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The Liberal Arts under Attack

Scott Bernard Nelson '94
Linfield College

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THE LIBERAL ARTS UNDER ATTACK



Susie Kuhn '97 never took a Linfield course in business, math or finance. "I was as hard-core humanities as you could get," says Kuhn, a history major and political science minor who took enough English classes to consider herself an honorary major in that department, too. These days, Kuhn is a vice president at Converse and general manager of the Nike subsidiary's direct-to-consumer sales in China. Rather than viewing her liberal arts background as a liability in the business world, Kuhn credits the curiosity, critical thinking and communication skills it honed for driving her success.

"In old-school business, it was about good repetition," she said. "Now it's about being flexible in your critical thinking to manage how your business will look in the future. The ability to adapt and constantly assess the market is crucial. You have to be willing to shift and alter your business plan because everything around you is moving."

You want the skills and attributes, in other words, that a well-rounded liberal arts education is supposed to provide.

"You will miss opportunities," Kuhn says, "if you're not nimble."

That, however, is not a universal view in American culture. The economic recession that started in late 2007 and the slow recovery that followed it overlapped with demographic changes in the traditional college-age U.S. population to form a new reality for colleges and universities. Nowhere, perhaps, is that reality being felt more strongly than at private liberal arts colleges.

Reduced to its simplest terms, the skepticism underpinning the new reality runs something like this: Academia is frittering away time and money teaching philosophy and interpretative literature, when the country really needs more workers with technical degrees or specific applied skills. Taken a step further, the argument suggests students are borrowing money to earn degrees that don't contribute to the economy or lead to good jobs.

“We have often just asserted that we are liberal arts colleges, as if anyone knows what that means. I don’t think we can assume anything anymore. We’re not going to be given the space in the market to assume.” — JON MCGEE

Since November, the critique has become even sharper. Congress and statehouses in many parts of the country are arguing – loudly in some cases – for more occupational job training as an alternative to liberal arts educations.

“There has been an attack, a critique, on college education in general,” says Chris Kimball, president of 4,100-student California Lutheran University, just outside Los Angeles. “Within that, there has been a more focused critique on the liberal arts as a waste of time.”

Kimball, who is a member of the NCAA Division III Management Council and on the executive committee at the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities, calls that assessment “not only wrong-headed, but against the facts.” Still, he says liberal arts colleges have to confront the questions head on, and take tangible steps to address people’s concerns.

And, to the extent they can, reframe the discussion.

“We have often just asserted that we are liberal arts colleges, as if anyone knows what that means,” says Jon McGee, vice president of planning and public affairs at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, in Minnesota. “I don’t think we can assume anything anymore. We’re not going to be given the space in the market to assume.”

Linfield President Thomas L. Hellie, who is chair of the board of Council of Independent Colleges, says that national group is taking steps to get ahead of the discussion: “For the last two years, the CIC has addressed this issue in three important ways: first, by engaging independent research that demonstrates the professional success of liberal arts graduates; second, by initiating a national campaign to promote and defend the liberal arts; and third, by convening educational leaders to develop and share strategies to innovate while remaining true to our mission.”

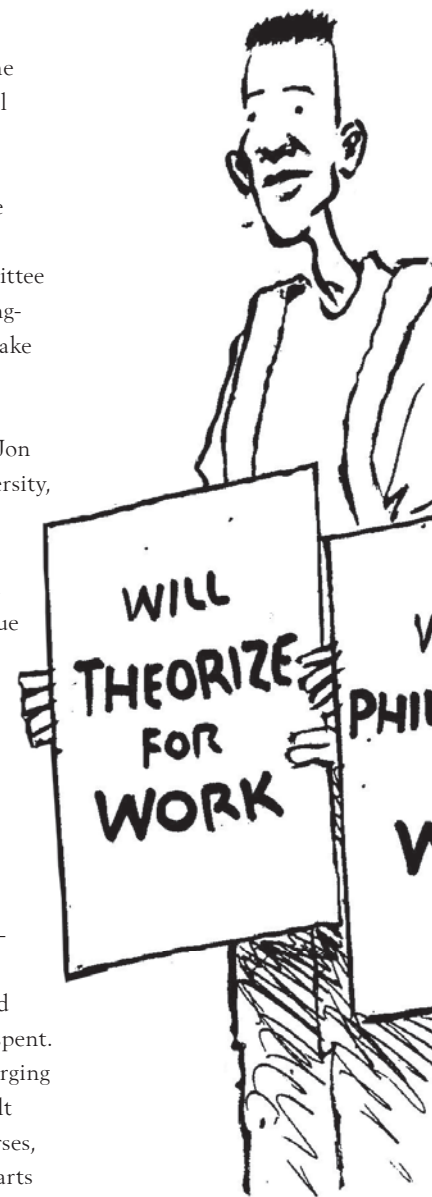
How did it come to this, with national campaigns to defend the liberal arts?

