



TECHNOLOGY

One Way to Set Up Liberal-Arts Majors for Success: Focus on Skills

By Goldie Blumenstyk | DECEMBER 04, 2018

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

Majors, skills, and job-market success.

Fans of the liberal arts (count this history major among them) have been conditioned to cringe when the national discourse about the value of college ends up directing job-conscious students away from programs that actually interest them and toward ones that they think will be more practical.

Now two new reports, based on the labor-market experiences of millions of college graduates, show that the cringing may be legit. The reports — one from the company Burning Glass and the other from the Strada Institute for the Future of Work — highlight the ways that majors like philosophy and communications can imbue students with the very skills that today's employers are seeking. In many cases, these can also be a better choice of a major than business or some other occupational-seeming discipline.

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But the operative word here is “can.” Without some intentional tweaks, the reports argue, such liberal-arts departments won't necessarily equip students to avoid underemployment (the focus of the Burning Glass report), or help them navigate a work environment increasingly dominated by automation (the theme of the Strada report).

One of the things I like in the “Robot Ready” report, from Strada, is the way it takes an in-demand but vague job skill and then sort of reverse-engineers it to show the ways someone with such a skill might apply it in a variety of fields. The report shows, for example, that a person skilled in communications might eventually work as a grief counselor in behavioral health, as a social-media manager in marketing, or in management training in human resources.

Do colleges get that? Maybe. Should they? According to the report's authors, yes. Liberal-arts programs “must develop clearer pictures of the common careers of liberal-arts majors while developing a more precise language for the skills that they will need to develop and take

with them as they transition within the job market,” the report says. Colleges that leave students unaware of how to translate their skills, the report argues, will “fumble the handoff from college to career.”

I was also intrigued by the stats in the Burning Glass report, “Majors That Matter: Ensuring College Graduates Avoid Underemployment.” One set of data showed that some business majors were more likely to be underemployed than, say, psychology majors who happened to have budgeting or research skills.

Underlying this is a simple theme — that adding a hard skill or two to a liberal-arts major will take a student farther. As I’ve reported, Burning Glass has highlighted this theme before. The company’s chief executive, Matthew Sigelman, is still trying to get that message across.

“Majors matter. Skills matter more,” Sigelman told me. Regardless of the department, he says, “we have to pay a lot more attention to what we teach *in* departments.” That means ensuring not only that history majors learn at least a little about research methods, but also that students in occupationally focused majors, like leisure studies, don’t miss out on the intellectual exploration typically emphasized in the humanities.

“An unfortunate decision about a major doesn’t have to consign you to a lifetime of underemployment,” says Sigelman.

As much as I appreciate the messages of both reports — and especially Sigelman’s assessment that backers of the liberal arts need to be “spending less time on the back foot” defending the value of such programs — I also sense a disconnect. A lot of what these reports recommend, such as greater use of project-based learning in classroom settings (Strada) and a greater focus on internships (Burning Glass), are already common practice at many colleges. In fact, just last week, in *The Chronicle’s* Teaching newsletter, my colleague Dan Berrett described recent surveys of students and professors that show how often students are already exposed to real-world situations as part of their undergraduate experience.

OK, perhaps these practices aren’t yet as widespread as they should be. But worthy efforts deserve their due. And a reminder of the need for greater intentionality around liberal-arts majors probably doesn’t hurt.

Private colleges embrace sharing of online courses.

An announcement last week included two things I don’t hear often from small private colleges: online courses and course sharing. You may have seen the announcement or read my colleague Beth McMurtrie’s write-up about it in the same Teaching newsletter cited above.

The Council of Independent Colleges has formed a consortium that will make it easier for member institutions to cross-enroll students in online courses. The council calls this a “win-win” opportunity. I find it hard to disagree, assuming of course that the institutions are able to use this plan to avoid duplicating costly programs.

As I think back on comments in last week’s newsletter about the fate of local institutions that face the rising “mega-university,” I see some relevance. Maybe this consortium is one example of the ways smaller institutions can continue to assert their unique identities and

missions.

Federal scrutiny on the way.

As online education has grown, so, too, has the influence of companies like Academic Partnerships and 2U, which contract with colleges for technology and student-recruiting services to help colleges put courses and degree programs online. It's a trend I've written about in the context of "the embedded for-profit," and it continues to fascinate me as companies like Grand Canyon Education and Kaplan have converted themselves into online-program managers, or OPMs.

This influence has not gone unnoticed by the U.S. Department of Education's independent auditing arm. Last week the agency's Office of Inspector General announced that it would review the role of OPMs as part of its 2019 Annual Plan. It will look at the nature and extent of such services, the extent to which selected colleges disclose relationships with OPMs, and whether college contracts with OPMs "are consistent with the intent of the incentive compensation regulations," which prohibit colleges from paying recruiters on the basis of the number of students they enroll.

This was no doubt good news to the folks over at the Century Foundation; a report on OPMs it did in 2017 raised several of the same issues. In the executive suites of the OPM companies, I'll bet, it rang a bit more sourly.

Still, it's hard to predict what the Office of Inspector General will conclude, let alone what its impact will be. Its reports on what it considered lax accreditation standards, for example, prompted the department in the Obama administration to take a tougher line. Yet one of the office's more recent reports, criticizing the department's relationship with Western Governors University, remains unacted upon by the Trump administration.

Got a tip you'd like to share or a question you'd like me to answer? Let me know, at goldie@chronicle.com. If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to see past editions or sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

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