a bad argument solely because it is not laughable on its face. Never mind that no one knows what "critical," as opposed to plain good, thinking is, or that there is no reason to suppose that one is more likely to become a critical thinker studying English literature than business management, or that there is certainly no reason to suspect that English literature professors are themselves more critical thinkers, or more capable of teaching critical thinking than business management professors. Yet no single assertion is more central to the Case made for liberal arts educations than the claim it will make you a more critical thinker, whatever that is.

*(2) A liberal education best provides oral and written communication skills.*

It is certainly true that a liberal education can provide these skills, but is it more true than for career-based education (or for that matter for the education that comes from being in the workplace)? There is no convincing evidence that the liberally educated are more effective communicators and the fact that the assertion is totally unsupported undercuts the Case as a whole.

*(3) Liberal arts colleges provide an international education.*

We live in a global world and it behooves liberal arts colleges to internationalize their curricula to the maximum extent possible. This does not mean, however, that the following common liberal arts promotion makes sense: "The globe is shrinking, we live in an international world, and our college recognizes these important facts by encouraging all students to spend a semester abroad."

Let's restate this promotion from the point of view of a potential student or parent: "You have told me that spending 26 months at your college over the next four years at a cost of \$150,000-\$200,000 is a sound investment, but now you say I should spend more than 10 percent of that time somewhere else. Are you trying to cut your costs by giving me less or do you simply believe 26 months is more than I

need?”

Everyone knows that study abroad is a useful and often meaningful, even life-changing, experience. But it makes no sense to say that it should be done at the expense of, rather than in addition to, the 26 months.

*(4) You can study the subjects you like best and are most interested in.*

In an effort to attract students, liberal arts colleges have reduced, and some have even eliminated, course requirements. To the extent they do so they turn over liberal education curriculum design to students who by definition are not yet liberally educated and virtually insure that their education will be less broad, less liberal. Maria Montessori’s maxim “follow the child” may make sense in first grade, but not at a liberal arts college unless, of course, the college’s education philosophy is that students will find liberal education on their own without the college’s guidance, in which case why should they spend \$200,000 for 26 months?

*(5) You will get good grades and this will help you get into the graduate or professional school of your choice.*

Colleges don’t explicitly include grade inflation in their pitches to students, but everybody knows it is going on. In fact, grade inflation serves only to cheapen the value of a liberal arts degree and signals to students that a liberal education is simply a part of playing the credential-seeking game, of getting ahead. Further, since everyone is doing it, it doesn’t work very well.

### **The Case That Needs to Be Made**

In contrast to these frivolous, disingenuous or wrong claims, the distinctively desirable features of a liberal arts education are de-emphasized or omitted entirely from the Case because it is assumed by admissions staff that they won’t be believed or understood.

*(1) The quality of a liberal education that makes it so effective is that the subject matter studied is not “use-eh-full.”*

It is the very “uselessness” of what liberal arts students study that opens the door to their appreciating knowing for the sake of knowing, that drives home the point that learning is of value in and of itself whether or not it leads directly to a marketable skill. It is possible to realize these things while studying banking or engineering, but it is much more difficult because the student is constantly distracted from the utility of acquiring knowledge by the utility of the knowledge being acquired. The genius of the American system of liberal education is that it eliminates this distraction. Its uselessness separates knowing from need to know, learning from need to learn, desire to understand from need to understand.

*(2) The best teaching is at liberal arts colleges.*

If liberal arts colleges pay attention in hiring, training, supporting and tenuring faculty, there is really no way universities, no matter how highly ranked, can match them in teaching excellence. The mission of universities is diverse and complex, the mission of liberal arts colleges is singular, to provide a liberal education to undergraduates. For the most part, the most famous names in higher education are associated with major universities, not liberal arts colleges, but the severe limits on their worth to university undergraduates are well known: limited exposure to students, huge lecture courses, smaller classes taught by graduate students, and so on. Universities, by their very nature, inescapably focus on

specialization, not breadth.