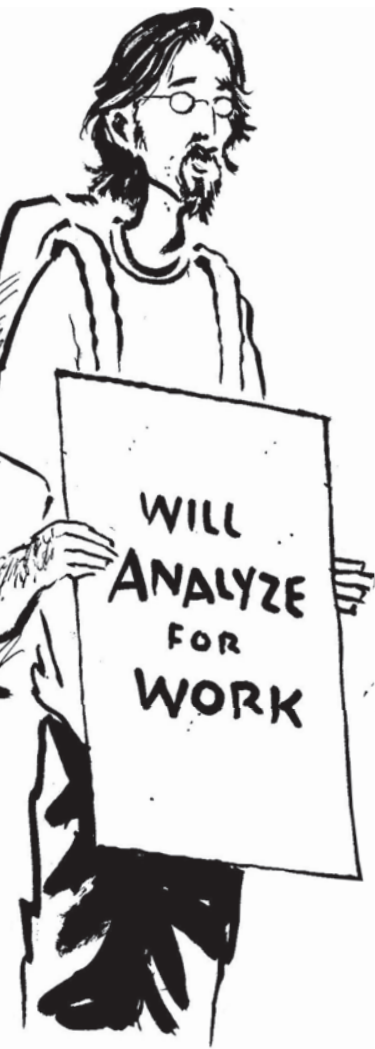
It’s too simple to say the situation developed just since the Great Recession. To some extent, it began changing in the late 1970s as the majority of U.S. high school graduates started going to college for the first time. As that became the new normal, the public’s view of a college education began to shift, as well.

What had been seen as optional, or as a necessary prerequisite only for white-collar careers, started to look an awful lot like a mandatory stepping-stone for the vast majority of Americans. That helped drive ever-increasing enrollments for the next three decades, but it also meant higher education began to be viewed more like a public good, similar to a utility. So government entities began regulating it like a public good, and politicians increasingly questioned the investment in higher education and how that investment was being spent.

The recession, and a new push for science, technology, engineering and math education, put those emerging trends into sharp relief in more recent years. Liberal arts colleges have long offered science and math, and felt like they were doing it one better by combining that education with humanities, arts and social science courses, also. But the growing emphasis on career preparation seemed to suggest to the American public that liberal arts colleges were no longer relevant in the same way.

McGee, of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s, says that shifting of cultural priorities has created a false choice in the minds of many students, parents, counselors and others. He refers to it as career craft over soul craft.





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– THOMAS L. HELLIE

“College has always had two important roles,” he says. “The first is intellectual, social, spiritual, the teaching of integrity and responsibility. The second is around the skills required for a successful professional life. The ascendance of the second, transactional narrative has come at the expense of the first, transformational one.”

It’s a false choice, McGee says, because it turns out soul craft is also good for the career.

The Brookings Institution recently used results from the American Community Survey to analyze lifetime earnings for graduates of 80 majors. In the first five years after graduation, it found, graduates with technical degrees almost universally out-earned their liberal arts classmates. The advantage diminished over time, however. Liberal arts graduates often attend graduate school and are attracted to relatively high-paying professions such as management, law and sales, so that the averages tended to converge over time. A number of salary surveys have noted that by late career, liberal arts majors often out-perform their peers who graduated with specific technical skills.

That’s at least in part, noted Kimball of Cal Lutheran, because a liberal arts education tends to develop the kind of traits that serve a person well over a career, including strong reading and writing skills and an appreciation for a wide range of disciplines. Liberal arts graduates learn how to learn and adapt. Over time, that’s often more valuable than technical skills that will have to be re-learned every few years.

Glen Giovannetti ’84, the Global Biotechnology Leader at EY (formerly Ernst & Young) and a Linfield trustee, says a narrow, skills-based education will increasingly be undercut by automation and, eventually, artificial intelligence. His firm is researching the future of the workforce.

“As more jobs – including white collar and service jobs – are automated, the ability to bring human judgment and interpersonal skills to a problem will be even more valuable,” he adds. “Someone who can provide relationship building and critical thinking and can write and speak well, skills that aren’t emphasized in a more technical education, that is a person who can do something a machine cannot do.”

Even in the business world of the present, Giovannetti says, “you may have equal credentials, but there is a real separation among people who can write and think critically.” Liberal arts graduates, in other words.

For colleges like Linfield, there’s an imperative to keep working hard on the transformational part of the mission. The college’s small class sizes, faculty-advising model, residential setting and tradition of hands-on research and learning are helpful toward that end, but a rigorous, mission-driven focus on priorities is required, too.

There’s also, though, a second imperative. Linfield, like other private liberal arts institutions, needs to be more aggressive in telling its story to the world. Rather than waiting for a narrative to be imposed from the outside, the college needs to be out telling people what it does and why it matters.

“In the coming months and years, we must redouble our efforts to educate the public on the value and the values of the liberal arts,” says Hellie. “This is not only vital to the future of Linfield, it’s important for the future of our country and our world.”

– Scott Bernard Nelson ’94

