

Readings for Essay #1

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*NONFICTION**Reviews & Products:** ACADEMICALLY Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (Book)
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ROKSA, Josipa**Abstract:** A review is presented of the books "Academically Adrift," by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa and "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower," by Professor X.**Full Text Word Count:** 5155**ISSN:** 0028792X**Accession Number:** 60972593**Database:** Academic Search Premier**Section:** THE CRITICS**A CRITIC AT LARGE****LIVE AND LEARN****Why we have college**

My first job as a professor was at an Ivy League university. The students were happy to be taught, and we, their teachers, were happy to be teaching them. Whatever portion of their time and energy was being eaten up by social commitments--which may have been huge, but about which I was ignorant--they seemed earnestly and unproblematically engaged with the academic experience. If I was naive about this, they were gracious enough not to disabuse me. None of us ever questioned the importance of what we were doing.

At a certain appointed hour, the university decided to make its way in the world without me, and we parted company. I was assured that there were no hard feelings. I was fortunate to get a position in a public university system, at a college with an overworked faculty, an army of part-time instructors, and sixteen thousand students. Many of these students were the first in their families to attend college, and any distractions they had were not social. Many of them worked, and some had complicated family responsibilities.

I didn't regard this as my business any more than I had the social lives of my Ivy League students. I assigned my new students the same readings I had assigned the old ones. I understood that the new students would not be as well prepared, but, out of faith or ego, I thought that I could tell them what they needed to know, and open up the texts for them. Soon after I started teaching there, someone raised his hand and asked, about a text I had assigned, "Why did we have to buy this book?"

I got the question in that form only once, but I heard it a number of times in the unmonetized form of "Why did we have to read this book?" I could see that this was not only a perfectly legitimate question; it was a very interesting question. The students were asking me to justify the return on investment in a college education. I just had never been called upon to think about this before. It wasn't part of my training. We took the value of the business we were in for granted.

I could have said, "You are reading these books because you're in college, and these are the kinds of books that people in college read." If you hold a certain theory of education, that answer is not as circular as it sounds. The theory goes like this: In any group of people, it's easy to determine who is the fastest or the strongest or even the best-looking. But picking out the most intelligent person is difficult, because intelligence involves many attributes that can't be captured in a one-time assessment, like an I.Q. test. There is no intellectual equivalent of the hundred-yard dash. An intelligent person is open-minded, an outside-the-box thinker, an effective communicator, is prudent, self-critical, consistent, and so on. These are not qualities readily subject to measurement.

Society needs a mechanism for sorting out its more intelligent members from its less intelligent ones, just as a track team needs a mechanism (such as a stopwatch) for sorting out the faster athletes from the slower ones. Society wants to identify intelligent people early on so that it can funnel them into careers that maximize their talents. It wants to get the most out of its human resources. College is a process that is sufficiently multifaceted and fine-grained to do this.

College is, essentially, a four-year intelligence test. Students have to demonstrate intellectual ability over time and across a range of subjects. If they're sloppy or inflexible or obnoxious--no matter how smart they might be in the I.Q. sense--those negatives will get picked up in their grades. As an added service, college also sorts people according to aptitude. It separates the math types from the poetry types. At the end of the process, graduates get a score, the G.P.A., that professional schools and employers can trust as a measure of intellectual capacity and productive potential. It's important, therefore, that everyone is taking more or less the same test.

I could have answered the question in a different way. I could have said, "You're reading these books because they teach you things about the world and yourself that, if you do not learn them in college, you are unlikely to learn anywhere else." This reflects a different theory of college, a theory that runs like this: In a society that encourages its members to pursue the career paths that promise the greatest personal or financial rewards, people will, given a choice, learn only what they need to know for success. They will have no incentive to acquire the knowledge and skills important for life as an informed citizen, or as a reflective and culturally literate human being. College exposes future citizens to material that enlightens and empowers them, whatever careers they end up choosing.

In performing this function, college also socializes. It takes people with disparate backgrounds and beliefs and brings them into line with mainstream norms of reason and taste. Independence of mind is tolerated in college, and even honored, but students have to master the accepted ways of doing things before they are permitted to deviate. Ideally, we want everyone to go to college, because college gets everyone on the same page. It's a way of producing a society of like-minded grownups.

If you like the first theory, then it doesn't matter which courses students take, or even what is taught in them, as long as they're rigorous enough for the sorting mechanism to do its work. All that matters is the grades. If you prefer the second theory, then you might consider grades a useful instrument of positive or negative reinforcement, but the only thing that matters is what students actually learn. There is stuff that every adult ought to know, and college is the best delivery system for getting that stuff into people's heads.

A lot of confusion is caused by the fact that since 1945 American higher education has been committed to both theories. The system is designed to be both meritocratic (Theory 1) and democratic (Theory 2). Professional schools and employers depend on colleges to sort out each cohort as it passes into the workforce, and elected officials talk about the importance of college for everyone. We want higher education to be available to all Americans, but we also want people to deserve the grades they receive.

It wasn't always like this. Before 1945, elite private colleges like Harvard and Yale were largely in the business of reproducing a privileged social class. Between 1906 and 1932, four hundred and five boys from Groton applied to Harvard. Four hundred and two were accepted. In 1932, Yale received thirteen hundred and thirty applications, and it admitted nine hundred and fifty-nine--an acceptance rate of seventy-two per cent. Almost a third of those who enrolled were sons of Yale graduates.

In 1948, through the exertions of people like James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard, the Educational Testing Service went into business, and standardized testing (the S.A.T. and the A.C.T.) soon became the virtually universal method for picking out the most intelligent students in the high-school population, regardless of their family background, and getting them into the higher-education system. Conant regarded higher education as a limited social resource, and he wanted to make more strait the gate. Testing insured that only people who deserved to go to college did. The fact that Daddy went no longer sufficed. In 1940, the acceptance rate at Harvard was eighty-five per cent. By 1970, it was twenty per cent. Last year, thirty-five thousand students applied to Harvard, and the acceptance rate was six per cent.

Almost all the elite colleges saw a jump in applications this year, partly because they now recruit much more aggressively internationally, and acceptance rates were correspondingly lower. Columbia, Yale, and Stanford admitted less than eight per cent of their applicants. This degree of selectivity is radical. To put it in some perspective: the acceptance rate at Cambridge is twenty-one per cent, and at Oxford eighteen per cent.

But, as private colleges became more selective, public colleges became more accommodating. Proportionally, the growth in higher education since 1945 has been overwhelmingly in the public sector. In 1950, there were about 1.14 million students in public colleges and universities and about the same number in private ones. Today, public colleges enroll almost fifteen million students, private colleges fewer than six million.

There is now a seat for virtually anyone with a high-school diploma who wants to attend college. The City University of New York (my old employer) has two hundred and twenty-eight thousand undergraduates--more than four times as many as the entire Ivy League. The big enchilada of public higher education, the State of California, has ten university campuses, twenty-three state-college campuses, a hundred and twelve community-college campuses, and more than 3.3 million students. Six per cent of the American population is currently enrolled in college or graduate school. In Great Britain and France, the figure is about three per cent.

If you are a Theory 1 person, you worry that, with so many Americans going to college, the bachelor's degree is losing its meaning, and soon it will no longer operate as a reliable marker of productive potential. Increasing public investment in higher education with the goal of college for everyone--in effect, taxpayer-subsidized social promotion--is thwarting the operation of the sorting mechanism. Education is about selection, not inclusion.

If you are friendly toward Theory 2, on the other hand, you worry that the competition for slots in top-tier colleges is warping educational priorities. You see academic tulip mania: students and their parents are overvaluing a commodity for which there are cheap and plentiful substitutes. The sticker price at Princeton or Stanford, including room and board, is upward of fifty thousand dollars a year. Public colleges are much less expensive--the average tuition is \$7,605--and there are also many less selective private colleges where you can get a good education, and a lot more faculty face time, without having to spend every minute of high school sucking up to your teachers and reformatting your résumé. Education is about personal and intellectual growth, not about winning some race to the top.

It would be nice to conclude that, despite these anxieties, and given the somewhat contradictory goals that have been set for it, the American higher-education system is doing what Americans want it to do. College is broadly accessible: sixty-eight per cent of high-school graduates now go on to college (in 1980, only forty-nine per cent did), and employers continue to reward the credential, which means that there is still some selection going on. In 2008, the average income for someone with an advanced degree (master's, professional, or doctoral) was \$83,144; for someone with a bachelor's degree, it was \$58,613; for someone with only a high-school education, it was \$31,283.

There is also increasing global demand for American-style higher education. Students all over the world want to come here, and some American universities, including N.Y.U. and Yale, are building campuses overseas. Higher education is widely regarded as the route to a better life. It is sometimes pointed out that Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg were college dropouts. It is unnecessary to point out that most of us are not Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg.

It's possible, though, that the higher education system only looks as if it's working. The process may be sorting, students may be getting access, and employers may be rewarding, but are people actually learning anything? Two recent books suggest that they are not. They suggest it pretty emphatically.

