

Artes { } Liberales

The View from Here



Every undergraduate enrolled at Williams this year is a member of a tiny, highly select minority—the 3 percent of all college students in the United States who have chosen a liberal arts education over early professional training. *By Zelda Stern*

ASIDE FROM A BRIEF SURGE after World War II, the proportion of undergraduate degrees awarded each year in the liberal arts has been declining for 100 years. At an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Conference on Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education, held at Williams last November, Williams President Emeritus Francis Oakley outlined the downward trajectory: As recently as the mid-1950s, approximately 50 percent of all institutions of higher education in the United States were liberal arts. By the early 1970s, that share had fallen to 25 percent. The decline in the share of student enrollments was even greater, from 25 percent in the mid-1950s to 8 percent by the early 1970s.

To some extent, the decline has not simply been proportionate. Between 1967 and 1990, some 167 private, four-year colleges disappeared, either by

closure or by merger. By 1994, of the 3,941 institutions of higher education in the United States, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classified only 202, or about 5 percent, as liberal arts colleges—that is, institutions awarding at least half their degrees in the liberal arts.

As the higher education pie grows larger, serving more and more people, the liberal arts slice shrinks in proportion to the whole. Today, the most popular undergraduate major in the United States—accounting for 20 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded annually—is business. Another 10 percent of degrees are conferred in education; 7 percent in one of the health professions. Almost twice as many degrees are awarded each year in social work as in all foreign languages and literatures combined.

Noted author, scholar and *New Yorker* contributor Louis Menand, in

“After the Liberal Arts,” a talk he delivered at Williams in February, summed up the extent to which American higher education has changed in recent decades with two observations: 1) Half of all Americans now have some exposure to higher education at one time or another in the course of their lives; 2) For most of these people, the word “college” does not connote the liberal arts.

In the face of this movement toward greater earlier specialization in American higher education, an uncertain economy, a tougher job market for college graduates and the increasing costs of providing and pursuing an education in the liberal arts, some critics have charged that the broad general education provided by a liberal arts college is an anachronism—a luxury individuals and society no longer can afford.

What is the graduate of a liberal arts college like Williams (not to mention the parents who have paid for this education) to make of such charges? Given current economic realities, of what use is a liberal arts education in today's world—to the individual, to society, to prospective employers?

College: A Recent Phenomenon

A little more than a century ago in the United States, it was possible to become a doctor, lawyer or scientist without ever going to college. In the

The term “liberal arts” connotes a certain elevation above

utilitarian concerns. Yet liberal education is intensely useful.

— George E. Will, *Washington Post* columnist



1869-70 academic year, for example, half the students at Harvard Law School and nearly three-quarters of the students at Harvard Medical School did not have undergraduate degrees. In 1868, 19

of the 411 medical students at the University of Michigan and none of the 387 law students there held prior degrees of any kind. Dartmouth’s Chandler Scientific School, founded in 1851, admitted students as young as 14; by 1868, the school had 104 graduates, none of whom had been to college. Until 1860, Yale’s Sheffield Scientific School had no admission requirements at all.

This state of affairs continued until around the turn of the century, when educational reformer and Harvard President Charles William Eliot, appalled at what he perceived to be a lack of uniform standards in American higher education, succeeded in making an undergraduate degree a prerequisite for attending Harvard’s professional schools. Menand, in his talk at Williams, credited this act with reversing the course of liberal arts education.

“Eliot’s reform, once it had been widely adopted, saved the liberal arts,” Menand said. “Eliot saw that in an expanding nation, social and economic power was passing to people who,

regardless of birth, possessed technical expertise. If a liberal arts education remained an optional luxury for these people, the college would wither away; and, in fact, there was evidence in the 1860s, cited with alarm by educators, that the proportion of Americans attending college was in steep decline. By making college the gateway to the professions, Eliot not only linked the college to the rising fortunes of this new class, he enabled it to preserve its anti-utilitarian ethos in an increasingly secular and utilitarian age. ‘The practical spirit and the literary or scholastic spirit are both good, but they are incompatible,’ [Eliot] explained in his *Atlantic Monthly* article. ‘If commingled, they are both spoiled.’ Liberalization is the prerequisite for specialization. It has been the pattern in American education ever since.”

While a liberal arts education is still the gateway to certain professions, pursuit of a liberal arts degree is now far from the norm. This fact often surprises the parents and grandparents of current Williams students—those generations who came of age during the golden era of higher education between the end of World War II and the end of the Vietnam War. Between 1945 and 1975, three phenomena—the baby boom, a long period of domestic economic growth and government support of higher education

as part of the Cold War competition for scientific supremacy—increased the number of American undergraduates by nearly 500 percent. In the 1960s alone, college enrollments more than doubled. At the peak of this expansion, new community college campuses were opening in the United States at the rate of one per week. In this climate of growth and prosperity, the liberal arts flourished. The proportion of degrees awarded annually in the liberal arts rose for the first time in a century.

This brief flowering of the liberal arts, however, turned out to be an anomaly. In the 1970s a sharp decline in college-age youths and an economic recession brought higher education expansion to a halt. Faced with falling enrollments, many colleges began to offer more courses with a direct application to work. Since then, while still paying lip service to the liberal arts, American higher education has become more and more professionally oriented. Anthony P. Carnevale, a labor economist and vice president at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, N.J., observed in an Aug. 3, 2003, *New York Times* article, “Careers: The Undecided”: “The American higher education system has become the work force training system. It doesn’t like to see itself that way. It perceives itself as ... provid[ing] a liberal education. It doesn’t.”

