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Flash

Increasing the Value of a Liberal Education

By William G. Bowen

There is a difference between learning skills and being educated, a former Princeton University president explains.



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The value of a liberal education, as traditionally understood, has never been as great as it is today. As we think about the rapidly changing world our students face, in which fewer and fewer people spend anything approaching a lifetime following one career trajectory, learning how to do mundane, repetitive tasks is not the way to go. What counts is being able to take a new problem, parse it out, and make headway in solving it -- all in the company of others.

Budgetary choices are always hard, especially when constraints are tight. But in choosing how to spend limited resources, it is important not to demean classic offerings that have stood the test of time. Here is an obverse proposition: Colleges should resist spending money on what many will regard as frills --

overly elaborate student centers and expensive playing fields, to cite just those two examples. Some thoughts as to where scarce dollars should (and should not) go:

A high priority should be placed on spending both money and time recruiting exceptional faculty leaders in key disciplines -- even if this means bruising the sensibilities of some current faculty by recruiting from outside at senior levels. Recruiting opportunities are more promising today than they have been in many years, given the fiscal and other problems facing the country and the public sector of higher education.

Many colleges are wisely investing in approaches designed to give their students a good sense of other cultures. This, too, makes excellent sense in the "globalized" world unfolding before us, especially if these programs emphasize real educational values and not just the pleasures of brief sojourns abroad.

Colleges should spend money helping students understand basic science and its ramifications -- but they should seek collaborations, with universities as well as other colleges, in order to avoid budget-breaking outlays on laboratories and equipment. Experimenting with "virtual" laboratories is wise.

In the digital world of today and tomorrow, students need to learn how to use technology, and how to learn online. But neither liberal arts colleges nor even most universities should invest in expensive interactive online platforms of their own. What's needed are centralized help, the expertise of research universities, and large up-front investments by foundations and/or government entities.

The money a college spends on financial aid is an investment and should be treated that way -- not merely as a discount used to win bidding wars. The case for enrolling a diverse student body is, if anything, more powerful than ever before, as we prepare students for a multi-faceted world in which most people don't look like them. At the same time, tempting as it may be to join the merit-aid wars, I think this tendency should be resisted, even if that means losing some excellent students. Finally, I remain steadfastly opposed to athletic scholarships, which I think are an embarrassment and an abomination, especially at a time when there are so many needy students.

I am skeptical of the decision by the wealthier institutions, such as Harvard and Princeton, to replacing all loans with grants for families above a modest-income threshold. Perhaps such grants should be offered to students who pursue vocations that pay little. But many other students in the higher-middle-income range will earn substantial returns on their educational investments, and there is no reason they should not repay some of the funds that were, in effect, "advanced" to them. A reasonable amount of educational debt is not a bad thing, and sustained efforts should be made to spread the costs of higher education across a wide population of direct beneficiaries.

Finally, in the face of much furor over allegedly high tuition charges and "affordability," I would not overreact. I believe that strong colleges and universities that emphasize the right kinds of learning and the right values will continue to attract sufficient numbers of outstanding students, regardless of modest variations in tuition. Many of these students will come from families that can pay, and that *should* pay -- even if that means, horror of horrors, sacrificing an occasional winter vacation in order to

make a lifetime investment on behalf of their children.

Implicit in what I have just said are my views on what students attending good liberal arts colleges should learn. Woodie Flowers, a highly regarded teacher at MIT (not a liberal arts college, to be sure, but a very good teaching institution), has encouraged us to distinguish "education" from "training." Flowers [suggests](#):

Learning a CAD program is training while learning to design requires education; learning spelling and grammar is training while learning to communicate requires education. In many cases, learning the parts is training while understanding and being creative about the whole requires education."

In considering what should be learned, I hope I may be allowed to offer an example from my own educational history (albeit at the graduate level). I took a beginning course in economic theory from William Baumol, a distinguished economist and one of my closest friends to this day. We used a text (*Value and Capital*) that is one of the most densely packed and worst-written books I have ever encountered. (I always suspected that Professor Baumol chose it in part for that reason.) We covered, if my memory serves me, about 35 pages in an entire semester. When we were studying a particularly inscrutable passage, Professor Baumol would say to the class, "Your assignment for next week is to take this passage and write me a three-page paper explaining, in clear English, what it means." I would go back to my room and struggle, and struggle, and struggle -- until I realized (if I were fortunate, and often in the middle of the night) "I've got it!" I remember vividly leaping out of bed and writing down the key insight, before I lost it. The course also included excruciating sessions at the blackboard in which students attempted to explain concepts to their classmates, under the relentless prodding of Professor Baumol, who insisted that we speak, as well as write, in clear sentences. (He would ask: "What is a demand curve? Please answer in a simple sentence that begins 'A demand curve is.....'"). Not everyone survived this regimen; sorting occurred.