"Academically Adrift" (Chicago; \$25) was written by two sociologists, Richard Arum (N.Y.U.) and Josipa Roksa (University of Virginia). Almost a third of it, sixty-eight pages, is a methodological appendix, which should give the general reader a clue to what to expect. "Academically Adrift" is not a diatribe based on anecdote and personal history and supported by some convenient data, which is what books critical of American higher education often are. It's a social-scientific attempt to determine whether students are learning what colleges claim to be teaching them--specifically, "to think critically, reason analytically, solve problems, and communicate clearly."

Arum and Roksa consider Theory 1 to be "overly cynical." They believe that the job of the system is to teach people, not just to get them up the right educational ladders and down the right career chutes. They think that some people just aren't capable of learning much at the college level. But they think that people who do go to college ought to be able to show something for the time and expense.

The authors decided that, despite a lot of rhetoric about accountability in higher education, no one seemed eager to carry out an assessment, so they did their own. They used a test known as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or C.L.A. The test has three parts, though they use data from just one part, the "performance task." Students are, for example, assigned to advise "an employer about the desirability of purchasing a type of airplane that has recently crashed," and are shown documents, such as news articles, an F.A.A. accident report, charts, and so on, and asked to write memos. The memos are graded for "critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and writing."

The test was given to a group of more than two thousand freshmen in the fall of 2005, and again, to the same group, in the spring of 2007. Arum and Roksa say that forty-five per cent of the students showed no significant improvement, and they conclude that "American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students."

The study design raises a lot of questions, from the reasonableness of assessing learning growth after only three full semesters of college to the reliability of the C.L.A. itself. The obvious initial inference to make about a test that does not pick up a difference where you expect one is that it is not a very good test. And, even if the test does measure some skills accurately, the results say nothing about whether students have acquired any knowledge, or socially desirable attitudes, that they didn't have before they entered college.

There are other reasons for skepticism. It's generally thought (by their professors, anyway) that students make a developmental leap after sophomore year--although Arum and Roksa, in a follow-up study completed after their book was finished, determined that, after four years, thirty-six per cent of students still did not show significant improvement on the C.L.A. But what counts as significant in a statistical analysis is a function of where you set the bar. Alexander Astin, the dean of modern higher-education research, who is now an emeritus professor at U.C.L.A., published a sharp attack on Arum and Roksa's methodology in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and, in particular, on the statistical basis for the claim that forty-five per cent of college students do not improve.

Even leaving the C.L.A. results aside, though, "Academically Adrift" makes a case for concern. Arum and Roksa argue that many students today perceive college as fundamentally a social experience. Students spend less time studying than they used to, for example. In 1961, students reported studying for an average of twenty-five hours a week; the average is now twelve to thirteen hours. More than a third of the students in Arum and Roksa's study reported that they spent less than five hours a week studying. In a University of California survey, students reported spending thirteen hours a week on schoolwork and forty-three hours socializing and pursuing various forms of entertainment.

Few people are fully reliable reporters of time use. But if students are studying less it may be because the demands on them are fewer. Half the students in the study said that they had not taken a single course in the previous semester requiring more than twenty pages of writing. A third said that they had not taken a course requiring more than forty pages of reading a week. Arum and Roksa point out that professors have little incentive to make their courses more rigorous. Professors say that the only aspect of their teaching that matters professionally is student course evaluations, since these can figure in tenure and promotion decisions. It's in professors' interest, therefore, for their classes to be entertaining and their assignments not too onerous. They are not deluded: a study carried out back in the nineteen-nineties (by Alexander Astin, as it happens) found that faculty commitment to teaching is negatively correlated with compensation.

Still, Arum and Roksa believe that some things do make a difference. First of all, students who are better prepared academically for college not only do better when they get to college; they improve more markedly while they're there. And students who take courses requiring them to write more than twenty pages a semester and to read more than forty pages a week show greater improvement.

The most interesting finding is that students majoring in liberal-arts fields--sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities--do better on the C.L.A., and show greater improvement, than students majoring in non-liberal-arts fields such as business, education and social work, communications, engineering and computer science, and health. There are a number of explanations. Liberal-arts students are more likely to take courses with substantial amounts of reading and writing; they are more likely to attend selective colleges, and institutional selectivity correlates positively with learning; and they are better prepared academically for college, which makes them more likely to improve. The students who score the lowest and improve the least are the business majors.

Sixty per cent of American college students are not liberal-arts majors, though. The No. 1 major in America is, in fact, business. Twenty-two per cent of bachelor's degrees are awarded in that field. Ten per cent are awarded in education, seven per cent in the health professions. More than twice as many degrees are given out every year in parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies as in philosophy and religion. Since 1970, the more higher education has expanded, the more the liberal-arts sector has shrunk in proportion to the whole.

Neither Theory 1 nor Theory 2 really explains how the educational system works for these non-liberal-arts students. For them, college is basically a supplier of vocational preparation and a credentialing service. The theory that fits their situation--Theory 3--is that advanced economies demand specialized knowledge and skills, and, since high school is aimed at the general learner, college is where people can be taught what they need in order to enter a vocation. A college degree in a non-liberal field signifies competence in a specific line of work.

Theory 3 explains the growth of the non-liberal education sector. As work becomes more high-tech, employers demand more people with specialized training. It also explains the explosion in professional master's programs. There are now well over a hundred master's degrees available, in fields from Avian Medicine to Web Design and Homeland Security. Close to fourteen times as many master's degrees are given out every year as doctorates. When Barack Obama and Arne Duncan talk about how higher education is the key to the future of the American economy, this is the sector they have in mind. They are not talking about the liberal arts.

Still, students pursuing vocational degrees are almost always required to take some liberal-arts courses. Let's say that you want a bachelor's degree in Culinary Arts Management, with a Beverage Management major, from the University of Nevada Las Vegas. (Hmm. I might have taken a wrong turn in my education somewhere.) To get this degree, U.N.L.V. requires you to take two courses in English (Composition and World Literature), one course in philosophy, one course in either history or political science, courses in chemistry, mathematics, and economics, and two electives in the arts and humanities. If your professional goal is, let's say, running the beverage service at the Bellagio, how much effort are you going to put into that class on World Literature?

This is where Professor X enters the picture. Professor X is the *nom de guerre* of a man who has spent more than ten years working evenings (his day job is with the government) as an adjunct instructor at "Pembrook," a private four-year institution, and "Huron State," a community college that is evidently public. The academic motivation of the students at these schools is utilitarian. Most of them are trying to get jobs--as registered nurses or state troopers, for example--that require a college degree, and they want one thing and one thing only from Professor X: a passing grade.

Professor X published an article in *The Atlantic* a few years ago about his experiences. David Brooks mentioned the piece in his *Times* column, and it provoked a small digital storm. "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower" (Viking; \$25.95) is the book version. The author holds an M.F.A. in creative writing (he teaches composition and literature), and he writes in the style of mordant self-deprecation that is the approved M.F.A. mode for the memoir genre. He can be gratuitously snarky about his colleagues (though not about his students), but he's smart and he's generally good company. "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower" has the same kind of worm's-eye charm as Stephen Akey's "College" (1996), a story of undergraduate misadventures at Glassboro State College, though "College" is funnier.

Professor X has entwined his take on teaching with episodes in his personal life involving the purchase of a house he could not afford and subsequent marital tension. These parts of the book are too vague to be engaging. If you are going to go down the confessional path, you have to come across with the lurid details. We never find out where Professor X lives, what his wife does, what his kids are like, or much else about him. This is a writer who obviously enjoys the protection of a pseudonym. "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower" is one of those books about higher education that are based on anecdote and personal history and supported by some convenient data (sort of like this review, actually), but the story is worth hearing.

Professor X thinks that most of the students he teaches are not qualified to attend college. He also thinks that, as far as writing and literature are concerned, they are unteachable. But the system keeps pushing them through the human-capital processor. They attend either because the degree is a job requirement or because they've been seduced by the siren song "college for everyone." X considers the situation analogous to the real-estate bubble: Americans are being urged to invest in something they can't afford and don't need. Why should you have to pass a college-level literature class if you want to be a state trooper? To show that you can tough it out with Henry James?

As Professor X sees it, this is a case of over-selection.

It's also socially inefficient. The X-Man notes that half of all Americans who enter college never finish, that almost sixty per cent of students who enroll in two-year colleges need developmental (that is, remedial) courses, and that less than thirty per cent of faculty in American colleges are tenure-track. That last figure was supplied by the American Federation of Teachers, and it may be a little low, but it is undeniable that more than half the teaching in American colleges is done by contingent faculty (that is, adjuncts) like Professor X.

This does not mean, of course, that students would learn more if they were taught by tenured professors. Professor X is an adjunct, but he is also a dedicated teacher, and anyone reading his book will feel that his students respect this. He reprints a couple of course evaluations that sum up his situation in two nutshell:

Course was better than I thought. Before this I would of never voluntarily read a book. But now I almost have a desire to pick one up and read.

I really like [Professor X], this is why I took the course because I saw he was teaching it. He's kind of enthusiastic about things that probably aren't that exciting to most people, which helps make the three hours go by quicker.

