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# Liberal arts education gaining recognition

Liberal arts colleges have long been a matter of discussion for multiple reasons. Characterized by their small size and concentration on educating students at the bachelor's level on non-professional subjects, some claim that they are relics of the past.

Many consider liberal arts colleges elite institutions that, with the exception of a few public ones, charge large amounts of money in tuition. However, given their endowments, scholarships they offer and other types of financial aid, students always pay less than the actual cost of receiving that education. That is what is called discount rates. Not surprisingly many have large endowments even above the billion-dollar mark given that they graduate people with means who end up in well-paying jobs.

Another characteristic of most liberal arts colleges is that they tend to be very selective in their admission processes. Therefore, they manage to have high retention and graduation rates. Another factor that keeps those rates high is the fact that liberal arts colleges with their small faculty-student ratios (usually around 12 students per professor) allow the faculty to develop closer relations with students, oftentimes even incorporating them in their own scholarly activities. Once they graduate, students already have a lot of hands-on experience, which furthers their ability to either pursue a graduate career at a top research university or get a good job.

Some of these institutions have been experimenting with having application processes different than most other colleges and universities. Some have gone as far as eliminating standardized tests while concentrating on other aspects of the candidates, such

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as personality, career goals and adaptability to the culture of the particular liberal arts college. There are liberal art colleges, such as Goucher College in Maryland, which have even implemented an application process in which students submit a short video about themselves. The admission staffs report that they can learn more about the prospective student through a video than by national tests.

Some have criticized liberal arts colleges for emphasizing education in areas that many consider "useless," such as history, literature, philosophy and the like. Also you see a lot of interdisciplinary programs developed in those institutions than combine natural sciences, humanities, visual and performing arts as well as social sciences. These kinds of programs allow many students to keep their options open. That is why the level of satisfaction with their college experience and in their post-graduation employment tends to be very high among students from these types of institutions.

Another characteristic of liberal arts colleges is that they tend to emphasize among their students (almost exclusively "traditional" ones, that is within the 18- to 22-year-old range) a lot of skills that are less practiced in large universities, including critical thinking, interpersonal skills, community relations, problem solving and teamwork. All these so-called "soft skills" are considered key to succeeding in any job.

Perhaps because of all these distinctive characteristics, the American liberal arts education model is being copied in other countries.

Among the ones imitating this model are several British universities, such as the universities of Winchester, Exeter and King's College London. These schools have developed in the last few years their own bachelor's programs in the liberal arts. Not only that, but American universities have started liberal arts programs abroad. New York University now operates a liberal arts campus in, of all places, Abu Dhabi, and Yale has done likewise in Singapore.

The interest in an American liberal arts education by people from other countries is not new. In fact, many of our liberal arts colleges have always prided themselves on the large proportion of international students they attract, which is another factor appreciated by American students since that diversity gives them the opportunity for more varied cultural experiences. In turn, another characteristic of these colleges is that they offer a great deal of study abroad programs wherein their students can develop proficiency not only in different cultures but languages as well.

Another characteristic of liberal arts colleges is that because they want to offer their traditional students with more experiences in terms of diversity, these institutions actively recruit minorities, even offering generous financial aid to students who, otherwise, would not be able to afford the tuition at those institutions.

One trend that we have been observing lately among employers is to seek more graduates from these colleges. Their reasoning is very simple. These students usually show a higher capacity to think

critically, show more creativity and are able to work collaboratively in their approaches to problems. These are not things you can just teach in a single course, but rather are the product of the environment provided by liberal arts colleges.

This does not mean that a liberal arts education is for everyone. There are students who feel more comfortable in larger comprehensive universities where they sense that they can go about their businesses unnoticed. Some also like the more diverse and competitive sports opportunities.

I think that despite unwarranted criticism, we should be emphasizing liberal arts approaches to education. Of course one of the problems is that the continuing budget cuts that public education is experiencing throughout this country makes things difficult since in order to cut costs public institutions are emphasizing more and more large classes and on-line education. Neither approach can offer all of the advantages of a liberal arts education.

At least the realities narrated above, together with the new interest by institutions of higher education abroad, should weaken the unfounded criticism toward liberal arts education and actually elevate our efforts to offer more in this country. After all, it is up to us to always offer our students the best we can so they not only increase their chances for getting a good and well-paying job, but also to provide them with a transformative experience aimed at making them great human beings.

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