



THE COUNCIL OF  
INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

INNOVATIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING  
RESEARCH BRIEF 3

# Career Preparation and the Liberal Arts

*CIC Project on the  
Future of Independent Higher Education*

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## About the Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

CIC's Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education is a multi-year initiative to identify and examine the forces that are most likely to affect the future of independent colleges and universities and to help member institutions prepare for both new challenges and new opportunities. With the guidance of a steering committee of college and university presidents (see page 21), the project considers potentially disruptive changes to American society and education and explores fresh approaches to higher education and new college business models. The project also examines the distinctive characteristics and missions of independent colleges that have enabled them to offer a high-quality education for so many years. The project is supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the TIAA-CREF Institute.

## Other Reports in This Series

This Research Brief is the third in a series of short papers on innovations in pedagogy and curriculum that may enhance student learning at independent colleges and universities. Each brief includes a review of recent literature, examples of how the innovation has been adopted by CIC members, discussion questions for further exploration, and recommendations for additional reading. The principal author is Philip M. Katz, CIC's director of projects.

Research Brief 1: *Competency-Based Education* (April 2015)

Research Brief 2: *Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education* (May 2015)

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## Career Preparation and the Liberal Arts

### KEY POINTS:

- This brief explores a central question: How does the independent sector of higher education balance expectations for job preparation with the preparation of students for full lives as educated citizens?
- The debate about the role of liberal arts institutions in preparing students for careers is not new. But several trends have made the debate more intense since 2008: a greater emphasis on the short-term economic benefits of higher education, especially as the perceived cost of postsecondary education has risen; a higher percentage of undergraduate programs in professional fields; a more widespread perception that colleges and universities do a poor job of preparing students for the workforce; and, in reaction, resurgent concerns about *too much* emphasis on employability.
- The debates often ignore the demonstrated success of smaller independent colleges and universities with a liberal arts focus in preparing students for careers: Graduates of such institutions are at least as likely to find jobs in the first six months, will earn about as much in their lifetimes, and will enjoy a higher level of career satisfaction than their peers who graduate from other institutions.
- Smaller institutions achieve these outcomes through undergraduate programs with a professional emphasis that incorporate substantial liberal arts content; liberal arts degree programs that integrate career preparation; experiential learning opportunities, especially internships; and innovative career preparation activities that supplement the liberal arts curriculum. Career centers play an important role.

## Introduction: Recent Trends

Any discussion of career preparation for undergraduate students at independent colleges and universities in the 21st century must consider at least five trends:

1) The first trend is the increasingly insistent public demand for a college education that directly and demonstrably prepares students for employment. A corollary is the recent upsurge of public doubts about the employment value of a college education, despite several economic studies since 2011 that demonstrate a larger lifetime gap in wages between college graduates and high school graduates than ever. The wage gap is now more than \$1 million, according to researchers at the New York Federal Reserve (Carlson 2013; Abel and Deitz 2015). This trend is driven by an unsettled global economy and the sharp rise in college costs over the past decade. As higher education journalist Scott Carlson notes,

Looking at college explicitly in terms of its “return on investment,” measured in starting salaries and potential earnings, is something new—a confluence of anxieties about the rising cost of college, mounting debt among students, a flaccid economy, and the ubiquitous vocabulary of the market.... As rising college costs have loaded more and more debt onto the backs of Americans, the return-on-investment conversation seems inevitable (Carlson 2013).

As a result, three-quarters of independent college and university presidents report that there are “more conversations about getting ready for the job market today compared to just three years ago” (Selingo 2015a, 13).

Recent opinion surveys are clear about what students and their parents expect from a college education. More than ever, students want jobs. A New America survey of prospective and recently-enrolled college students conducted in 2014 concludes that the top reasons students decide to go to college are to “improve my employment opportunities,” “make more money,” and “get a good

job” (Fishman 2015). The annual survey of first-year students conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute returned similar results, with 86 percent of first-year students reporting that a very important reason to attend college was “to get a better job”; a decade earlier, 72 percent offered the same response (Eagan et al. 2015; also see Bidwell 2015 for comparable results from other polls). And a 2015 survey of parents by **Robert Morris University** (PA) concludes that, “as far as parents are concerned, the days of college being a place to focus on learning are over”; instead, more than half the parental respondents said that colleges need to pay more attention to “current labor needs and trends” (Thomsen 2015).

In the political sphere, workforce preparation is central to the Obama administration’s higher education agenda. At least 35 governors also noted the importance of higher education to economic and workforce development in their “state of the state” addresses at the start of 2015, underscoring the perceived role of higher education in addressing the nation’s continuing economic recovery (Emma 2015). Some governors have gone even further by singling out certain kinds of postsecondary education as worthy of state support and devaluing the role of other kinds of education. According to North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory, for example, “if you want to take gender studies, that’s fine, go to a private school and take it. But I don’t want to subsidize that if that’s not going to get someone a job” (Marcus 2013).