Professor X blames this state of affairs on what he calls "postmodern modes of thought," and on the fact that there are more women teaching in college, which has had "a feminizing effect on the collective unconscious of faculty thought." He also takes some shots at the academic field of composition and rhetoric, which he regards as low on rigor and high on consciousness-raising. This all seems beside the point. Professor X's own pedagogy is old-fashioned and his grading is strict (he once failed nine students in a class of fifteen)--and he hasn't had much luck with his students, either.

When he is not taking on trends in modern thought, Professor X is shrewd about the reasons it's hard to teach underprepared students how to write. "I have come to think," he says, "that the two most crucial ingredients in the mysterious mix that makes a good writer may be (1) having read enough throughout a lifetime to have internalized the rhythms of the written word, and (2) refining the ability to mimic those rhythms." This makes sense. If you read a lot of sentences, then you start to think in sentences, and if you think in sentences, then you can write sentences, because you know what a sentence sounds like. Someone who has reached the age of eighteen or twenty and has never been a reader is not going to become a writer in fifteen weeks. On the other hand, it's not a bad thing for such a person to see what caring about "things that probably aren't that exciting to most people" looks like. A lot of teaching is modelling.

Professor X has published a follow-up essay, in *The Atlantic*, to promote the book. He's on a mini-crusade to stem the flood of high-school graduates into colleges that require them to master a liberal-arts curriculum. He believes that students who aren't ready for that kind of education should have the option of flat-out vocational training instead. They're never going to know how to read Henry James; they're never going to know how to write like Henry James. But why would they ever need to?

This is the tracking approach. You don't wait twenty years for the system to sort people out, and you don't waste resources on students who won't benefit from an academically advanced curriculum. You make a judgment much earlier, as early as middle school, and designate certain students to follow an academic track, which gives them a liberal education, and the rest to follow a professional or vocational track. This is the way it was done for most of the history of higher education in the West. It is still the way it's done in Britain, France, and Germany.

Until the twentieth century, that was the way it worked here, too. In the nineteenth century, a college degree was generally not required for admission to law school or medical school, and most law students and medical students did not bother to get one. Making college a prerequisite for professional school was possibly the most important reform ever made in American higher education. It raised the status of the professions, by making them harder to enter, and it saved the liberal-arts college from withering away. This is why liberal education is the elite type of college education: it's the gateway to the high-status professions. And this is what people in other parts of the world mean when they say they want American-style higher education. They want the liberal arts and sciences.

Assuming that these new books are right (not a fully warranted assumption), and that many students are increasingly disengaged from the academic part of the college experience, it may be because the system has become too big and too heterogeneous to work equally well for all who are in it. The system appears to be drawing in large numbers of people who have no firm career goals but failing to help them acquire focus. This is what Arum and Roksa believe, anyway. Students at very selective colleges are still super-motivated--their motivation is one of the reasons they are selected--and most professors, since we are the sort of people who want a little gold star for everything we do, still want to make a difference to their students. But when motivation is missing, when people come into the system without believing that what goes on in it really matters, it's hard to transform minds.

If there is a decline in motivation, it may mean that an exceptional phase in the history of American higher education is coming to an end. That phase began after the Second World War and lasted for fifty years. Large new populations kept entering the system. First, there were the veterans who attended on the G.I. Bill--2.2 million of them between 1944 and 1956. Then came the great expansion of the nineteen-sixties, when the baby boomers entered and enrollments doubled. Then came co-education, when virtually every all-male college, apart from the military academies, began accepting women. Finally, in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, there was a period of remarkable racial and ethnic diversification.

These students did not regard college as a finishing school or a ticket punch. There was much more at stake for them than there had been for the Groton grads of an earlier day. (How many hours do you think they put in doing homework?) College was a gate through which, once, only the favored could pass. Suddenly, the door was open: to vets; to children of Depression-era parents who could not afford college; to women, who had been excluded from many of the top schools; to nonwhites, who had been segregated or under-represented; to the children of people who came to the United States precisely so that their children could go to college. For these groups, college was central to the experience of making it--not only financially but socially and personally. They were finally getting a bite at the apple. College was supposed to be hard. Its difficulty was a token of its transformational powers.

This is why "Why did we have to buy this book?" was such a great question. The student who asked it was not complaining. He was trying to understand how the magic worked. I (a Theory 2 person) wonder whether students at that college are still asking it.

PHOTO (COLOR): More and more Americans are going to college, but how many of them are actually learning anything?

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By Louis Menand

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## College: What It Is, Was, And Should Be

The true college will ever have one goal—not  
to earn meat, but to know the end and aim  
of that life which meat nourishes.

—W.E.B. DuBois

a complete failure? Better, he thinks never to have been born, than to be born to no purpose. . . .<sup>24</sup>

With a few small changes in diction, these sentences could have been written today. Now, as then, most students have no clear conception of why or to what end they are in college. Some students have always been aimless, bored, or confused; others self-possessed, with their eyes on the prize. Most are somewhere in between, looking for something to care about.

What does all this mean for those (students, faculty, administrators, alumni, donors, legislators, trustees) who have something to say about what happens in America's colleges? Surely it means that every college has an obligation to make itself a place not just for networking and credentialing but for learning in the broad and deep meaning of that word. It means that all students deserve something more from college than semi-supervised fun or the services of an employment agency. Good colleges can still be transformative in the sense of the title of a best-selling book, *Colleges that Change Lives*, which has become a welcome alternative to the usual guides (*Barron's*, *Princeton Review*, *U.S. News & World Report*), which simply list colleges in a hierarchy of prestige that conforms almost exactly to the relative size of their endowments.

For all these reasons, it is particularly painful when those colleges at the top of the usual lists, the ones with the most resources and (as they like to claim) the most talent, fail to confront their obligations—when, as the former dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis, puts it, they “affect horror” that “students attend college in the hope of becoming financially successful, but . . . offer students neither a coherent view of the point of a college education nor any guidance on how they might discover for themselves some larger purpose in life.” Lewis's critique of “the

service-station conception” of college is more than a gripe at his home institution.<sup>25</sup> It is a call for every college to do what every true teacher, at least since Socrates, has asked every student to do: engage in some serious self-examination.

## 4

What, then, are today's prevailing answers to the question, what is college for? There are basically three. The most common answer is an economic one, though it is really two linked answers: first, that providing more people with a college education is good for the economic health of the nation; and, second, that going to college is good for the economic competitiveness of the individuals who constitute the nation.

Politicians tend to emphasize the first point, as when Richard Riley, secretary of education under President Clinton, said in a much-quoted comment that we must educate our workers for an increasingly unpredictable future: “We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist using technologies that haven't been invented in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet.” President Obama makes the same point more briefly: “countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow.”<sup>26</sup>

As for the second economic rationale—the competitiveness of individuals—it's clear that a college degree long ago supplanted the high school diploma as the minimum qualification for entry into the skilled labor market, and there is abundant evidence that people with a college degree earn more money over the course of their lives than people without one. One authority claims that those who hold a BA degree earn roughly 60 percent more, on average, over their lifetime than those who do not. Some estimates put the worth of a BA degree at about a million

dollars in incremental lifetime earnings. More conservative analysts, taking account of the cost of obtaining the degree, arrive at a more modest number, but there is little dispute that one reason to go to college is to increase one's earning power.<sup>27</sup>

For such economic reasons alone, it is alarming that the United States has been slipping relative to other developed nations as measured by the percentage of its younger population with at least some postsecondary education. There are differences of opinion about how much we have slipped, but there is general agreement that American leadership in higher education is in jeopardy and can no longer be taken for granted. For the first time in our history, we face the prospect that the coming generation of adult Americans will be less educated than their elders.<sup>28</sup>

Within this gloomy general picture are some especially disturbing particulars. For one thing, flat or declining college attainment rates (relative to other nations) apply disproportionately to minorities, who are a growing portion of the American population. And financial means has a shockingly large bearing on educational opportunity, which, according to one authority, looks like this in today's America: if you are the child of a family making more than \$90,000 per year, your odds of getting a BA by age twenty-four are roughly one in two; if your family's income is between \$60,000 and \$90,000, your odds are roughly one in four; if your parents make less than \$35,000, your odds are one in seventeen.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, among those who do get to college, high-achieving students from affluent families are four times more likely to attend a selective college than students from poor families with comparable grades and test scores.<sup>30</sup> And since prestigious colleges (prestige correlates almost exactly with selectivity) serve as funnels into leadership positions in business, law, and government, this means that our "best" colleges are doing more to sus-

tain than to retard the growth of inequality in our society. Yet colleges are still looked to as engines of social mobility in American life, and it would be shameful if they became, even more than they already are, a system for replicating inherited wealth.

