

The Next Pivot for Successful Liberal Arts Colleges: The 2020s

By **Nicholas Ladany, PhD** - January 2, 2018



Since the nineteenth century, pundits have predicted, at best, an ambivalence toward the future of liberal education (Koch 1977) and, at worst, the doom of liberal education and liberal arts colleges in the United States (Jones, 2016). Although each decade has brought with it new predictions for the downfall of liberal arts colleges, the extinction has yet to occur. At each step of the way, the evolution of liberal education has outpaced the gloomy predictions.

Why have liberal arts colleges proven to be so resilient to the changing landscape of higher education? To be sure, what it means to receive a liberal education has evolved in many ways from around the time of the Yale report of 1828 (Committee of the Corporation, and the Academical Faculty, 1828) into what it is today. In fact, it could be argued that liberal arts colleges, with their liberal education core and foundational intents and outcomes (e.g., critical thinking, writing, and speaking; inclusive excellence; interpersonal and knowledge-based adeptness and flexibility) serve as immunity for graduates to minor and even major fluctuations in the post-graduation market (e.g., moving from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy at the end of the last century). It is because they offer necessary education to students for lifelong skills that they are so appealing and resilient.

Another reason for the inaccurate predictions is that a liberal education has served as a foil for a narrow view of the outcomes of an undergraduate education. For example, six-month employment has been used as a type of outcome without taking into consideration job performance, long-term leadership potential, and job satisfaction. Getting a job six months after graduation is a very short-term outcome for a four-year education. In addition, ability to work with others, empathy, critical thinking, and the like are typically what employers most desire and are directly linked to the outcomes of a liberal education. This disconnect becomes even more pronounced when one considers that 47 percent of today's jobs will become moderately to significantly redefined in the next two decades due to computerization (Frey & Osborne, 2013). The jobs least at risk require employees who are adept at complex human interactions, ambiguity, flexibility, critical thinking, and systems thinking. Teaching these and related skills are what liberal arts colleges do best.

At the same time, liberal arts colleges cannot necessarily rest on past laurels and presumed resiliency. In fact, the most successful ones have understood that they need to evolve continuously, which raises the question: How can liberal arts colleges pivot again and demonstrate success in the

current higher education climate and into the 2020s? I propose that there are seven points of focus that liberal arts colleges should attend to:

1. **Define and celebrate the liberal education brand.** A significant challenge facing liberal arts colleges is how to define, brand, and educate the college-bound public and their parents about what "liberal arts" means (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2017; Greenberg, 2015). The words *liberal* and *arts* reflect notions and Latin roots from Ancient Greek and Roman times. "Liberal" refers to freedom, including freedom of thought and how to be a citizen in a free society. "Arts" has evolved to refer to study in the humanities (e.g., literature, music, philosophy); social sciences (e.g., psychology), natural sciences (e.g., biology); physical sciences (e.g., astronomy); and mathematics. The idea is that intentional and broad study in these "arts" leads to graduates who think and act more complexly in our diverse society. A challenge in today's society is that both words, *liberal* and *arts*, conjure definitions that are not consistent with their original or current use (i.e., liberal as in politically and arts as in fine arts only). To that end, liberal arts colleges will need to assist the public in a concerted and possibly collaborative effort on what a liberal education means and how it differentiates from other educational systems (e.g., learning for life and lifelong employment vs. learning for a single job that may not exist in the future). Liberal education is more akin to Apple's *Think Different* than to Zune's *Beam Your Beats* advertising campaigns.

Moreover, branding has to highlight how liberal education forms the foundational skills that are needed for innovation and entrepreneurship and that a hallmark of liberal arts colleges is an engaged faculty who deeply care about teaching. Finally, liberal arts colleges must continue to highlight how their students, armed with a liberal education, are in the best position to survive future changes in the job market and become, as Joseph Aoun puts it, robot-proof (Aoun, 2017).

2. **Embrace and champion the richness of diversity and inclusive excellence.** Liberal arts colleges are primed to respond to the changing demographics in the United States, combined with the need for global citizens. After all, inclusive excellence and the ability to reach across interpersonal and intercultural boundaries are hallmarks of liberal arts colleges. Liberal arts colleges have been successful at going beyond the surface of diversity that may be reflected in website images to core educational approaches that integrate diversity across multiple realms in a deep manner. Liberal arts colleges are also traditionally more flexible, nimble, and adaptive than their land-grant counterparts.
3. **Demonstrate financial stewardship.** A challenge for many liberal arts colleges is developing fiscal models that ensure long-term financial stability and success. In the present higher education environment, where tuition discounts are not in sync with inflation and income, it is critically important to continue to examine and build financial structures that counter the sole reliance on tuition. Moody's Investors Service has cautioned small colleges about what could happen if they become inflexibly tuition dependent (Moody's Investors Service, 2015). At the same time, it has provided guidance on how to remain successful, including intentional financial planning and structures that include alternative revenue streams (e.g., auxiliary facilities; donor gifts, contracts, and grants).
4. **Attend to enrollment management.** The need for a sophisticated and integrated enrollment management system cannot be underestimated. Best practices in enrollment management attends to the entire student life cycle (e.g., brand, recruitment, admissions, student serves, alumni). As an example, the recruitment of prospective students alone involves multiple interrelated approaches such as online advertising, geo-fencing, high school pipelines (e.g., adopt-a-school), regional and international outreach, and social media. Data-informed decision making must permeate the entire process from admissions and the deployment student services. Finally, the enrollment management operations must be seamless and intentionally lead to alumni engagement.
5. **Focus on fundraising.** As an extension of enrollment management, alumni engagement must be sophisticated and keep pace with emerging technologies. Alumni engagement is a key opportunity for donor gifts. In addition, a liberal arts college must actively diversify its donor base and consider business and community organizations that are not necessarily tied to alumni. Student and faculty stories that come out of liberal arts colleges are compelling and are made for donor appreciation. Sophisticated fund-raising campaigns can lead to gifts from multiple friends of a college.
6. **Pursue teaching and learning that is technologically enhanced.** The practice of teaching at a liberal arts college has as its roots the use of the Socratic method. Although the Socratic method is not used as a sole method of teaching, it does inform the primary goals of liberal education, which are to develop students who can think, write, and speak critically. Over time, technology has been able to supplement (not supplant) teaching, and it behooves educators to continue to examine the extent to which new technologies (e.g., augmented reality, virtual reality, and blended learning) may enhance teaching and student learning. A critical condition of specific technology use is that it must indeed demonstrate enhanced teaching and learning; otherwise, it should not be used. Liberal arts colleges do not need to be filled with Zunes.

7. **Follow the best leader.** Liberal arts colleges must seek out leaders who understand and can lead the aforementioned best practice areas and have the skills to steer a large ship forward into a future that contains many uncharted waters. The president is the focal point and model of campus leadership and can serve a critical role in developing and inspiring multiple leaders throughout the college. Liberal arts colleges would do well to hire leaders who understand leadership and can convey a leadership approach that reflects collaboration, relationship building, listening, diversity and inclusive excellence, flexibility, innovation, entrepreneurship, and a broad view of the current and future higher educational landscape. To be sure, finding this type of leader is a tall order. That said, the successful future of any liberal arts college depends on it.

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