Universities are aware of their inherent disadvantages in providing undergraduate liberal arts education and in recent years some have made efforts to shore up their performance by creating so-called honors colleges and requiring full professors to teach an undergraduate course now and then. By and large, however, these are Band-Aid efforts. A Nobel laureate once complained to me about being required to teach an undergraduate seminar. “I’m a professor, not a teacher,” he growled.

*(3) Your life will be fuller and richer if you read Aristotle, Descartes and Rousseau.*

There is no doubt that this is a tough sell for college bound, wealth-seeking, “what’s in it for me” philistines and their nervous parents, but enrichment is inescapably central to the value of the liberal arts. Before I came to the academy, I was a lawyer. I know to a certainty that one does not learn how to practice law until one starts doing it. It is not learned in law school. Therefore, a career-directed, pre-law program at the undergraduate level makes no sense, i.e., even though vocational, it is neither useful nor enriching. By far the best, and often the only, way to learn any career skill is by practicing it. Career-directed courses are always of limited value; a liberal education is always enriching. The wise person, therefore, seeks both a liberal education and an on-the-job career education.

## Curriculum

In the early 19th century, subject matter that made up the liberal arts curriculum was fixed: the ancient classics, rhetoric, logic, Greek and Latin. It was what a gentleman, a liberally educated person, had to know. Today, while the curriculum is flexible, taking advantage of the special skills and interests of the faculty, it still defines liberal education at each liberal arts college. It is the responsibility of the faculty — not the students, not the administration — to create a curriculum and the goal in doing so must be to make the best possible use of the faculty to insure that the college’s graduates are securely launched on a lifetime of liberal education.

Distribution, as opposed to course, requirements represent a partial abrogation of this responsibility. Perhaps after the first two or three years a distribution requirement makes sense, but course requirements come first. Elimination of requirements is a marketing, not educational, strategy. Since the objective of liberal arts colleges is to provide a liberal education the old Brown University no requirements strategy is disingenuous as well as wrong.

A liberal education is broad, not narrow. The more major requirements imposed, the narrower the resulting education. If all departments reduced their major requirements, liberal education would be facilitated. Experiencing some depth of inquiry is a part of a liberal education, but not at the expense of breadth. Graduate and professional schools, not to mention getting a job, will give students all the depth they need.

Which courses offered by a department receive the greatest departmental attention — survey and entry-level courses or specialized advanced courses for major? Too often, it is the latter. I well remember a talk given by a creative writing professor who told us that the single most important and enriching course in his undergraduate career was Astronomy 101. At liberal arts colleges, his experience should be commonplace, not exceptional. 101 courses are the foundation of a liberal education.

Interdisciplinary courses are inherently pro-liberal arts. There are problems with them, however, including that creating a truly interdisciplinary syllabus is difficult and more work to teach, and that there is not the kind of recognition for success in interdisciplinary teaching that exists within

departments. The steps colleges can take to ameliorate or eliminate these problems are obvious and should be taken.

A liberal education is best pursued when students share the learning experience. Common courses are a sound device for maximizing sharing. Similar problems inhere in teaching common courses as in interdisciplinary courses and require the same steps to remove them.

A much-used cost containment strategy is to combine departments, e.g. anthropology and sociology, art and art history, philosophy and religion. Reduction in, or failure to increase, the number of teachers in the departments is a common byproduct (or cause) of such combinations. While there is nothing inherently wrong with combined departments and, indeed, to some extent they may partake of the positive liberal arts qualities of interdisciplinary courses, combining departments can have unintended adverse consequences on the quality of instruction and should only be entered into after careful analysis. On the other side of the coin, too many departments can mark the way towards career-based education, especially in the social and physical sciences. Many universities, for example, offer dozens of economics majors, each directed to a specific career path and each leading away from breadth. Liberal arts colleges are to some extent insulated from this practice by the relatively small size of their faculties, but they are not immune.