Not surprisingly, as in any discussion of economic matters, one finds dissenters from the predominant view. Some on the right say that pouring more public investment into higher education, in the form of enhanced subsidies for individuals or institutions, is a bad idea. They say that the easy availability of government funds is one reason for inflation in the price of tuition. They argue against the goal of universal college education as a fond fantasy and, instead, for a sorting system such as one finds in European countries, where children are directed according to test results early in life toward the kind of schooling deemed suitable for them: vocational training for the low-scorers, who will be the semiskilled laborers and functionaries; advanced education for the high-scorers, who will be the diplomats and doctors, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

Others, on the left, question whether the aspiration to go to college really makes sense for "low-income students who can least afford to spend money and years" on such a risky venture, given their low graduation rates and high debt. Such skeptics point out, too, that most new jobs likely to be created over the next decade will probably not require a college degree. From this point of view, the "education gospel" seems a cruel distraction from "what really provides security to families and children: good jobs at fair wages, robust unions, affordable access to health care and transportation."<sup>32</sup>

One can be on either side of these questions, or somewhere in the middle, and still believe in the goal of achieving universal college education. Consider an analogy from another sphere of public debate: health care. One sometimes hears that eliminat-



ing smoking would save untold billions because of the immense cost of caring for patients who develop lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease, or diabetes—among the many diseases caused or exacerbated by smoking. It turns out, however, that reducing the incidence of disease by curtailing smoking (one of the major public-health successes of recent decades) may actually end up costing us more, since people who don't smoke live longer, and eventually require expensive therapies for chronic diseases and the inevitable infirmities of old age. Yet who does not think it a good thing when a person stops smoking and thereby improves his or her chances of living a longer and healthier life? In other words, measuring the benefit as a social cost or social gain does not quite get the point—or at least not the whole point. The best reason to end smoking is that people who don't smoke have a better chance to lead better lives.<sup>33</sup> The best reason to care about college—who goes, and what happens to them when they get there—is not what it does for society in economic terms but what it can do for individuals, in both calculable and incalculable ways.

## 5

The second argument for the importance of college is a political one, though one rarely hears it from politicians. This is the argument on behalf of democracy. “The basis of our government,” as Thomas Jefferson put the matter near the end of the eighteenth century, is “the opinion of the people.” And so if the new republic was to flourish and endure, it required, above all, an educated citizenry—a conviction in which Jefferson was joined by John Adams, who disagreed with him on just about everything else, but who concurred that “the whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expense of it.”<sup>34</sup>

This is more true than ever. All of us are bombarded every day with pleadings and persuasions, of which many are distortions and deceptions—advertisements, political appeals, punditry of all sorts—designed to capture our loyalty, money, or, more narrowly, our vote. Some say health-care reform will bankrupt the country, others that it is an overdue act of justice; some believe that abortion is the work of Satan, others think that to deny a woman the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy is a form of abuse; some assure us that charter schools are the salvation of a broken school system, others are equally sure that they violate the public trust; some regard nuclear energy as our best chance to break free from fossil fuels, others describe it, especially in the wake of the tsunami in Japan, as Armageddon waiting to happen. Any such list could be extended indefinitely with conflicting claims between which citizens must choose or somehow mediate, so it should be obvious that the best chance we have to maintain a functioning democracy is a citizenry that can tell the difference between demagoguery and responsible arguments.

About a hundred years ago, a professor of moral philosophy at Oxford, John Alexander Smith, got to the nub of the matter. “Gentleman,” he said to the incoming class (the students were all men in those days), “Nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be of the slightest possible use to you in after life—save only this—that if you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that, in my view, is the main, if not the sole, purpose of education.”<sup>35</sup> Americans tend to prefer a two-syllable synonym, bullshit, for the one-syllable Anglicism, rot—and so we might say that the most important thing one can acquire in college is a well-functioning bullshit meter.<sup>36</sup> It's a technology that will never become obsolete.

Putting it this way may sound flippant, but a serious point is at stake: education for democracy not only requires extending educational opportunity but also implies something about what kind of education democratic citizens need. A very good case for college in this sense has been made recently by former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman, who now teaches in a Great Books program for Yale undergraduates. In a book with the double-entendre title, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, Kronman argues for a course of study (at Yale it is voluntary; at my college, Columbia, it is compulsory) that introduces students to the constitutive ideas of Western culture. At Yale, relatively few students, about 10 percent of the entering class, are admitted to this program, which is called "Directed Studies." At Columbia, the "Core Curriculum" is required of all students, which has the advantage, since they are randomly assigned to sections (currently capped at twenty-two), of countering their tendency to associate mainly with classmates from the same socioeconomic or ethnic background, or in their own major or club or fraternity house. The Core also counters the provincialism of the faculty. Senior and junior professors, along with graduate student instructors, gather weekly to discuss the assigned texts—a rare opportunity for faculty from different fields, and at different stages of their careers, to consider substantive questions. And, not least among its benefits, it links all students in the college to one another through a body of common knowledge: once they have gone through the Core, no student is a complete stranger to any other.

Whether such a curriculum is an option or an obligation, its value is vividly evident in Kronman's enumeration of the ideas it raises for discussion and debate:

The ideals of individual freedom and toleration; of democratic government; of respect for the rights of minorities and for human rights generally; a reliance on markets as a mechanism for the organization of economic life and a recognition of the need for markets to be regulated by a supervenient political authority; a reliance, in the political realm, on the methods of bureaucratic administration, with its formal division of functions and legal separation of office from officeholder; an acceptance of the truths of modern science and the ubiquitous employment of its technological products: all these provide, in many parts of the world, the existing foundations of political, social, and economic life, and where they do not, they are viewed as aspirational goals toward which everyone has the strongest moral and material reasons to strive.<sup>37</sup>

Anyone who earns a BA from a reputable college ought to understand something about the genealogy of these ideas and practices, about the historical processes from which they have emerged, the tragic cost when societies fail to defend them, and about alternative ideas both within the Western tradition and outside it. That's a tall order for anyone to satisfy on his or her own—and one of the marks of an educated person is the recognition that it can never be adequately done and is therefore all the more worth doing.

## 6

Both of these cases for college—the argument for national and individual competitiveness, and the argument for inclusive democratic citizenship—are serious and compelling. But there is a third case, more rarely heard, perhaps because it is harder to articulate without sounding platitudinous and vague. I first heard

it stated in a plain and passionate way after I had spoken to an alumni group from the college in which I teach. I had been commending Columbia's core curriculum—which, in addition to two yearlong courses in literary and philosophical classics, also requires the study of art and music for one semester each. Recently, a new course called "Frontiers of Science," designed to ensure that students leave college with some basic understanding of contemporary scientific developments, has been added. The emphasis in my talk was on the Jeffersonian argument—education for citizenship. When I had finished, an elderly alumnus stood up and said more or less the following: "That's all very nice, professor, but you've missed the main point." With some trepidation, I asked him what that point might be. "Columbia," he said, "taught me how to enjoy life."

What he meant was that college had opened his senses as well as his mind to experiences that would otherwise be foreclosed for him. Not only his capacity to read demanding works of literature and to grasp fundamental political ideas, but also his alertness to color and form, melody and harmony, had been heightened and deepened—and now, in the late years of his life, he was grateful. Such an education is a hedge against utilitarian values. It has no room for dogma—only for debate about the meaning, or meanings, of truth. It slakes the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one's own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself. As the gentleman reminded me, it is among the invaluable experiences of the fulfilled life, and surely our colleges have an obligation to coax and prod students toward it.

If all that seems too pious or earnest, I think of a comparably personal comment I once heard my colleague Judith Shapiro, former provost of Bryn Mawr and then president of Barnard, make

to a group of young people about what they should expect from college: "You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life." What both Judith and the Columbia alum were talking about is sometimes called "liberal education"—a hazardous term today since it has nothing necessarily to do with liberal politics in the modern sense of the word. (Former Beloit College president Victor Ferrall suggests scrapping that troublesome adjective and replacing it with something bland like "broad, open, inclusive," or simply "general.")<sup>38</sup> The phrase *liberal education* derives from the classical tradition of *artes liberales*, which was reserved in Greece and Rome—where women were considered inferior and slavery was an accepted feature of civilized society—for "those free men or gentlemen possessed of the requisite leisure for study."<sup>39</sup> Conserved by medieval scholastics, renewed in the scholarly resurgence we call the Renaissance, and again in the Enlightenment, the tradition of liberal learning survived and thrived in Europe, but remained largely the possession of ruling elites.

Seen in this long view, the distinctive American contribution has been the attempt to democratize it, to deploy it on behalf of the cardinal American principle that all persons, regardless of origin, have the right to pursue happiness—and that "getting to know," in Matthew Arnold's much-quoted phrase, "the best which has been thought and said in the world" is helpful to that pursuit. This view of what it means to be educated is often caricatured as snobbish and narrow, beholden to the old and wary of the new; but in fact it is neither, as Arnold makes clear by the (seldom quoted) phrase with which he completes his point: "and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits."<sup>40</sup> In other words, knowledge of the past helps us to think critically about the present.