2) A second trend to consider is the gradual shift in emphasis from the liberal arts to vocational or pre-professional studies in the independent sector of higher education. By one estimate, the number of “true” liberal arts colleges, defined as teaching-focused undergraduate institutions that award at least 40 percent of their bachelor’s degrees in traditional liberal arts disciplines, shrank from 212 institutions in 1990 to no more than 130 today. This happened as private liberal arts colleges “added [more] programs in professional fields in order to attract vocationally

oriented students” (Baker, Baldwin, and Makker 2012). Some researchers date the beginning of this shift to the late 1960s (Breneman 1990; Baker, Baldwin, and Makker 2012). Others trace the start of a long, slow decline of liberal education in the United States to a much earlier date, noting that a “recurring theme in the history of American higher education is that the professional has been displacing the liberal” (Labaree 2006, 1; also see Teagle Foundation 2008, 18–21). As the president of a small private college lamented in 1938, “threats to the liberal-arts college have caused many privately supported colleges to establish their own professional departments and schools—business and teaching most often—thus dissipating their resources and weakening their position as strongholds of liberal training” (McConaughy 1938, 61).

Today, more than 60 percent of undergraduate degrees are awarded in vocational or professional fields across all sectors (Baker and Baldwin 2015, 248), although there is some disagreement among researchers about which majors should be categorized as “professional.” In 2013, the most recent year for which complete data are available, the most popular major for graduates of teaching-focused independent colleges and universities was business, representing 21 percent of all bachelor’s degrees—or about three times as many degrees awarded in the social sciences. Bachelor’s degrees in nursing outnumbered degrees in chemistry by a similar factor, and accounting majors outnumbered art history majors by 15-to-1. Independent institutions also awarded thousands of degrees in explicitly professional fields such as education, engineering, social work, and specialized medical and therapeutic occupations (CIC analysis of IPEDS data). Yet because the major printed on a student’s diploma does not fully define the content of the curriculum, the relative decline of the liberal arts as a component of postsecondary education may be overstated by comparing the percentages of degrees awarded.

3) A third trend is the widespread perception, especially among business leaders, students and their

families, and some public observers, that colleges in general are doing a poor job of preparing students for the workforce. According to a recent Gallup survey, just 13 percent of American adults strongly agree with the statement, “College graduates in this country are well prepared for success in the workforce” (Gallup 2015, 15). Another survey in 2015 reported that barely one-third (35 percent) of college students believe that “college was effective in preparing them for a job,” and just 20 percent of these students think they are “very well prepared for the workforce” (McGraw-Hill Education 2015). In surveys conducted for the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), business leaders report that they want to hire college graduates who possess both a broad education and specific workforce skills, especially “written and oral communication skills, teamwork skills, ethical decision-making, critical thinking skills, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings.” Business leaders also report that a minority of recent graduates are actually *proficient* in each of these desirable skill areas (Hart Research Associates 2015). In fact, as Peter Cappelli, professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, points out, there is “an enormous amount of complaining going on in the United States now by the employer community about difficulty in hiring people, finding people with the right skills. And much of that complaining seems to be directed at [higher] education” (Cappelli 2015).

These complaints are almost certainly too pessimistic, given the actual experience of college graduates in the workforce. The assessments of college leaders may be too optimistic in turn, however, as 78 percent of presidents from private institutions report that their students are “well prepared” or “very well prepared” for a job search (Selingo 2015a, 17), and 96 percent of chief academic officers in all sectors rate their institutions as very or somewhat effective in preparing students for the world of work (London 2015, 2). A Gallup researcher who helped conduct the survey of CAOs describes this self-assessment as “a massive disconnect between

higher education and the marketplace in terms of what it means to be prepared for work” and concludes that “the level of intentional collaboration between higher education and employers is downright pathetic at the moment” (London 2015, 2).

4) Meanwhile, many academic leaders and some public observers worry about the adverse effects of too much emphasis on pre-professional studies and employability instead of a focus on the liberal arts and general education. This is a fourth trend, though one with a deep history, as Americans have argued about the role of “practical” versus “liberal” studies in higher education since at least the early 19th century (Grubb and Lazerson 2006; Labaree 2006). Since 2008, there have been numerous articles in the popular and higher education press with titles such as “Is College Worth It?” and “Liberal Arts Education vs. Job Preparation for College Students: Have the Liberal Arts Become a Luxury?” and “Valediction for the Liberal Arts” (Carlson 2013; Cooperman 2012; Ferrall 2015). These articles have been answered by more nuanced discussions of the liberal arts’ return on investment, most recently in the 2015 books by Peter Cappelli (*Will College Pay Off?*) and journalist Fareed Zakaria (*In Defense of a Liberal Education*), but many in higher education still perceive a need to defend “the elements of a more well-rounded curriculum” (London 2015, 7).