There is nothing wrong with career-based courses and there is nothing wrong with encouraging students to pursue them, but not in lieu or instead of liberal arts courses. “Take them in the evening, in the summer, or before or after you graduate, but for the 26 months you are with us you will pursue a liberal education full time” is the correct rule for liberal arts colleges.

No course credit should be given for non-academic initiatives. If students have excellent summer work experiences or organize successful public service programs, they should put them on their resumes, not in their transcripts. The quality of the liberal education a college delivers is measured by what happens at the college, not in a congressman’s office or at a European university. If students can get a better liberal education somewhere other than at the college, why should they attend the college at all? Off-campus experience can supplement and enhance the liberal education a college offers, but not replace it.

## **The Faculty**

Sadly, it is easier for liberal arts colleges to raise money for buildings, sports, or almost anything other than faculty salaries and support. If, however, liberal arts colleges do not offer the very best teaching, their prospects for the future are at best problematic. Faculties are the heart and soul of liberal education.

It makes no sense to staff a liberal arts college with teachers who are not themselves liberally educated. (Indeed, if college presidents, vice presidents, deans and other administrators are to play a meaningful role in directing the course of a liberal arts college, they also need to be liberally educated.) Hiring procedures used by liberal arts colleges – posting ads that ask candidates to furnish information about their qualifications to teach a particular specialty; 20 minute interviews in hospitality suites at professional society meetings where narrow specialists gather; observing candidates teach a 50-minute class to students chosen because they are majoring in the candidates area of specialization – are not well-calculated to reveal the extent and quality of candidates’ liberal education.

Certainly little that happened to candidates at the graduate schools where they earned their Ph.D.s provides assurance that the candidates are liberally educated. Graduate schools are antithetical to liberal education. They put a premium on and reward narrowness, not breadth. Indeed, most graduate schools have precious little to do with preparing their students to be effective teachers. The graduate school

game is research and publication, no matter how frivolous or insignificant.

Worse, graduate schools dissemble about their graduates. A letter of recommendation from a graduate school dean or professor saying a graduate will be a good liberal arts college teacher frequently really means the graduate school believes the graduate will not be a successful researcher. Graduate school deans and professors often have little or no knowledge about the potential teaching capability of their students, and care less.

The one sure way to find liberally educated, potentially excellent teachers is to actively look for them, not wait for them to drop in at hospitality suite or respond to an advertisement. Networking is the key, talking to friends and friends of friends. Business understands this and there is no reason colleges can't, too.

The number of new Ph.D.'s has increased faster than the number of college teaching positions. This can put colleges in the enviable position of having a surfeit of candidates to choose from. Too often, however, this advantage is lost because a first cut is made on the basis of the ranking of the universities from which candidates' degrees were received. There is little reason to believe a social historian from Harvard is more liberally educated or more likely to become an excellent teacher than one from a lower ranked institution. The efforts and aptitudes required to gain admission to and earn a Ph.D. from Harvard (or any other first rate graduate school) are not closely correlated, if at all, with good teaching. Indeed, a respectable argument can be made that they are counter indicators. In fact, it is far from self-evident that liberal educatedness and teaching excellence are positively correlated with possession of a Ph.D. When a college has an opportunity to hire a potentially excellent teacher who lacks the Ph.D. credential, a retired judge or legislator perhaps, or a linguist or artist (even if an M.F.A. is also missing), the opportunity should be seized.

Hiring to fill a particular slot, the most common practice, itself risks losing teaching excellence. Obviously, a chemist cannot be hired to replace a retiring historian, but if a medievalist is the strongest candidate to replace a retiring professor of modern European history, changing course offerings should at least be seriously considered.

Flexibility in hiring is an especially important consideration in hiring minority faculty. The likelihood that a minority group member highly qualified and desiring to teach organic chemistry at a liberal arts college will happen to be available the very year old Charlie decides to retire from the chemistry department is not high. But such a candidate might have been available at an earlier time and, even though it did not fit perfectly into the then perceived staffing requirements of the chemistry department, grabbing the candidate before he or she went somewhere else could have made good sense.