Arguably the most eloquent defense of liberal education remains that of Arnold's contemporary John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* (1852), where, in a definition that encompasses science as well as what is customarily called the "humanities," he describes liberal knowledge as "knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation."<sup>41</sup> In today's America, at every kind of institution—from underfunded community colleges to the wealthiest Ivies—this kind of education is at risk. Students are pressured and programmed, trained to live from task to task, relentlessly rehearsed and tested until winners are culled from the rest. They scarcely have time for what Newman calls contemplation, and too many colleges do too little to save them from the debilitating frenzy that makes liberal education marginal or merely ornamental—if it is offered at all.<sup>42</sup>

In this respect, notwithstanding the bigotries and prejudices of earlier generations, we might not be so quick to say that today's colleges mark an advance over those of the past. Consider a once-popular college novel written a hundred years ago, *Stover at Yale* (1912), in which the young Yalie declares, "I'm going to do the best thing a fellow can do at our age, I'm going to loaf."<sup>43</sup> Stover speaks from the immemorial past, and what he says is likely to sound to us today like a sneering boast from the idle rich. But there is a more dignified sense in which "loaf" is the colloquial equivalent of what Newman meant by contemplation, and has always been part of the promise of American life. "I loaf and invite my soul," says Walt Whitman in that great democratic poem *Song of Myself*, "I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass."

Surely, every American college ought to defend this waning possibility, whatever we call it. And an American college is only true to itself when it opens its doors to all—rich, middling, and poor—who have the capacity to embrace the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them. If we are serious about democracy, that means everyone.

- and Health Care Administration History and Health Research and Educational Trust, 2008), p. 6.
16. Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 227; Veyscy, *Emergence of the University*, p. 269.
  17. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 229.
  18. Roth, *Indignation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 49. “Tufts U. Bans Student Sex When Roommates Are Present,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 28, 2009. For an account of social life on the same campus, see “Lady Power,” by Nancy Bauer, chair of the Philosophy Department at Tufts: “Visit an American college campus on a Monday morning and you’ll find any number of amazingly ambitious and talented young women wielding their brain power, determined not to let anything—including a relationship with some needy, dependent man—get in their way. Come back on a party night, and you’ll find many of these same girls (they stopped calling themselves ‘women’ years ago) wielding their sexual power, dressed as provocatively as they dare, matching the guys drink for drink—and then hook-up for hook-up. . . . When they’re on their knees in front of a worked-up guy they just met at a party, they genuinely do feel powerful—sadistic, even. After all, though they don’t stand up and walk away, they in principle could. But the morning after, students routinely tell me, they are vulnerable to what I’ve come to call the ‘hook-up hangover.’ They’ll see the guy in the quad and cringe. Or they’ll find themselves wishing in vain for more—if not for a prince (or a vampire, maybe) to sweep them off their feet, at least for the guy actually to have programmed their number into his cell phone the night before. When the text doesn’t come, it’s off to the next party.” *Opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com*, June 20, 2010.
  19. Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (1918: repr. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 101, 99.
  20. Romano, “Will the Book Survive Generation Text?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 29, 2010; Kevin Kiley, “Long Reads,” *InsideHigherEd.com*, May 12, 2011; Clydesdale, “Wake up and Smell the New Epistemology,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January, 23,

- 2009; Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 19.
21. Bowen, preface to *Jefferson and Education*, ed. Jennings L. Wagoner Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 11–12.
  22. Richard Vedder, *Going Broke by Degree: Why College Costs Too Much* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2004), p. 52; Brody, quoted in Dale Keiger, “Measuring the Unmeasurable,” *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, November, 2008, p. 29.
  23. The incidence of cheating is hard to measure, but one authority on the subject, Donald McCabe of Rutgers University, finds that the number of students reporting “cut and paste” plagiarism using Internet sources quadrupled between 1999 and 2001. McCabe also describes a sharp rise over the last four decades in the number of students reporting “unpermitted collaboration” ([academicintegrity.org/cai\\_research.asp](http://academicintegrity.org/cai_research.asp)). Drawing on McCabe’s research, David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (New York: Harcourt, 2004), p. 217, estimates that serious cheating in college increased by 30 to 35 percent during the 1990s. As for drinking, many studies confirm the high incidence of binge drinking and substance abuse among college students. See, for example, “Wasting the Best and the Brightest: Substance Abuse at America’s Colleges and Universities,” report from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, March, 2007, available at [http://www.casacolumbia.org/templates/Publications\\_Reports.aspx#r11](http://www.casacolumbia.org/templates/Publications_Reports.aspx#r11), which estimates that roughly half of all full-time college students binge drink or abuse drugs at least once a month.
  24. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Wife and I* (New York, 1871), pp. 76–77.
  25. Harry Lewis, *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), p. 17. The phrase “service-station conception” comes from Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 6.
  26. Riley, quoted in Mildred Garcia, “A New Model of Liberal Learning for the 21st Century,” *DailyBreeze.com*, November 23, 2009. Garcia, a

- staunch defender of liberal education, is president of California State University at Dominguez Hills, a community college serving a large minority population. President Obama, quoted in *Politico*, February 24, 2009.
27. Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 18: “The more educated you are, the more likely you are to be in work, to stay in work, and to enjoy stable, long-term employment on a permanent contract.” There is also evidence that an associate’s degree from a two-year college, or completing even a year or two at a four-year college, has measurable economic value. Relative to their starting point, students who gain the most in economic terms seem to be those from poor families, or from families where no one has previously attended college, or from minority groups with lower college-going rates. See David Glenn, “Disadvantaged Students May Benefit Most from Attending College,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 1, 2010. Recent data are available in “The College Payoff: Education, Occupation, Lifetime Earnings,” <http://cew.georgetown.edu/collegepayoff/>, released on August 5, 2011, by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, in partnership with the Lumina Foundation.
28. See Clifford Adelman, *The Spaces Between Numbers: Getting International Data on Higher Education Straight* (Washington DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2009), and Jane V. Wellman, *Apples and Oranges in the Flat World: A Layperson’s Guide to International Comparisons of Postsecondary Education* (Washington DC: American Council on Education, 2007).
29. Brian K. Fitzgerald, “Missed Opportunities: Has College Opportunity Fallen Victim to Policy Drift?” *Change* 36, no. 4 (July–August 2004): 14. The estimates of chances to attend college are cited, with permission, from a talk given on March 5, 2010, by Eugene Tobin, former president of Hamilton College, currently program officer on higher education at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Tobin was drawing on Ross Douthat, “Does Meritocracy Work?” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2005, p. 120; and William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in Ameri-*

- can Higher Education* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 77–94.
30. Danette Gerald and Kati Haycock, “Engines of Inequality: Diminishing Equity in the Nation’s Premier Public Universities” (Washington DC: Education Trust, 2006).
31. See, for example, Charles Murray, “Are Too Many People Going to College?” *The American* (Journal of the American Enterprise Institute) 2, no. 5 (September–October 2008): 40–49.
32. Ann Larson, “Higher Education’s Big Lie,” *InsideHigherEd.com*, June 3, 2010; and Jacques Steinberg, “Plan B: Skip College,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2010.
33. Jan J. Barendregt et al., “The Health Care Costs of Smoking,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 337 (October 9, 1997): 1052–57.
34. In Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 480.
35. Smith made this statement at Oxford in 1914.
36. In a talk delivered at the National Convention for Teachers of English, published in Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1969), Postman credited the phrase “crap detector” to Ernest Hemingway as a term describing the one thing necessary for good writing.
37. Anthony Kronman, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 172–73.
38. Victor E. Ferrall Jr., *Liberal Arts on the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 8.
39. Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (1986), quoted in Francis Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 51.
40. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), ed. Samuel Lipman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 5.
41. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852), ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 81.

42. My impression is at odds with that of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), who estimate that today's college students, on average, spend only twelve hours per week studying (p. 69). Arum and Roksa suggest that students at highly selective colleges spend somewhat more—around fifteen hours. Other studies, such as that of Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, summarized in *Leisure College USA: The Decline in Student Study Time* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2010), conclude that study time has declined by roughly 50 percent over the half century since 1961. For a more nuanced view, see Alexander C. McCormick, "It's About Time: What to Make of Reported Declines in How Much College Students Study," *Liberal Education* 97, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 30–39 (published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities). McCormick calls attention to such factors as "efficiency gains due to new technologies" (by which he means word processing versus the longhand writing or mechanical typewriting of fifty years ago), as well as to the different meanings of "week" that students have in mind (some mean five days, others seven) in responding to survey questions about their study habits.
43. Owen Johnson, *Stover at Yale* (1912; Boston: Little, Brown, 1926), p. 234.

