



# 'Shovel-ready' Students: A Dilemma

HIGHER EDUCATION is facing an interesting dilemma. As I first pointed out in my inaugural speech, liberal-arts education was devised as a public good, necessary for a well-functioning society, and it has never been more important than it is now. Historian Richard Greenwald of Drew University noted, "We are witnessing a new way of working

developing before our eyes. Today, breadth, cultural knowledge and sensitivity, flexibility, the ability to continually learn, grow, and reinvent, technical skills, as well as drive and passion, define the road to success." These attributes, of course, are the primary goal and outcome of a liberal-arts education, which produces students whose skills never go out of date—students who have been educated to reinvent themselves regularly and know how to do it. In short, there is a good match between the needs of the new century and liberal-arts education.

So what is the problem? The problem is that, increasingly, students are majoring in job-focused areas. Nationally, for example, only 8 percent of undergraduates today major in the humanities, compared with 17 percent in 1966, and the most popular undergraduate major is business. Students and their parents, as well as a significant portion of the public at large, are calling for "relevant" education. And by relevant, they mean education that employers look for in their new hires.

This makes sense, given the growing insistence of many employers on specific skills in their new hires. Banks used to want liberal-arts-educated employees, but many now insist on accounting, finance, and general business majors—people who can "hit the ground running," as they put it. These are difficult times for businesses, and the forgone skills-training costs are, to them, a significant saving. They want "shovel-ready" employees, able to be immediately productive without further investment, so we can hardly blame students and their parents for wanting a curriculum that caters more directly to potential employers and gives graduates an edge in competing for good starting positions. That edge, after all, is why many think they are paying that high tuition. So we can't blame either employers or students for what they are each demanding.

But it is important that we ask: Who are we educating for? Is it for the short-term benefit of the corporate world or the long-term benefit of our students (and, importantly, the good of our society)? Our ultimate purpose must be the education of responsible, thoughtful citizens, rather than just good entry-level corporate employees. Most importantly, we must convey the important fact that liberal-arts education can and does do both. In the long run, businesses will be better off with broadly educated employees; the business or finance major

with specific skills may be cheaper at the outset, but the liberal-arts graduate will be there for the marathon, not just the sprint.

We must push back against this growing trend. It's time to (re)educate people about the long-term benefits of liberal-arts education, and provide compelling evidence of this fact not only to students but to their parents, their future employers, and to society. History is on our side in this argument. The liberal-arts approach works; it has produced the creativity, innovation, and ability to cope with change and challenge that have made our nation productive and forward-looking.

It is important to the future competitiveness of our country that we make our case strongly. And who better to do it than Wellesley? Liberal-arts education is still what we do here—and we do it extremely well. The distribution of our majors across broad fields has changed little: In 2009, we had 35 percent in the humanities, 43 percent in the social sciences, and 16 percent in the sciences, compared to 38 percent, 46 percent, and 14 percent, respectively, in 1968. At the same time, we have dramatically increased the opportunities for students to gain valuable practical experience via internships, public service, and other related cocurricular activities, so that employers get both early productivity and lifetime potential from Wellesley graduates.

Our students' success in the world beyond our gates, and the continuing high demand for a Wellesley education, are the best arguments I can think of for the current and future value and relevance of a liberal-arts education in the 21st century.

H. Kim Bottomly



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—President H. Kim Bottomly