If diversity in the student body is desirable, indeed essential, for a liberal education, as almost all liberal arts colleges acknowledge, then faculty diversity is essential, too. If there is no minority organic chemist available, there may be an outstanding astronomer or sociologist who will advance the liberal arts excellence of the college as well as the diversity of its faculty. When Branch Rickey set out to hire major league baseball's first black player, he did not search for a third baseman, but rather for the best player he could find, and then played him where he fit in; at third base. Incidentally, in hiring Jackie Robinson, Mr. Rickey gave full consideration to Mr. Robinson's personal, as well as athletic, qualifications. The parallel to giving full consideration to liberal educatedness as well as academic qualifications in hiring teachers is apt.

Once hired, most new teachers need to be taught how to teach. This did not happen to most of them at graduate school. Throwing them into the classroom and letting them sink or swim, a traditional

approach, makes no sense. Instruction of new teachers by faculty members who are skilled teachers should be intensive and continuing, not hit or miss. The progress of new teachers needs to be systematically monitored. Too often what is known about a young faculty member's teaching skills is as best anecdotal, largely based on passing comments by students. Reliable evaluation is essential to effective training and, of course, to making sound tenure decisions.

In the popular press, tenure is controversial, seen by many outside the academy as an undeserved life-long sinecure. The claimed centrality of tenure to preserving academic freedom, heavily relied on by tenure supporters, is not persuasive. The freedom to assert controversial positions is not an issue for the overwhelming majority of faculty members. Instances where it can reasonably be said that, but for tenure, a faculty member would be fired are rare. In addition, academic freedom can be contractually guaranteed without tenure, e.g. "No professor can be disciplined, demoted or terminated for expressing a controversial or unpopular view."

Tenure is a ruthless, up or out system. A faculty member denied tenure at one college is less likely to get it somewhere else. Tenure denial is a wrenching experience not only for the teacher denied but also for the persons making the denial decision. The human response at most teaching-oriented institutions is to try to avoid making it. Doubts are resolved in favor of granting tenure. Weaknesses are under-weighted and strengths are over-weighted to reach the "grant" decision. Non-teaching contributions by the candidate are given significant weight to justify granting tenure to a candidate whose teaching is not first class. The result is "acceptable" or "pretty good," but not excellent, teachers are rewarded with tenure and take possession of the college's limited number of teaching positions for the next 25-30 years.

In making tenure decisions substantial weight is frequently assigned to a candidate's publications. Indeed, at some of the finest liberal arts colleges a published book is a tenure requirement. This may make sense at graduate schools where the objective is to promote scholarship and research, not teaching. It makes no sense at liberal arts colleges. It is commonly observed that scholarship informs and enhances teaching. If this is so, as I strongly believe it to be, publications need not be considered separately as a part of the tenure review process because their enhancing effect will be reflected in the teaching performance of the candidate. On the other side of the coin, poor teachers can produce outstanding scholarship. They should be encouraged to devote their lives to graduate school research, not liberal arts college teaching.

The first place most businesses look to save money is workers' salaries. Such cost cutting efforts, however, are frequently frustrated by the pressures of competition and unions. At liberal arts colleges these pressures are more easily resisted. The result is that faculty salary increases tend to lag behind other employment venues and sometimes even languish below the rise in cost of living. Since far and away the most valuable resource of a college is its faculty, this is foolish.

The reluctance to grant salary increases to faculty is far less apparent in the case of college administrators. Perhaps in making salary decisions, business executive members of college boards of trustees identify faculty with their factory workers, and administrators with themselves. It has been observed that when the salary of a college or university president reaches three times that of senior faculty, a potentially destructive disequilibrium is created. This disequilibrium is becoming more common.