The general argument in support of liberal education offered by independent college leaders, such as **Gettysburg College** (PA) president Janet Riggs, is that

Liberal arts colleges are focused on the development of critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills, all of which are essential to solving the complex issues our globally interconnected world faces. We prepare students to be responsible citizens, individuals who will work to improve their communities. That value to our nation and the world might be harder to quantify than individual salary, but it’s

no less important (Riggs 2013; also see Kiley 2012; CLASIC 2014; Schwartz 2014; Selingo 2015b).

A more specific argument is that narrowing the focus of a college education to vocational training narrows the range of career options for liberal arts majors. As Hofstra University President Stuart Rabinowitz puts it, a curriculum that focuses primarily on professional education

assumes that students begin their studies with a clear understanding of what they want to do with their lives after graduation.... But compelling students to make decisions based on perceived job opportunities that are four years in the future deprives them of the self-discovery that is the hallmark of a liberal arts education.... Students who approach their education purely in terms of occupational preparation may deprive themselves of the opportunity to find inspiration and excel in some other area of concentration (Rabinowitz 2013).

5) A final trend to note is the actual success of smaller independent institutions in preparing students for their first jobs and subsequent careers. During the depths of the recession that followed the financial crisis of 2008, researchers reported that many liberal arts graduates experienced higher unemployment rates and lower average earnings than other college graduates. These reports gave rise to stories in the popular media about liberal arts graduates flipping burgers and working as baristas, if they could find jobs at all. Both employment and earnings began to recover by 2011–2012, however. By the start of 2014, the unemployment rate for recent liberal arts graduates was 5.2 percent and the rate for mid-career liberal arts graduates (in their forties) was 3.5 percent, compared with a national unemployment rate of 6.6 percent (Carnevale and Cheah 2015; AAC&U 2014b).

An analysis of the graduating class of 2014 conducted by the National Association of Colleges

and Employers (NACE 2015) found that 80 percent of all bachelor's degree graduates had achieved a "positive career outcome"—defined as full-time employment, self-employment, military or other public service, or continuing education—within six months of receiving a diploma. Graduates of private, nonprofit colleges had even better outcomes, with 89.5 percent achieving some positive career outcome at the six-month mark (including 58.5 percent with full-time jobs), compared to 73.4 percent of graduates from public institutions with positive career outcomes. Independent college graduates also had a higher mean starting salary (\$50,386 versus \$46,767). Graduates of smaller institutions had comparable or better outcomes than graduates of larger institutions. And, importantly, the graduates of colleges that focus on the liberal arts did just as well as the graduates of institutions that focus on professional education (i.e., institutions that confer 60 percent or more of their degrees to students in professional majors).

The NACE analysis of first destinations revealed more variation by undergraduate major than institutional type, with positive career outcome rates that ranged from 74 percent (biology majors) to 95 percent (communications technology majors). Mean starting salaries also ranged from a low of \$29,000 for theology majors to a high of \$64,891 for new engineers (NACE 2015, 19). Indeed, the initial wage gap between engineers and most liberal arts graduates persists for decades—but an analysis of Census data by AAC&U also shows that “at peak earnings ages (56–60 years), workers who majored as undergraduates in the humanities or social sciences earn annually on average about \$2,000 *more* than those who majored as undergraduates in professional or pre-professional fields” (AAC&U 2014b).

Salary is just one measure of career success; job satisfaction is another. According to surveys of college graduates conducted in 2002 and 2011 by education consultants at Hardwick Day, graduates of independent liberal arts institutions report feeling more satisfied with their educations, better prepared to find a first job, and better prepared for life than

their counterparts at public institutions or private research universities (Hardwick Day 2011). Three decades of research also demonstrate that liberal arts graduates “enjoy greater long-term rates of employability, income, and job satisfaction” (Teagle Foundation 2008, 12). By contrast, college graduates who major in business tend to become less engaged with their careers and less satisfied with their lives than graduates who major in the social sciences, science and technology fields, or the arts and humanities (Dugan and Kafka 2014).

As Chris Kimball, president of **California Lutheran University**, has noted, “There’s been a long tradition in American culture of saying [a liberal arts education] is not practical, not valuable. I think the evidence is pretty clear that for people who pursue that path, it leads to a richer and more successful life. Now obviously not everyone wants to pursue those degrees. But those who do—they gain a lot” (Bidwell 2015).