#### Chapter Two. Origins

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2. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 37.
3. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Life of Francis Higginson* (New York, 1891), pp. 11–12.
4. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, pp. 80–81.
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13. Horatio Greenough, *Form and Function: Remarks on Art, Design, and Architecture*, ed. Harold A. Small (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947), p. 74. The essays constituting this volume were originally published in 1853.
14. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 252. Daniel Coit Gilman, quoted in Veysey, *Emergence of the University*, p. 161.
15. Lewis, quoted by Bowen in his commencement address at Indiana University, May 6, 2011.
16. Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 51.
17. Quoted in James O. Freedman, *Liberal Education and the Public Interest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), p. 107.
18. Newman, *Idea of a University*, ed. Turner, p. 83.
19. Oakley, *Community of Learning*, pp. 50–51.
20. Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, no. 88 ("On Liberal and Vocational Studies"), 3 vols., trans. Richard M. Gummere (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917–1925), 2:353–55.
21. Emerson, journal entry, April 20, 1834, in *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 123.
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***IT TAKES MORE THAN A MAJOR:  
Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success***

**An Online Survey Among Employers Conducted On Behalf Of:  
The Association Of American Colleges And Universities  
By Hart Research Associates**

April 10, 2013

Hart Research Associates  
1724 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20009



# Hart Research Associates

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*From January 9 to 13, 2013, Hart Research Associates conducted an online survey among 318 employers whose organizations have at least 25 employees and report that 25% or more of their new hires hold either an associate degree from a two-year college or a Bachelor's degree from a four-year college. Respondents are executives at private sector and nonprofit organizations, including owners, CEOs, presidents, C-suite level executives, and vice presidents.*

*This report provides a detailed analysis of employers' priorities for the kinds of learning today's college students need to succeed in today's economy. It also reports on changes in educational and assessment practices that employers recommend.*

## Overview

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### **Innovation is a priority for employers today.**

- Nearly all employers surveyed (95%) say they give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that will enable them to contribute to innovation in the workplace.
- More than nine in ten agree that "innovation is essential" to their organization's continued success.

### **Employers recognize capacities that cut across majors as critical to a candidate's potential for career success, and they view these skills as more important than a student's choice of undergraduate major.**

- Nearly all those surveyed (93%) agree, "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major."
- More than nine in ten of those surveyed say it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning.
- More than three in four employers say they want colleges to place *more emphasis* on helping students develop five key learning outcomes, including: critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.
- Employers endorse several educational practices as potentially helpful in preparing college students for workplace success. These include practices that require students to a) conduct research and use evidence-based analysis; b) gain in-depth knowledge in the major and analytic, problem solving, and communication skills; and c) apply their learning in real-world settings.

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## **Employers recognize the importance of liberal education and the liberal arts.**

- The majority of employers agree that having both field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of skills and knowledge is most important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success. Few think that having field-specific knowledge and skills alone is what is most needed for individuals' career success.
- Eighty percent of employers agree that, regardless of their major, every college student should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences.
- When read a description of a 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal education<sup>1</sup>, a large majority of employers recognize its importance; 74% would recommend this kind of education to a young person they know as the best way to prepare for success in today's global economy.

## **Employers endorse a blended model of liberal and applied learning.**

- Across many areas tested, employers strongly endorse educational practices that involve students in active, effortful work—practices including collaborative problem-solving, internships, research, senior projects, and community engagements. Employers consistently rank outcomes and practices that involve application of skills over acquisition of discrete bodies of knowledge. They also strongly endorse practices that require students to demonstrate both acquisition of knowledge and its application.

## **Employers think that more college graduates have the skills and preparation needed for entry-level positions than for advancement.**

- A majority of employers (56%) express satisfaction with the job colleges and universities are doing to prepare graduates for success in the workplace, but more than two in five indicate room for improvement.
- Two in three employers (67%) believe most college graduates have the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in entry-level positions, but only 44% think they have what is required for advancement and promotion to higher levels.

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<sup>1</sup> *Definition of liberal education provided in this survey: "This approach to a college education provides both broad knowledge in a variety of areas of study and knowledge in a specific major or field of interest. It also helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings."*

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### **Employers express interest in e-portfolios and partnerships with colleges to ensure college graduates' successful transition to the workplace.**

- In addition to a resume or college transcript, more than four in five employers say an electronic portfolio would be useful to them in ensuring that job applicants have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their company or organization.
- Notable proportions of business and non-profit leaders say they are already partnering with two-year and four-year colleges to advance the success of college students after graduation, and those who are not express interest in doing so to provide more hands-on learning opportunities and to help college students successfully make the transition from college into the workplace.

## Key Findings

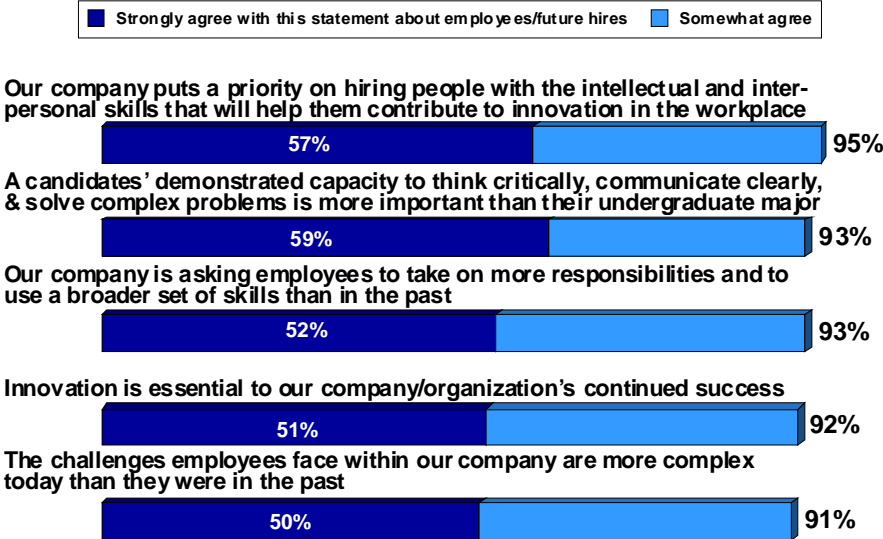
**1** Employers are highly focused on innovation as critical to the success of their companies and they report that the challenges their employees face today are more complex and require a broader skill set than in the past. Notably, employers indicate that they prioritize critical thinking, communication, and complex problem-solving skills over a job candidate’s major field of study when making hiring decisions.

Employers point out that both the expectations and challenges their employees face are greater today than in the past. Majorities say their company/organization is asking employees to take on greater responsibilities and to use a broader set of skills (93% total agree; 52% strongly agree) while facing challenges today that are more complex than in the past (91% total agree; 50% strongly agree).

Employers today are highly focused on innovation and are giving priority to hiring employees who can help in this advancement. Fully 92% agree that innovation is essential to their company’s continued success, including 51% who strongly agree. Additionally, 95% of employers agree (57% strongly) that their company “puts a priority on hiring people with the intellectual and interpersonal skills that will help them contribute to innovation in the workplace.”

To achieve success at their companies in today’s more complex environment, employers are in broad agreement that a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex programs is more important than his or her undergraduate field of study (93% total agree; 59% strongly agree).

### Consensus among employers is that innovation, critical thinking, and a broad skill set are important for taking on complex challenges in the workplace.



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**2** While they may prioritize key skills over a job candidate’s field of study, the majority of employers agree that having **BOTH field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of skills and knowledge is most important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success.** When asked whether having field-specific knowledge, a broad range of skills, or both is most important to achieving long-term career success, over half (55%) of employers say it is most important to have both. Among employers who chose just one category, more say having a broad range of skills and knowledge is important for career advancement (29%), than say having knowledge and skills that apply to a specific field or position is most important for college graduates’ long-term success (16%).

**A majority of employers agree that both specific knowledge and a broad range of skills are necessary for advancement and long-term career success.**

*Which is more important for recent college graduates who want to pursue advancement and long-term career success at your company?*



**3** Employers’ evaluation of two-year and four-year colleges and universities for the job they are doing preparing graduates to succeed and contribute to today’s economy suggests that many see room for improvement. They register a greater sense of confidence in college graduates having the skills and knowledge to succeed in entry-level positions than to advance or be promoted within their companies/organizations.

A 56% majority of employers think that higher education is doing an excellent (9%) or good job (47%) in preparing students for success in today’s economy, compared with 44% who say the system is doing a fair (40%) or poor job (4%). It is notable that few employers give post-secondary institutions marks of either excellent or poor; most fall somewhere in the middle.

When asked to think about college graduates from both two-year and four-year colleges and universities, two-thirds of employers say that all (14%) or most (53%) graduates who apply to positions within their company/organization have the skills

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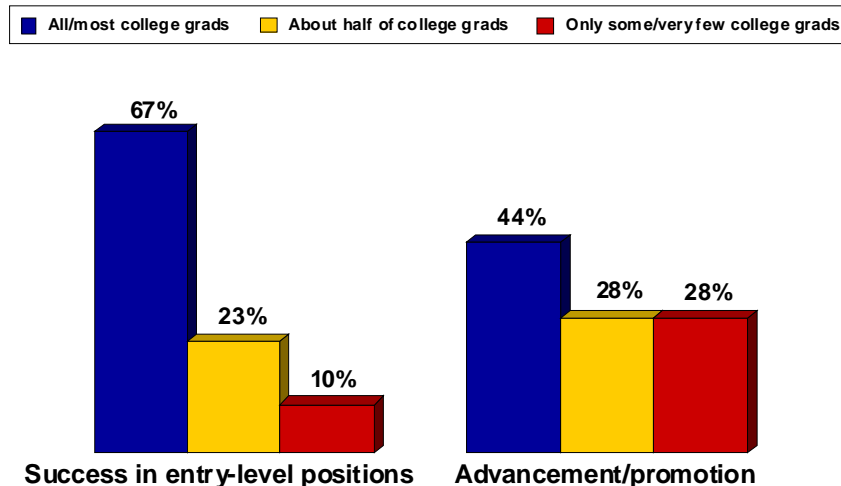
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to succeed in entry-level positions, compared with one in three (33%) who say about half or fewer are qualified for entry-level positions.

