The Value of a Liberal Arts Education in Today’s Global Marketplace

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As newly minted college graduates take their first steps into the “real world,” an opportunity to reflect on the nature of higher education presents itself. For years, those of us in education have heard a lot about Science, Technology, Engineering and Math — also known as STEM.

The STEM disciplines are eminently worthy areas of study. Anxious parents often counsel their children to pursue these disciplines because job prospects are seemingly better in STEM areas. But in today’s world of changing demographics, 24/7 news cycles and a global marketplace, the liberal arts are critical to success in every economic sector. There can be no doubt that they play an essential part in providing a foundation for learning in every professional field.

Clearly, all successful careers require critical thinking, teamwork, sensitivity to cultural, demographic, economic and societal differences and political perspectives. A liberal arts education provides this grounding. Most people will have six to 10 jobs during their careers, and liberal arts majors are the most adaptable to new circumstances. No one knows what the jobs of the future will be, but a liberal arts degree provides a great foundation for adjusting to new careers and further education. We do know that a third of all Fortune 500 CEOs have liberal arts degrees. For example, Leslie Moonves, who leads CBS, has a degree in Spanish from Bucknell University, and Howard Schultz, Starbucks’ CEO, majored in communications at Northern Michigan.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities recently launched the LEAP Employer-Educator Compact to make the quality of college learning a national priority as employers seek college graduates with a broader set of skills and knowledge. LEAP — Liberal Education and America’s Promise — is a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that champions the importance of a 21st century liberal education for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality.

I was among 100 college presidents, all members of the LEAP Presidents’ Trust, who developed the compact in concert with employers who are advisers to this initiative. These education leaders and visionary employers were the initial signers of the compact. More than 350 colleges, community colleges and universities and eight state systems of higher education are working through LEAP to ensure that all their students achieve this essential learning.

In addition to launching the compact, the Association of American Colleges and Universities also recently released the results of a new national survey of employers that describes what college graduates need to succeed in a global economy. The findings clearly underscore the importance of the liberal arts.
Nearly all those surveyed (93 percent) say that “a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate’s] undergraduate major.”

- More than 9 in 10 want those they hire to demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning.
- More than three-fourths of employers want more emphasis on: critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.
- Nearly three-fourths 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.

Increasingly, the information we receive from many sources — including 140-character Twitter feeds, videos and other social media — is tailored to our presumed interests. Search engines and social networks track our online habits to influence our preferences. The ability to quickly assimilate information, analyze what’s needed, and aggregate content for personal or professional use are skills that stem — no pun intended — from liberal arts training and are critical in all aspects of life today.

In a country of polarized politics, a liberal education enables critical thinking and the capacity to put tough issues into a larger context. Such graduates will develop skills to help our country implement solutions rather than simply conduct arguments.

Finally, our society desperately needs the grounding in ethical thinking and questioning that the liberal arts provide. Improving engineering fundamentals will accomplish little if our ethical foundations keep eroding.

A good job and top salary out of college, we all agree, would be wonderful. More important by far, is what our college graduates do beyond the starting line to build a rewarding life, create a fulfilling career and serve their communities.

I have confidence in our future because I have met countless liberal arts alumni who have been successes in every sphere, who are living fulfilled lives, and who make us all very proud.