Salaries reflect perceived value. The fact that many liberal arts colleges pay their teachers poorly reflects how the institutions value teachers' services, and inevitably how teachers value themselves. I am aware of no established benchmark for what faculty salaries ought to be, or of accepted comparables. There are, however, some useful guidelines. First, faculty salaries should increase no less rapidly than those of administrators. Second, salaries of senior faculty should increase no less rapidly than starting salaries for

assistant professors. Third, teaching excellence should be rewarded by salary increases, not bonuses or prizes which are always sporadic, capricious and often devices designed to portray the institution as more generous than it in fact is. Fourth, special effort should be given to encouraging donors to earmark gifts for faculty salaries.

## **Conclusion**

A not insignificant portion of the challenges now faced by liberal arts colleges are of their own making, resulting from competition between them. Costs have been increased by the addition of programs and resources for the specific purpose of attracting students away from competing colleges. Competition has caused dollars to be diverted from important uses, e.g. for faculty salaries and support, to flashy facilities and programs. Grade inflation and the elimination of requirements are examples of competition between liberal arts colleges that degrades the offerings of all of them.

A few liberal arts colleges are wealthy, but most struggle financially. They all, however, are threatened by declining demand for liberal education. If they have any long-run chance of resisting the vocationalizing of their curricula, they need to make common cause, to work together, not at odds with each other.

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Compare the top national liberal arts colleges in the U.S. Learn more about the best national liberal arts colleges to find the right school for you. The National Liberal Arts Colleges, including schools like Colby College and Wesleyan University, emphasize undergraduate education and award at least half of their degrees in the liberal arts fields of study. Read the methodology. To unlock full rankings, SAT/ACT scores and more, sign up for the U.S. News College Compass! SUMMARY. Here are the best liberal arts colleges in the U.S. Williams College. Amherst College. If the liberal arts college doesn't do the work of remembering, then who will? We may continue to have a strong slate of research universities, public and private, dedicated to the generation of new knowledge, but who will preserve what has already been known for centuries and millennia? The unique role of the scholar is to remember. Twenty-five years ago, Thomas Cahill surprisingly landed on the best-seller lists with his *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. He argued that the Irish monasteries preserved the cultural inheritance of the West during the barbaric darkness of the early middle ages. If we are on the verge of a new kind of "dark age" one that may be rich in technology and comfort, and yet still darkened in its understanding then one must wonder who will save civilization this time. Are you considering a liberal arts college or a four-year university? Students may encounter this question in their college admissions and application process and be stumped on how to answer, especially if they aren't sure what the difference is. While liberal arts colleges and universities are both places to get a higher education, they offer different experiences, learning styles, and amenities to students. Recommended: What Is a Liberal Arts College? Liberal Arts Colleges vs. Universities. Liberal Arts College. University. Liberal Arts College Focus on well-rounded education. University F How Ohio Liberal Arts Colleges are Managing During the Pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted all facets of society as businesses and schools close down worldwide. Emergency policies in Ohio have affected education at all levels, including colleges and universities. In addition to changing the way that instruction is provided to current students, colleges have had to adapt the processes for recruiting and admitting future students. With the rising cost of college tuition, many students opt to begin their higher education at a community college and then transfer colleges to a four-year school to save money. Others may recognize that their current school is not the right fit so choose to continue their education at a different one. Whatever the reason Liberal arts colleges are to some extent insulated from this practice by the relatively small size of their faculties, but they are not immune. There is nothing wrong with career-based courses and there is nothing wrong with encouraging students to pursue them, but not in lieu or instead of liberal arts courses. Take them in the evening, in the summer, or before or after you graduate, but for the 26 months you are with us you will pursue a liberal education full time is the correct rule for liberal arts colleges. Sadly, it is easier for liberal arts colleges to raise money for buildings, sports, or almost anything other than faculty salaries and support. If, however, liberal arts colleges do not offer the very best teaching, their prospects for the future are at best problematic.