Thinking specifically about the skills and knowledge needed to advance or be promoted within their company, 44% of employers say that all (7%) or most (37%) graduates have what it takes to move beyond the entry-level. Fifty-six percent (56%) of employers say that about half or fewer applicants who apply to positions within their company have the skills and knowledge for advancement.

**Two in three employers believe most college graduates have the skills/knowledge to succeed in entry-level positions; they feel fewer graduates have what it takes to advance.**

*What proportion of applicants for positions at your company in the past few years possess the full set of skills and knowledge needed for this?*

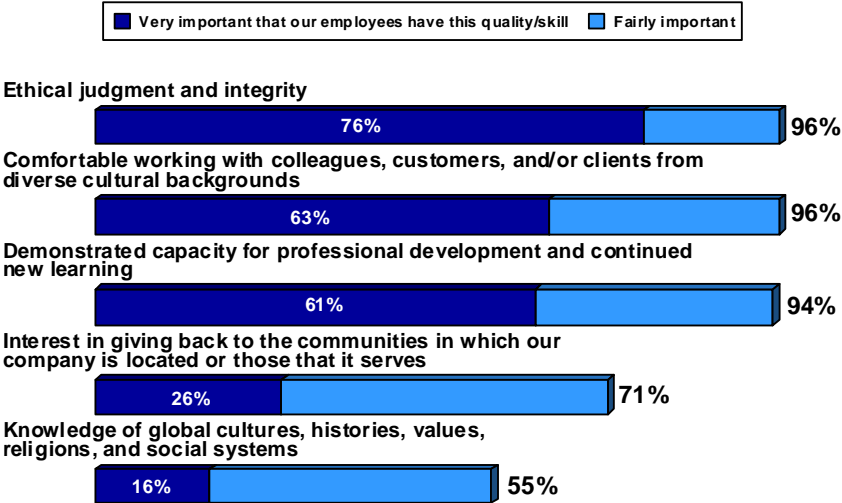


**4** Employers point to a variety of types of knowledge and skills as important considerations when hiring, placing the greatest priority on ethics, intercultural skills, and capacity for professional development. While majorities of employers say that all skill and knowledge areas tested are important, they differentiate between those that are very important to the hiring decisions of their company/organization.

Employers place the greatest degree of importance on the following areas:

- **Ethics:** “Demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity” (96% important, including 76% very important)
- **Intercultural Skills:** “Comfortable working with colleagues, customers, and/or clients from diverse cultural backgrounds” (96% important, including 63% very important)
- **Professional Development:** “Demonstrate the capacity for professional development and continued new learning” (94% important, including 61% very important)

## Employees value some skills and qualities more than others when hiring.



While deemed important by majorities of employers, they place a lesser degree of emphasis on the following areas when it comes to hiring:

- **Community Involvement:** “Show an interest in giving back to the communities in which our company or organization is located or those that it serves” (71% important, including 26% very important; 29% just somewhat/not important)
- **Global Knowledge:** “Know about global cultures, histories, values, religions, and social systems” (55% important, including 16% very important; 45% just somewhat/not important)

## 5 Majorities of employers believe two-year and four-year colleges and universities should place more emphasis on a variety of key learning outcomes to increase graduates’ success in today’s global economy. Few say less emphasis should be placed on any of the learning outcomes tested, but employers overall are most likely to believe there is a need to increase the focus on active skills such as critical thinking, complex problem-solving, communication, and applying knowledge to real-world settings.

Employers were asked whether colleges and universities should place more, less, or the same emphasis on 17 different learning outcomes in order to help students succeed in today’s global economy. Large majorities believe colleges and universities should place at least the same or greater emphasis on all of these learning outcomes. Of the 17 learning outcomes tested, majorities believe that colleges should place *more* emphasis on 11 of them, including seven for which more than seven in 10 employers say colleges should increase their focus.

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Employers say the most emphasis should be placed on the following areas:

- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning (82% more emphasis, 7% less)
- Complex problem solving and analysis (81% more emphasis, 6% less)
- Written and oral communication (80% more emphasis, 8% less)
- The application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings (78% more emphasis, 6% less)
- The location, organization, and evaluation of information from multiple sources (72% more emphasis, 9% less)
- Innovation and creativity (71% more emphasis, 9% less)

### Employers Say Colleges Should Place Varying Degrees Of Emphasis On Selected Learning Outcomes

|                                                                                      | More % | Less % | Same % |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills                                    | 82     | 7      | 11     |
| The ability to analyze and solve complex problems                                    | 81     | 6      | 13     |
| The ability to effectively communicate orally                                        | 80     | 8      | 12     |
| The ability to effectively communicate in writing                                    | 80     | 8      | 12     |
| The ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings                     | 78     | 6      | 16     |
| The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources      | 72     | 9      | 19     |
| The ability to innovate and be creative                                              | 71     | 9      | 20     |
| Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings | 67     | 11     | 22     |
| The ability to connect choices and actions to ethical decisions                      | 64     | 9      | 27     |
| Knowledge about science and technology                                               | 56     | 9      | 35     |
| The ability to work with numbers and understand statistics                           | 55     | 10     | 35     |
| Proficiency in a language other than English                                         | 43     | 18     | 39     |
| Knowledge about global issues and developments and their implications for the future | 40     | 15     | 45     |
| Knowledge about the role of the United States in the world                           | 35     | 18     | 47     |
| Knowledge about cultural diversity in America and other countries                    | 33     | 22     | 45     |
| Civic knowledge, civic participation, and community engagement                       | 30     | 18     | 52     |
| Knowledge about democratic institutions and values                                   | 27     | 20     | 53     |

Employers see less need for colleges to heighten their focus on ensuring graduates demonstrate 1) proficiency in a foreign language, 2) knowledge about global issues/developments, 3) knowledge about cultural diversity/the role of the United States in the world, 4) civic knowledge/participation, and 5) an understanding of democratic institutions and values. Rather, majorities of employers would like higher education institutions to maintain their current level of emphasis in these areas.

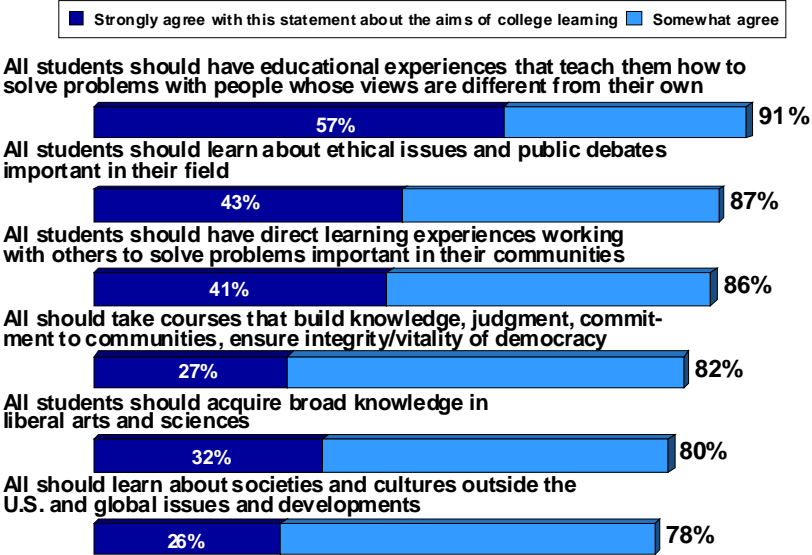


**6** There is broad agreement among employers that *all* students, regardless of their chosen field of study, should have educational experiences that teach them about building civic capacity, broad knowledge about the liberal arts and sciences, and cultures outside the United States.

Large majorities of employers agree with each of six tested goals for college. Top among them, 91% of employers agree that all students should have experiences in college that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own, including 57% who strongly agree with this statement. Other aims of college learning that earn high levels of agreement include teaching students about ethical issues and public debates important to their field (87% total agree; 43% strongly) and ensuring college students gain experience working with others to solve important problems in their community (86% total agree; 41% strongly).

While employers may not be clamoring for colleges to *increase* their emphasis on civic learning or in teaching about global issues, they widely agree that *all* students should receive civic education and learn about cultures outside the U.S. Fully 82% agree (27% strongly) that every student should take classes that build civic capacity, and learning about societies and cultures outside the United States (78% total agree; 26% strongly) is widely valued for all students. Additionally, four in five agree (32% strongly) that all students should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences, regardless of a student’s chosen field of study.

**Employers are in agreement with a broad set of college learning goals.**



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The variation in the proportion of employers who say they *strongly* agree with these goals for college do reveal some distinctions, however, suggesting the deepest commitment to the top goal of all students learning how to solve problems with people with different views.