Fortunately, I did survive, and that at-times-searing educational experience taught me lessons that I have never forgotten. One is that clear thinking has to precede clear writing, but that the former does not guarantee the latter. A second lesson was that it might take me quite a while to understand something -- longer than it took some of my classmates -- but that if I persevered, I could figure most things out. Thanks to Professor Baumol's friendly but demanding tutelage, I gained a quiet confidence that was (is) a gift of incredible value. An impersonal educational setting, or studying with a much less gifted teacher, would not have permitted that kind of learning.

I am certainly not saying, however, that all teaching, even at liberal arts colleges, has to have this one-on-one character (though much of it should). There is also a place for sophisticated online learning. My plea is for a "portfolio" approach to curricular development, one that provides a carefully calibrated mix of learning styles. This mix will vary by institutional type, and liberal arts colleges can and should put much more weight on seminars, discussion groups, and directed study than large institutions can hope to do. Nonetheless, even wealthy, elite colleges and universities should ask if failing to participate in some degree of online learning is to their advantage in the long run. Their students, along with others of their generation, will expect to use digital resources -- and to be trained in their use.

More generally, faculty should take account of recent research in fields such as cognitive science. Liberal arts colleges, in particular, should put a real premium on doing all that can be done to ensure that excellent teaching actually occurs, and is not reflected solely in the language of promotional materials, abstract pronouncements, and inspirational talks.

Grasping complexity -- embracing it -- is a critical capacity to be learned earlier rather than later in life. Liberal arts colleges should do all in their power to encourage students to avoid the polarized thinking that is, sad to say, becoming the standard of our day. Einstein was right in asserting that "everything should be made as simple as possible ... *but not more so!*" Dilemmas are real and should be acknowledged, not dismissed by sloganeering. In his famous book *Russian Thinkers*, Isaiah Berlin wrote of 19th century Russian writers who sought to balance a yearning for absolutes with the complex visions that they simply could not push from their minds. Berlin writes with special empathy about those "who see, and cannot help seeing, many sides of a case... The middle ground," he wrote, "is a notoriously exposed, dangerous, and ungrateful position." So it is. Nonetheless, students need to be both thoughtful enough and courageous enough to occupy it when that is where hard thought takes them.

There is also great value in recognizing what one does not know, and realizing when it is time "to punt." A great friend of mine, Ezra Zilkha, grew up in Baghdad and is fond of telling stories from the Arabian Nights. This is the story of the Black Horse. A prisoner who was about to be executed was having his last audience with the Sultan. He implored the Sultan: "If you will spare me for one year, I will teach your favorite black horse to talk." The Sultan agreed immediately with this request, and the prisoner was returned to his quarters. When his fellow prisoners heard what had happened, they mocked him: "How can you possibly teach a horse to talk? Absurd." He replied: "Wait a minute. Think. A year is a long time. In a year, I could die naturally, the Sultan could die, the horse could die, or, who knows, I might teach the black horse to talk." When telling this story, Mr. Zilkha always described himself as an "adaptive pessimist." The lesson of the story is, he said, "if you don't have an immediate answer, buy time. Time, if we use it, might make us adapt and maybe, who knows, find solutions." If speaking to a college or university audience, Mr. Zilkha would add, "It is the job of the college to learn to teach the black horse to talk."

I end now with another admonition, easier to state than to follow. Do not be reluctant to teach students to think about values as well as about how to achieve more mundane ends. In a 2010 Baccalaureate address titled "[We Are What We Choose](#)," Jeff Bezos, the hugely successful CEO of Amazon, recalled a trip he took with his grandparents when he was 10 years old. While riding in their Airstream trailer, this precocious 10-year-old laboriously calculated the damage to her health that his grandmother was doing by smoking. His conclusion was that, at two minutes per puff, she was taking nine years off her life. When he proudly told her of his finding, she burst into tears. His grandfather stopped the car and gently said to Jeff, "One day you'll understand that it's harder to be kind than clever."

Bezos went on to distinguish between gifts and choices. "Cleverness," he said, "is a gift. Kindness is a choice. Gifts are easy -- they're given, after all. Choices can be hard." He then challenged the graduating students to think carefully about their future range of choices: "Will you be clever at the expense of others, or will you be kind?"

There is, of course, an all-too-real limit to what colleges can do to shape the thinking of their students. But it is well to recognize that our colleges, at their best, can and should encourage their students to learn to choose wisely -- and to learn to be kind. Our colleges should do this at the same time that they seek to inculcate in their students an insatiable appetite to learn new things, in new ways, while always respecting evidence; and to inculcate in them, too, a capacity to occupy, when their best thinking takes them there, "the notoriously exposed, dangerous, and ungrateful middle ground." These avowedly subjective goals will always elude the quantifiers among us (and within us). Still, if they can be embraced, the future of liberal arts colleges will offer, without question, "more to hope than to fear."

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