What does the increasing prevalence of early specialization mean for undergraduate institutions like Williams that still do provide a liberal education? As it turns out, not much. While the percentage share of liberal arts enrollments in relation to the growing number of total student enrollments in institutions of higher learning has fallen, it is not at all clear that the actual number of students pursuing the liberal arts has declined.

The institutions that have been able to survive the financial pressures brought on by the leveling off of the college-age population and the increased costs of

higher education have been those whose faculties, facilities and resources are still attracting large numbers of students—in other words, the strongest, best-endowed, most selective private liberal arts colleges and universities in the country. In the hierarchy of American higher education, liberal arts institutions like Williams remain at the top.

Philosopher or Engineer?

If the shift toward greater earlier specialization in American higher education has had little impact on the selective liberal arts college, what are

Origin of the “Liberal Arts”

Although the business of trying to define what purpose higher education should serve dates at least to Plato and Aristotle, the term “liberal arts” derives from the Medieval Latin *artes liberales*—*artes* meaning “subjects of study,” and *liberales* meaning “proper to free persons.” In the medieval European university, “liberal arts” referred to the seven branches of learning considered suitable for freemen: grammar, logic and rhetoric (the trivium), leading to a Bachelor of Arts; and arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music (the quadrivium), leading to the Master of Arts. During the Renaissance, people began to use “liberal arts” more broadly to describe studies aimed at imparting a general rather than a vocational or professional education. Although the liberal arts curriculum has changed, this Renaissance usage holds today.

Liberal arts in modern colleges and universities include the study of literature, languages, philosophy, history, mathematics and the sciences (both the “hard” sciences and the social sciences).



*Note too that a faithful study of the liberal arts
humanizes character and permits it not to be cruel.*
— Ovid, *Ex Ponto*, II, ix, 47

the implications for the liberal arts graduate? Does this trend and a tougher job market mean that a liberal arts education is less useful than it used to be? What real-life skills, if any, does a liberal arts degree confer upon its graduates? Or, as Williams Professor of English Stephen Fix wrote in a response paper for a panel on the mission of liberal arts colleges at the ACLS conference at Williams last November, “If we, as liberal arts educators, aren’t offering our students specialized or professional training, what exactly are we offering them?”

The classic response to this question is that a liberal arts education develops general intellectual skills—the ability to think critically, communicate clearly and pose and test illuminating hypotheses—that can be applied to any situation. The liberal arts educator argues that the value of such education lies precisely in its emphasis on breadth over specialization, on moral ambitions over practical results, on the development of the whole person over the honing of specific abilities for a specific slot. Explains Fix, “The liberal arts claim is that the broadly educated person will be at least as capable—and maybe more

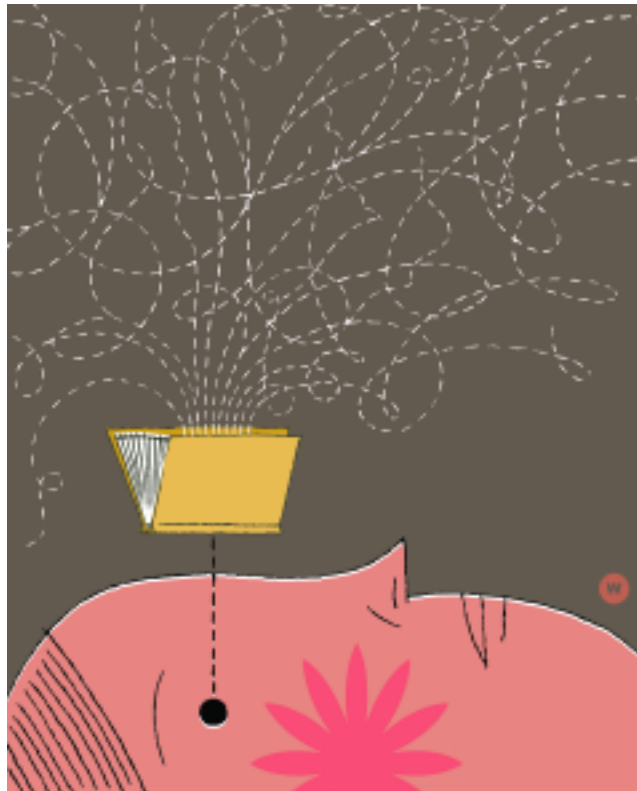
capable—of adapting later to the particular needs of the professions and of public life, than would a person more narrowly trained—at an early age—in specific subjects.”

From the point of view of the prospective employer, a liberal arts degree from a selective college still signals that you are among the most able of your generation and that you are more likely to be a person who has broad interests, good analytical skills, flexibility, the ability to communicate and the ability to learn. Such attributes

are essential to success in many professions and are often worth more to an employer than the possession of specific technical skills.

Professor Fix often tells this story to his students: “I once asked the personnel director for a major aerospace company what kind of student he is most eager to recruit. ‘I’ll always go for the philosophy major,’ the personnel director said. ‘They know nothing about aerospace, but they know everything about complexity—and that’s what I need.’”

In the end, of course, the usefulness of a liberal arts education is not just about getting a job. Professor Fix, in answer to his own question, “If we, as liberal arts educators, aren’t offering our students specialized or professional training, what exactly are we offering them?” gave this answer at the conference: “We’re offering them the past. The present and future too, of course: the latest economic theory, the cutting-edge technique in genetics and so forth. But above all, we are offering the past—the story of where human beings have been, what we have achieved, how we have failed. If anything is at the core of our mission, I’d say that’s it.” ■



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