### **7 Among the ten existing and emerging educational practices tested, employers believe several have the potential to improve the education of today's college students and prepare graduates to succeed in the workplace.**

Employers express the greatest confidence in the following practices to help students succeed beyond graduation. Large majorities believe that colleges that set expectations for students to achieve these learning outcomes will do the most to prepare them for success:

- Develop research questions in their field and evidence-based analyses (83% will help a lot/fair amount)
- Complete a project prior to graduation that demonstrates their acquired knowledge and skills (79% will help a lot/fair amount)
- Complete an internship or community-based field project (78% will help a lot/fair amount)
- Develop the skills to conduct research collaboratively (74% will help a lot/fair amount)
- Acquire hands-on or direct experience with the methods of science (69% will help a lot/fair amount)
- Work through ethical issues and debates to form their own judgments about the issues at stake (66% will help a lot/fair amount)

#### **Degree To Which Various New Approaches To Learning Have Potential To Help Students Succeed**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <u>Will Help<br/>A lot/Fair<br/>Amount</u><br>% |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Expecting students to develop the skills to research questions in their field and develop evidence-based analyses                                                                                               | 83                                              |
| Expecting students to complete a significant project before graduation that demonstrates their depth of knowledge in their major AND their acquisition of analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills | 79                                              |
| Expecting students to complete an internship or community-based field project to connect classroom learning with real-world experiences                                                                         | 78                                              |
| Expecting students to develop the skills to conduct research collaboratively with their peers                                                                                                                   | 74                                              |
| Expecting students to acquire hands-on or direct experience with the methods of science so they will understand how scientific knowledge is developed                                                           | 69                                              |
| Expecting students to work through ethical issues and debates to form their own judgments about the issues at stake                                                                                             | 66                                              |

## Degree To Which Various New Approaches To Learning Have Potential To Help Students Succeed (Continued)

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Will Help<br>A lot/Fair<br><u>Amount</u><br>% |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Using new approaches that deemphasize lectures in the classroom and instead have students listen to lectures online and devote classroom time to dialogue, debate, and problem solving in groups or alone, and with guidance from the instructor | 59                                            |
| Expecting students to learn about the points of view of people in societies other than those of Western Europe or North America                                                                                                                  | 47                                            |
| Expecting students to learn about cultural and ethnic diversity in the context of the United States                                                                                                                                              | 44                                            |
| Expecting students to explore challenges facing society, such as environmental sustainability, religious tolerance, or human rights                                                                                                              | 42                                            |

A flipped classroom approach to learning also has broad appeal among employers. Three in five (59%) say an approach that deemphasizes lectures and devotes classroom time to dialogue, debate, and problem solving in groups or alone with the guidance of the instructor will help prepare students a lot or a fair amount for success beyond graduation.

Employers anticipate that other emerging educational practices would have a more muted impact in preparing students for success: expecting students to learn about points of view of people in societies outside of North America and Western Europe (47% a lot or fair amount), expecting them to learn about cultural and ethnic diversity in the context of the United States (44% a lot or fair amount), and expecting them to explore various challenges facing society (42% a lot or fair amount).

**8** **In addition to a résumé and college transcript, a large majority of employers say an electronic portfolio demonstrating a student’s work and key skill and knowledge areas would be useful in evaluating potential candidates for hire.** Four in five (83%) employers say an electronic portfolio of student accomplishments would be very (43%) or fairly (40%) useful to them in ensuring applicants have the skills and knowledge to succeed in their company or organization. Just 17% say the portfolio would be only somewhat useful or less.

**9** **A notable proportion of employers say their company or organization currently partners with a nearby college or university to offer internships to college students. Smaller proportions of employers report partnering with higher education institutions in other ways tested, but express interest in doing so in the future.**

When it comes to partnering with two-year and four-year colleges to advance the success of college students after graduation, employers are most likely to say their company or organization offers internships and/or apprenticeships to students at nearby institutions (47% currently do this). An additional 42% of employers say

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they have a high (21%) or medium (21%) level of interest in developing this type of program in the future. Only 11% say they would have a low level of interest.

Other collaborative efforts between colleges and companies/organizations are less common among employers today; nevertheless, majorities of employers express interest in these initiatives:

- Working closely with the career services office of a nearby college to help students successfully make the transition from college into the workplace (26% currently do this; 51% do *not* currently do this, but would have a high/medium level of interest in doing so in the future).
- Partnering with colleges in the area to better align the curriculum and learning outcomes they teach to the skills and knowledge our company looks for in new hires (22% currently do this; 54% do *not* currently do this, but would have a high/medium level of interest in doing so in the future).
- Sponsoring a program at a nearby college to get students involved in more “real-world” or hands-on learning while they are still in college (18% currently do this; 53% do *not* currently do this, but would have a high/medium level of interest in doing so in the future).

**10** Across several areas tested, employers strongly endorse educational practices that involve students in active, effortful work—practices that involve such things as collaborative problem-solving, research, senior projects, community engagement, and internships.

Questions that ask employers about specific areas of “knowledge” with no reference to active learning or skill development receive lower scores than questions that address cross-cutting skills, or questions that address a combination of knowledge and skills. Even where employers considered particular kinds of knowledge very important or somewhat important (e.g. global knowledge, science and technology), they still place a higher priority on forms of learning that emphasize students’ active development and application of intellectual and practical skills.

- More than nine in ten of those surveyed say it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning.
- More than 75% of employers say they want colleges to place *more emphasis* on helping students develop five key learning outcomes, including: critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.
- In contrast, no more than 40% of employers indicate a desire for colleges to place more emphasis on helping students gain knowledge in areas including global issues, the role of the United States in the world, cultural diversity in America, civics, or democratic institutions and values. (Majorities would rather that colleges maintain their current level of emphasis on these knowledge areas.) The only knowledge area in which more than half of employers would like to see colleges place more emphasis is on knowledge

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about science and technology (56% more emphasis), but it is still a lower priority than active, effortful learning and skills development.

- Employers endorse several educational practices as potentially helpful in preparing college students for workplace success. These include practices that require students to a) conduct research and use evidence-based analysis; b) gain in-depth knowledge in the major and analytic, problem solving, and communication skills; and c) apply their learning in real-world settings.

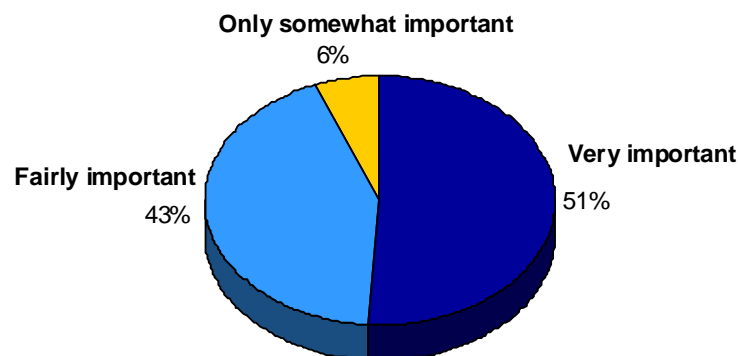
**11** **Employers recognize the importance of today’s colleges and universities providing a liberal education—one that focuses on both broad knowledge in a variety of areas and knowledge in a specific field of interest, as well as intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study and a sense of social responsibility. When given a description of the component elements of a liberal education, nearly all consider this kind of learning very or fairly important for colleges to provide, and the large majority would recommend this approach to young people they know**

- When presented with a description of liberal education (see full description in corresponding graph), fully 94% of employers say it is important for today’s colleges to provide this type of education, including half (51%) who say it is very important to do so.

## Employers endorse the concept of a liberal education.

### *How important is it for today’s colleges to provide this type of education?*

“This approach to a college education provides both broad knowledge in a variety of areas of study and knowledge in a specific major or field of interest. It also helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.”



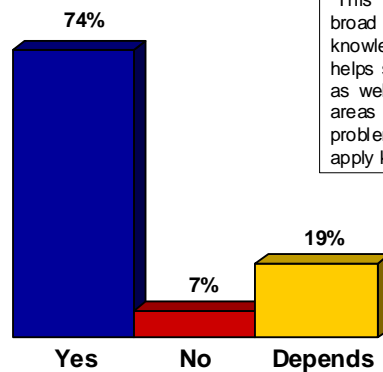
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- Moreover, nearly three in four employers (74%) say they would recommend that their own child or a young person they know pursue this type of education in order to achieve professional and career success in today's global economy. Just 7% would not recommend this approach, and 19% say it depends. When forced to choose one way or the other (and without the "depends" option), fully 89% would recommend the described approach to a young person seeking advice on the type of college education they should pursue and only 11% would not.

### Three in four would recommend the concept of a liberal education to their own child or a young person they know.

*If you were advising your child or a young person you know about the type of college education they should seek to achieve in order to achieve professional and career success in today's global economy, would you recommend they pursue an education like the one described below?*



"This approach to a college education provides both broad knowledge in a variety of areas of study and knowledge in a specific major or field of interest. It also helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings."