



## TECHNOLOGY

# How Can Colleges Help Liberal-Arts Majors Enter the Job Market? Here's What You Told Us.

By Goldie Blumenstyk | DECEMBER 11, 2018

I'm Goldie Blumenstyk, a senior writer at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, covering innovation in and around academe. Subscribe here. Here's what I'm thinking about this week:

## Three takes on success for liberal-arts students.

I asked. You answered. In last week's newsletter, I wrote about two new reports that recommend tweaks in liberal-arts programs to make their graduates more employable from the get-go. I suspected there'd be no shortage of ideas about how to do that.

This week I share some of what I heard from you, including a college's new four-year program of professional development for its current and prospective liberal-arts majors; a professor's campaign to get his colleagues to use their syllabi to highlight the specific workplace skills that students will acquire in their courses; and a plan for inserting the intellectual underpinnings of the liberal arts directly into professional majors. Let's dive in.

- The Liberal Arts Bridge program, at Saint Mary's College of California, was created in part as a response to falling enrollments in undergraduate majors. Before 2012 the college had around 1,000 such majors, but by 2017 that number had fallen to 849; the low point was under 800. Meanwhile the number of majors in economics and business administration grew by 46 percent over roughly the same period.

LAB, as the program is known, was also a response to the realization that often "it's bumpy" for liberal-arts majors entering the professional world, says Sheila Hassell Hughes, dean of the School of Liberal Arts, even though many of them go on to do well economically.

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The program is just getting started but already includes work on a new minor in digital studies, a plan for expanding internship opportunities, an effort to document how the learning outcomes of various majors map to specific job skills, programs that connect first-year students with alumni working in fields like the arts and social justice, and an intentional effort to ensure that faculty members are aware of the array of career-services resources available to students.

It's that faculty connection that especially interests me. All too often at colleges, career advising isn't well connected to academics. And not all professors at Saint Mary's are on board with advising students on potential careers, Hughes acknowledges. "We have faculty, frankly, who think they're here to liberate their minds," she told me. But most are embracing it, "so students and faculty are beginning to talk about this from the first year on."

- The syllabus idea comes courtesy of Drew C. Appleby, a professor emeritus of psychology at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, who used it in his own courses for years and hopes to enlist other professors to do the same. It's pretty simple, actually. In addition to listing on his syllabus the skills that students should learn in the course, Appleby includes a section urging them "to become aware of the skills you develop in all your classes" and to share this information with career counselors and other advisers.

Appleby is also on an American Psychological Association committee that is documenting the set of job-related skills that psychology majors can develop if they take advantage of both curricular and extracurricular opportunities. His expertise is in showing the connections between the psychology curriculum and careers. But he argues that professors in any field can — and should — help their students see the career applicability of their liberal-arts programs. As he wrote to me, "Please consider me to be a VERY kindred spirit in the battle to help college students prepare themselves for success in the workforce."

- The idea to inject humanities and social sciences into all career-related majors was suggested by Robert E. Wright, a professor of political economy at Augustana University, in South Dakota. I realize that he's certainly not the first to suggest this idea. But I loved its simple logic. "Consider, for example, nursing," he wrote. "Why have students take Western Civ or the U.S. survey when they could take a History of Nursing that meets the same intellectual needs but also gives nursing students a deeper understanding of their chosen profession?"

Nursing is close to Wright's heart because his wife is a nurse, and his daughter is majoring in the discipline. He says both of them would have preferred humanities and social-science courses that had more relevance to their professional interests.

Yes, there's an element of "if you can't beat 'em ..." to this approach. Yet if more and more students are choosing professional majors (as each of the two reports noted), at the very time the underpinnings of the liberal arts are more important than ever in the work force (as the two reports also predicted they will be), then maybe this is another good way to go.

Wright said he'd been frustrated in his efforts to get the leaders in his original discipline, history, to embrace this idea. The approach won't do much to reverse the recently documented decline in history majors (ouch!), but it could at least help ensure that the insights gained by students in studying history remain a vital part of their education. Count Wright, too, among the kindred spirits whom Appleby invoked.

### **A timely streaming debut for a film about for-profit colleges.**

For-profit colleges are in the headlines again, and once again the news isn't good. Last week the Education Corporation of America abruptly shuttered dozens of its colleges in 21 states, leaving 15,000 to 20,000 students stranded without even a "teach-out" plan in place to help

them figure out where they might go next.

The students who attended the company's Virginia College, Brightwood College, Brightwood Career Institute, Ecotech Institute, and Golf Academy of America face many of the same challenges as the students featured in the 2017 documentary *Fail State*, which has been playing in venues around the country for the past year. The movie will go into broader release via the streaming service Starz on December 17.

As *Chronicle* readers may recall from this interview, the film's director, Alex Shebenow, didn't start out to make a film about for-profit colleges. Shebenow intended to do a film about student debt and its impact on his fellow millennials. But as he was getting into the project, Corinthian Colleges collapsed. He widened his focus to look more broadly at the ecosystem of state, federal, and Wall Street funding that helped to fuel the growth of the for-profit-college industry.

**Quote of the week.**

"White students are given a first-class education at selective public colleges while most black and Latino students are funneled into underfunded open-access public colleges with low graduation rates. Why? Misguided admissions practices that overrely on SAT/ACT scores and growing inequality in funding are the primary culprits ... It's time to end the overreliance on standardized-test scores."

*From a message from Anthony P. Carnevale, founder and director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.*

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