

Chapter 10

Benefits of a Liberal Arts Education on Effective Business Communication

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ABSTRACT

With the growing popularity of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees, it is important to understand the value of a business degree coupled with a liberal arts education. Business degrees provide one with a multitude of beneficial skills including analytical thinking, problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, and project management. When coupled with a liberal arts education, business degrees become even more powerful providing young professionals with a competitive advantage by creating a more well-rounded individual with a broader education base. In addition to the benefits of a business degree, the liberal arts education provides increased leadership skills, creativity and innovation, adaptability, and both richer native communication and foreign language skills. This chapter focuses on how a liberal arts education provides one with more pronounced, stronger communication skills both written and orally, which directly provides value to businesses.

INTRODUCTION

Quintessentially American (Koblik & Graubard, 2000), liberal arts colleges provide graduates with a uniquely powerful education in terms of critical and creative thought. According to Jiang and Guo (2017) a liberal arts education “uses an interdisciplinary curriculum to cultivate critical thinking, creativity, moral reasoning, analytical skills, and a sense of social responsibility” (p. 268), and “values self-examination, participatory and informative citizenship” (p. 269). But once acquired, how does one typically make use of this investment in developing one’s intellect? In what has become a famous, if not infamous, quote,

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President Coolidge (1925) explained, “the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world.” The pull towards enterprise is significant, regardless of undergraduate major. In fact, when looking at six popular degree areas of: a) language and philosophy, b) social science, c) business, d) communications, e) engineering and f) information technology, research suggests that employment in some form of business activity is typically listed as one of the top ten job outcomes for each of the six majors and of all college graduates in the United States with 54% working in major business functions (Fain, 2019).

While it may seem that there is a natural synergy between the education one would receive at a liberal arts college and the demand for people to contribute meaningfully to business success, tensions persist.

Suspensions of legitimacy both plague and haunt business schools in colleges and universities. Grey (2001) explained that “business schools, more than perhaps any other part of universities...have often experienced, the scorn of other, more traditional subjects” (p. S27). Such misgivings are perhaps even more pressing within liberal arts colleges. As Styhre (2009) described, “business school disciplines are often regarded as being less prestigious than traditional disciplines” (p. 30), because management is a “plebian science in terms of dealing with actual everyday life problems rather than liberal arts or abstract philosophies” (p. 31). Overcoming such tensions between departments engenders a space for mutual benefit to develop. As reported by Schneider (2015), “what we’re faced with is not so much a dichotomy between liberal arts and technical skills but rather the task of bridging foundational knowledge with the practicality of the real world and what is happening in business” (p. 111). When coupled with a liberal arts education, business degrees become even more powerful providing young professionals with a competitive advantage by creating a more well-rounded individual with a broader education base, one with more pronounced, stronger communication skills both written and orally. In turn, the professional success of these graduates highlights the essential benefit derived from the critical and creative thinking which comprise the core of a liberal arts education.

Before such synergies can be developed, and tensions reduced, between business schools and the traditional liberal arts, it is important to understand the degree to which liberal arts colleges in the United States already incorporate business, and business-related, degrees. A descriptive research methodology was used as the basis for assessing this phenomenon. Prior to addressing the methodology and results, the survey of literature is presented next to build sufficient context for understanding and interpretation.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

Without education the mind can easily become yoked to one’s most base nature. Most scholars credit Greek philosophers such as Plato and Roman orators such as Cicero for developing the idea of a liberal education (Arsene, 2012; Kimball, 1995) with the goal of liberating the mind. Indeed, the Greek desire to have cities ruled by citizens required a thoughtfully educated citizen with knowledge of the “fundamental ‘liberating’ arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric” (Simmons, 2018, p. 100). Of course, while the idea of a liberal education survived the middle ages, the Renaissance and Reformation for the larger part of human history, such an ideal education was reserved for the elite and almost exclusively male.

Perhaps more than any other western country, the US embraced the liberal arts heritage of training a gentle man in the classics of philosophy and oration not in preparation for work but rather for a more meaningful life. Naturally, it must be noted that it wasn’t until the last century that universal education gained support and not until 1918 that every state in the US required at least an elementary education for

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