## Persistent Issues

How independent colleges and universities should help prepare students for careers is not a new concern for the sector (Jones 1983; Ekman 2007). Four persistent and closely related issues stand out from the ongoing debate:

### *Defining the proper balance between liberal and professional education*

The distinguished academic leader Ernest Lynton laid out the challenge of defining this balance in 1990, noting that

[The call] for more liberal [arts in] professional learning too often still consists merely of trying to squeeze a few more credits of liberal arts subject matter into an already crowded curriculum. There exist instances, as well, of going to the opposite and equally unsatisfactory extreme: to abandon all components of technical expertise and to concentrate only on process skills such as critical thinking and clarity of communication

under the motto: “a liberal arts major is the best preparation for professional competence” (Lynton 1990, 6–7).

The perceived conflict between the “two cultures” of professional education and the liberal arts was highlighted during a national symposium on the liberal arts and business convened by CIC in 2007. According to the summary report, “the participants almost unanimously noted the tensions and conflicting perspectives between business and liberal arts faculty members,” even within the same institutions. “[A]s one participant put it, it seemed almost inevitable that the ‘fix it’ and ‘get a job’ perspective of business [and other professions] would clash with the ‘think and get cultured’ and ‘reflective’ perspective of the liberal arts” (Paris 2007, 41). Surprisingly little has changed in the intervening years (Baker and Baldwin 2015, 249).

### *Understanding the contribution of the liberal arts to career preparation*

As CIC President Richard Ekman noted in 2007, following the national symposium discussed above, “definitions of the ‘liberal arts’ vary across time and even across contemporaneous institutions, [so] understanding their connection to careers in business becomes more difficult.” Moreover,

whenever someone tries to pinpoint the essential skills, perspectives, and knowledge that study of the liberal arts furnishes to those who subsequently enjoy successful business careers, the efforts are often too broadly conceived to account for differences among the disciplines of the arts and sciences, as well as differences in what is termed “business” (Ekman 2007).

Despite significant efforts in the past decade by AAC&U and other higher education associations to define the professional skills and competencies that liberal arts graduates *ought* to bring to the workplace, the causal link between the liberal arts and career success remains elusive and a topic worthy of additional research.

### *Specifying the knowledge, skills, and perspectives that are needed for the 21st-century workplace*

Surveys of prospective employers are consistent about what they expect from college graduates today and for the near future: “both technical skills—the very focused learning associated with many master’s and doctoral programs—as well as the so-called ‘soft skills’ that often are honed in undergraduate liberal arts programs” (Brenau University 2014, quoting Brenau University president Ed Schrader). Looking more deeply into the future, however, alarmists such as Nobel laureate and Yale University professor Robert Schiller foresee that, “Computers and robots are already replacing many workers. What can young people learn now that won’t be superseded within their lifetimes by these devices and that will secure them good jobs and solid income over the next 20, 30 or 50 years? In the universities, we are struggling to answer that question” (Schiller 2015). Still other observers reject the “strange idea that employability reflects *education* and not the economy or the labor market,” and they argue that identifying and developing new workplace skills in a changing economy is less the job of colleges and universities than the responsibility of employers (Watters 2014; also see Cappelli 2015). Advocates for this position also note that employers often have more resources than small academic institutions to identify economic changes that demand new skills for employees.

### *Understanding the difference between preparing students for their first jobs, for careers—and for fulfilling lives*

Most leaders of independent colleges and universities agree with Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University (CT), that “college should prepare students for their first job—likely their worst job—but also ready them for a lifetime of meaningful work that contributes to making the world a better place” (Schwartz 2014). Many of these academic leaders believe that their institutions prepare students well for first jobs after graduation, and the NACE study



provides evidence to support this belief. Yet there remains a strong undercurrent of doubt, as voiced by the anonymous president of an independent liberal arts college: “We’re doing a great job educating our students for the job they’ll have in 20 years. However, we’re not doing a great job educating our students for the job they’ll have next year” (Jarrett and Martinsen 2015, 20).

## Examples of Innovative Career Preparation at Independent Colleges and Universities

CIC member institutions rely on a number of approaches to combining the liberal arts with career preparation. The most common approach is a liberal arts core of required courses plus majors in both liberal arts and professional fields. This structure allows students to choose various combinations of majors, double majors, majors and minors, or concentrations to prepare themselves for postgraduate jobs and lifelong learning. More distinctive approaches include professional degree programs that incorporate substantial liberal arts content, liberal arts degree programs that integrate career readiness, internships and other experiential learning opportunities, and career preparation activities designed to supplement the liberal arts curriculum. The following section of this report illustrates such approaches with a few examples of recent innovations.\*

This report will not consider graduate degree, certificate, or continuing education programs that are designed to prepare students for a specific profession or lead to a professional certification, although many independent colleges and universities offer high-quality programs of these kinds. Nor will it consider the role of national accrediting organizations, which prescribe detailed guidelines for a large number of professional undergraduate degrees, ranging from

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\*Except where noted elsewhere, the descriptions of academic programs in this section are based on information from the institutions’ public websites.

business, engineering, nursing, social work, and teaching to more specialized fields such as sonography and mortuary science (CHEA 2015).

### *An emphasis on professional training*

Blending the liberal arts into business and other professional programs is an old strategy for independent colleges and universities (Jones 1983), but as Adrienne Bloss, chief academic officer at **Shenandoah University** (VA), notes, “professional and pre-professional programs that have a strong liberal arts underpinning ... [are especially] powerful in today’s market” (Bidwell 2015). The area of professional specialization in these programs is typically more responsive to market conditions than the liberal arts content. For example, after a close review of regional and national market conditions, in 2014 **Rollins College** (FL) introduced an undergraduate major in health care management that would be followed by three related master’s degree programs in 2015 and 2016. According to the director of the new programs, “health care is one of the more recession-proof industries” and demand for health care workers in South Florida is high. Some faculty members, however, needed to be convinced that the undergraduate program was consistent with the college’s liberal arts mission. “This is part of a bigger issue going on at Rollins,” says David Richard, dean of the college for working adults that will be home to all the health care programs: “What does a 21st-century liberal arts institution look like?” (Russon 2015). The result was a bachelor’s degree that incorporates existing courses in anthropology, business, communications, English, and psychology, as well as general education requirements and a health care-related internship.

**Wheelock College** in Massachusetts, with a domestic enrollment of about 900 undergraduates and 500 graduate students, has a distinctive mission: training students for professions that “improve the lives of children and families,” including education, social work, juvenile justice and youth advocacy, and child welfare (Jenkins-Scott 2014). It also offers a

distinctive pedagogy built around field experience in which “undergraduate students are immediately exposed to professional practice in the field beginning freshman year with their [required] Human Growth and Development course and accompanying field placement...[including] fieldwork, practicum, and internship experiences that are interwoven with the academic program.” The field placements are responsive to changing community needs and employment trends. Despite this practical and experiential orientation, the college describes its educational “hallmarks” as “a solid foundation in the liberal arts and sciences, strong professional preparation, and a flexible, interdisciplinary approach.” The liberal arts are considered essential to support the social justice component of the institutional mission and are incorporated into all majors. Many students also pursue double majors in a helping profession and a liberal arts discipline such as American studies, environmental studies, mathematics, or the visual arts—and the latter majors always include field experiences directly related to the welfare of children and families.

Tim Ewest and Julie Kliegl, who teach business at **Wartburg College** (IA), describe four “broad approaches...for reconciling business education to the liberal arts,” approaches that also apply to undergraduate education in most other professional areas

The first is to embrace liberal education as leadership education. The second is to enhance integrative and critical thinking in business education. The third is for business education to focus more attention on the ethical formation of the person, and the fourth is to integrate business and liberal arts curricula more closely (Ewest and Kliegl 2012, 79).

Of course, institutions have different strategies for integrating business education and the liberal arts. At **Birmingham-Southern College** (AL), the introductory course for business majors, *Foundations of Business Thought*, takes a humanistic “great books” approach that uses “classic and contemporary

literature...to explore perceptions and opinions about business and the role individuals play in business organizations.” At **Dominican University** (IL), every undergraduate, even those pursuing majors in business or a professional field, participates in common Liberal Arts and Science Seminars that focus on ethical and spiritual issues related to work and life. By contrast, **Shenandoah University** offers a highly individualized bachelor of business administration program that pairs students with faculty mentors to tailor customized pathways that satisfy the accreditation requirements of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) while assuring broad-based study in the liberal arts. All of these innovations were introduced before 2007 and they remain in place today (Ekman 2007; Paris 2007).

In 2015, the **University of Evansville** (IN) was ranked first in an independent listing of “30 Great Small Colleges for an Accounting and Finance Degree.” For several years, the bachelor of science in accounting program at Evansville has boasted a perfect record in helping new graduates secure a job or pursue advanced education in the field. The reason for this success, according to president Tom Kazez, is that “our students leave with a strong liberal arts foundation that makes them desirable to employers around the world,” which is reinforced by internships and other hands-on experiences (University of Evansville 2015). This throws some doubt on a recent review of best practices in accounting education which argued that undergraduate accounting programs should focus on technical skills—which is what instructors in the field “do best”—and that curricular reforms designed to develop “so-called soft skills” (such as ethics, team-building, communications skills, interpersonal skills, and critical thinking, all of which are strongly associated with the liberal arts) have been “misguided” (St. Pierre and Rebele 2014, 118).

The strong record of innovation by smaller independent colleges and universities to assure that undergraduate professional education is grounded in

the liberal arts was recently acknowledged by the Teagle Foundation. In 2014, the foundation announced a “Liberal Arts in the Professions” initiative designed to “fully embed liberal education throughout the curriculum, from the first year to the senior year, in professional undergraduate programs” (Teagle Foundation 2014). The initial grant recipients under this initiative included the Southeastern Pennsylvania Consortium for Higher Education, a regional coalition of eight CIC member institutions that will “explore how its member institutions can bring about substantive integration of the liberal arts into undergraduate preparation in teacher education, business, health, and technology” (Teagle Foundation 2015).

### *Integrating career readiness*

Other CIC member institutions approach the blending of liberal arts and career preparation by focusing on liberal education first yet making sure that students have multiple opportunities to develop practical workforce skills. As early as 1968, for example, **Tougaloo College** (MS) introduced what is now called the “Interdisciplinary Career Oriented Humanities Major” (Jones 1983, 13–14). This degree program includes interdisciplinary general education courses, a concentration in a traditional humanities discipline, a carefully developed career plan, specialization in a career area, internships and cooperative education (which are recommended but not required), and an integrative capstone project (comprehensive exam and thesis).

Four decades later, in 2011, **Albion College** (MI) introduced the Albion Advantage, “an intentional, four-year educational model blending a liberal arts foundation with career readiness” (Randall 2011, 38). This initiative grew out of a planning process that began just before the economic crisis of 2008. According to Donna Randall, who was president at the time, the goals of the planning process were to address families’ concerns about college costs, meet competition from alternative sources of career preparation, demonstrate what was “value-added” in a

residential liberal arts education, and strengthen Albion’s distinctive brand identity (Randall 2011, 38; also see Baker and Baldwin 2015, 253–54).

The Albion Advantage is summarized as “purposeful direction, practical knowledge, professional skills, and powerful connections,” but it also stresses “a solid grounding in the liberal arts [as] the best preparation for your life after college.” All Albion students are matched with a faculty mentor and an alumni mentor; encouraged to pursue multi-year academic research projects with real-world applications as well as off-campus experiences (job-shadowing, study abroad, internships, etc.) with a clear connection to their majors; and complete a four-year career plan with guidance from the campus Career and Internship Center and faculty mentors. The career plan incorporates both developmental tools, such as an interest assessment in the first year, and practical workforce skills, such as building a professional network through LinkedIn, writing a résumé, or applying to graduate school. To help promote this distinctive program, Albion tracks and shares on its website the career trajectories of recent graduates.

Like Albion, **Mount Holyoke College** (MA), a highly selective women’s college, faced the challenge of “articulat[ing] the value of a liberal education in a compelling way” in the midst of a national economic crisis. It responded by “build[ing] a bridge between the liberal arts curriculum and students’ careers” through an initiative called the Lynk. The program comprises four developmental stages. The first stage, goal setting, is marked by activities such as enhanced first-year advising and a day-long Sophomore Institute devoted to networking and career exploration. The second stage, professional development, includes non-credit business skill workshops and College 210: Ready for the World, a required, for-credit course for any student preparing to participate in an internship or intensive summer research project. The third stage, practical experience, includes summer internships and research projects, which are followed by a second required course, College 211: Tying It All Together.

Finally, the launch stage includes a series of public symposia for students to “showcase what they’ve learned both in the classroom and out of it, and to demonstrate the connection between those worlds” (AAC&U 2014a). There is no single prescribed path through these four stages. Instead, students work closely with multiple mentors and advisors drawn from the faculty, the career development center, and specialized academic centers on campus.

Although the Lynk initiative was designed fully to integrate academic and career preparation activities, there was some resistance from faculty members who were concerned that the liberal arts curriculum would be watered down in the process and that “vocational” training was “not my job” (Townsend, Packard, and Paus 2014/2015, 26). One response to these concerns was ongoing and intensive discussions with the faculty and staff members, supported by external funding. Another, says the college’s president, Lynn Pasquerella, was creating “parallel [administrative] structures so that Lynk is not any one department’s responsibility”; instead, every department’s strategic plan was explicitly tied to the success of the Lynk. Finally, the career development center was moved to the college’s academic affairs unit to “make sure we never lose sight of the fact that it is all about the liberal arts and sciences” (AAC&U 2014a). The impact of the Lynk on the institution and its students is still being assessed, but criteria will include both the extent of faculty buy-in and student outcomes such as participation and postgraduate employment (Townsend, Packard, and Paus 2014/2015, 29).

### *Planning career pathways*

Other independent colleges and universities have introduced multi-year career-planning pathways for their students. At **Willamette University** (OR), a residential liberal arts campus that enrolls about 2,000 undergraduates, a new strategic plan in 2013 included the goal that “every graduating senior will have a career plan.” To support that goal, the career center developed a detailed set of sequential action steps for each year on campus (plus a gap year). The

recommended steps during senior year, for example, include developing a concrete job search strategy, joining a professional association, and “understand[ing] your life’s priorities by putting first things first.” The director of career services also recruited faculty members to help “incorporate career awareness in class” (McKillop 2013). In some academic departments, completing the first part of the student Career Roadmap (a detailed self-assessment tool) has become a required course assignment, which is then followed by a classroom visit from a career center advisor and personalized advising from both faculty and staff members.

Students at **Maryville College** (TN) and **Randolph-Macon College** (VA) also are expected to develop personalized, four-year career preparation paths using structured menus of planning activities. A distinctive feature of Randolph-Macon’s program is an off-campus “Boot Camp,” intended primarily for sophomores, during which the students “retreat to a nearby hotel to polish their personal narratives, get advice from alumni, and attend a dinner designed to help them with etiquette” (Biemiller 2015).

At **Stevenson University** (MD), the career development plan is called the “Individualized Career Architecture Plan” (ICAP). ICAP is built on three legs—personal direction, discipline expertise, and professional know-how—in a conceptual structure that is introduced to first-year students through a popular team-building exercise involving LEGO blocks (Markley 2013). ICAP integrates self-assessment tools, faculty and staff advising, experiential learning opportunities, and personal branding to help students construct an individual strategic plan. The model has been so successful that Stevenson now offers a free online MOOC to introduce ICAP to career counselors at other colleges and universities.

### *Internships and other real-world experiences*

As suggested by the examples above, internships are a common tool for undergraduate career exploration and preparation. Both academic leaders and potential employers agree that internships and other real-world

experiences—including short-term externships, field experiences, practicums or other clinical assignments, co-op experiences, community-based research, and project-based research with corporate partners—are valuable training. Indeed, nearly half (44 percent) of college presidents from all sectors surveyed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2015 said that their biggest concern when it comes to preparing students for careers was the “need to develop more opportunities for internships and other direct work experience” (Selingo 2015a, 18). Multiple studies reviewed by researchers at Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce show that students who complete *paid* internships “enter the labor market with substantially higher rates of receiving job offers and starting salaries than their peers” (Carnevale and Hanson 2015, 8). Students who complete *unpaid* internships, however, do not always receive the same immediate advantage on the job market, in part because there is “a large range in the quality ... [and level of supervision in] unpaid internships” (p. 10). Aside from their immediate benefit to some job seekers, internships as a form of pedagogy are considered high-impact practices, with notably positive effects on student learning, engagement, and retention. According to the latest results from the National Survey of Student Engagement, students at independent colleges and universities are more likely to participate in internships and related activities than their peers at other types of institutions (Gonyea and Kinzie 2015).

Founded as a women’s college in the depths of the Great Depression but coeducational since 1994, **Endicott College** (MA) proudly claims that it was “the first college in the country to require an internship as a part of its academic program.” Undergraduate students in most majors are now required to complete three substantial internships that relate to their field of study: 120-hour internships during the winter or summer breaks of both the first and second years and a full-semester, faculty-supervised, 12-credit internship during the fall semester of the senior year. The “internship program

is fully integrated into the curriculum and is developmental in nature” (Endicott College 2012, 3). Internships are unpaid but completed as part of credit-bearing courses that also include a weekly on-campus meeting, and students are required to sign a formal “learning agreement” that incorporates learning outcomes as well as workplace expectations for the interns and the employers. Endicott employs a staff of 12 to coordinate more than 1,400 internships in a typical academic year.

Many other CIC member institutions require, encourage, or facilitate student internships. Some have taken additional steps to assure that first-generation students, who are more likely to come from families with relatively limited financial resources, can take equal advantage of internship opportunities. This form of support was identified as a best practice for first-generation student retention during the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program (Strand 2013). For example, **DePaul University** (IL) and **Kalamazoo College** (MI) each offer competitive grants and targeted career counseling to help first-generation students pursue unpaid internships related to their academic studies or intended careers. The goal, according to Kalamazoo provost Michael McDonald, is to enable “first-generation students...to deeply engage in doing something over the summer besides really trying to earn money” (Lipka 2010).

**Gettysburg College** (PA) was another pioneer in connecting current undergraduates with real-world practitioners. In the early 1980s, Gettysburg developed a virtual mentoring network through its Alumni Career Tape Program, which gathered “taped interviews of Gettysburg alumni at their workplaces concentrate[ing] on the issues that liberal arts students face in making career decisions” (Jones 1983, 11). Today, Gettysburg still has an extensive alumni mentoring network, now web-based, as well as a robust program of networking dinners, job shadowing opportunities, three-day “Career Immersion Trips,” week-long competitive externships, and fellowships to support summer internships.

These co-curricular programs are coordinated by a center for career development, which also coordinates student internships and other career development activities during the academic year. Internships at Gettysburg may be paid or unpaid and may or may not be undertaken for academic credit; the relatively loose integration of internships with the formal curriculum is more typical than the tightly structured approach at Endicott College.

Some independent institutions have begun to introduce career preparation opportunities that are tied even less closely to other curricular or co-curricular activities on campus. For example, five CIC member institutions—**Colorado College**, **Connecticut College**, **Denison University** (OH), **Whitman College** (WA), and **Mount Holyoke College** (MA)—have partnered with Koru Careers, Inc. to provide “employer-embedded programs for current students and graduates, enhancing their skills, experience and connections that are needed to land jobs that make an immediate impact at today’s leading companies” (Denison University 2014). Koru, a Seattle-based start-up firm, offers a month-long business boot camp in conjunction with various companies in the technology and e-commerce sectors. The program costs about \$2,750 per student plus travel and expenses, with limited financial aid available from some of the partner colleges. Unlike most traditional internships, the partner colleges are minimally involved in supervising the students or setting outcomes for the Koru programs. This is similar to other skills-based boot camps offered by for-profit providers such as General Assembly, FullBridge, and Kaplan, which may not involve college partners at all (Blumenstyk 2014; Watters 2014).

The assumption, according to one of Koru’s founders, is that college graduates “are not job ready. It’s not just the wrong skills, they are missing the right mindsets” (Adams 2015). The firm’s business model is to fill this perceived skills gap; as the website at [www.joinkoru.com](http://www.joinkoru.com) explains, the “Koru program is designed to complement your college education with applied experience and a business context. We’ve had

art history majors hired at tech companies. Anything is possible.”

### *Career service centers*

The most effective career preparation at independent colleges and universities usually involves both curricular and co-curricular activities and the engagement of both faculty and staff members. Two recent reports on career service centers highlight the changing role of these significant campus offices and their impact on students’ career preparation. The first report, from Hanover Research (2012), summarizes the biggest change: “Traditionally focused on job placement and informational resources, current career service units are characterized by an increased commitment to *holistic and ongoing* career preparation” (p. 2, emphasis in the original; also see McKillop 2013).

Willamette University and other institutions discussed above provide evidence of this change in focus. So do a number of independent institutions that participate in the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE). They use their career centers to anchor curricular and co-curricular activities that encourage students to explore the intellectual and theological dimensions of vocation in the context of career development. At **Point Loma Nazarene University** (CA), for example, the combined Offices of Strengths and Vocation offer traditional career services such as internships, mentoring, and networking. But they also offer an integrated set of activities designed to help students discern their individual strengths for both career *and* faith development, as well as targeted seminars on topics shaped by the institution’s mission, such as “Strengths and Your Faith” and “The Socially Responsible Business Owner.” The CORE Center at **Augustana College** (IL) brings together campus support for career services, opportunities for experiential learning, student research, and the exploration of vocation. A recommended plan of annual activities to prepare students for postgraduate life incorporates a vocational journey of self-assessments, mentoring,

and advising designed, in part, to help job-seeking seniors appreciate the distinction between changeable employment and durable vocations. Another approach is under development at **Saint Peter's University** (NJ), which is using a competitive grant from NetVUE to implement a Life Portfolio Project. Starting in their first year, students will use the portfolio to reflect on academic, co-curricular, and vocational activities from a Jesuit perspective. Then, "with the assistance of advisors, faculty, and representatives from the departments of career services and campus ministry, students will use the data in the Life Portfolio to help them discern choices for internships, graduate schools, and other career-related options" (Saint Peter's University 2015).

The second report on career centers, from the Consortium of Liberal Arts Schools and Independent Colleges (CLASIC) in southern California, also summarizes current trends in career center operations and identifies a number of specific innovations at independent colleges and universities. Again, the overarching trend is that "institutions invested in a higher return on investment for their liberal arts majors are actively pursuing opportunities to embed career services in the greater college experience" (CLASIC 2014, 6). Embedding career services in this manner demands "high touch, highly collaborative models that require the involvement and support of various constituents across campus communities in partnership with career services...[as well as using technology to create] an increasingly accessible global

network. It also demands the development, clarification, and implementation of student learning outcomes and the establishment of feasible methodologies which produce direct evidence of these outcomes" (p. 8). The CLASIC report advocates for several best practices: reorganizing reporting structures to make academic advising and career development part of the same division, as at **Biola University** (CA); engaging faculty in developing major-specific approaches to career planning, as at **Messiah College** (PA), which also is a NetVUE member; and collecting better data about student outcomes, ideally at the five-year-out stage to "account for an exploratory process common among liberal arts and humanities students" (p. 7).

Unfortunately, for all of these positive trends, the results of the latest student workforce readiness survey from McGraw-Hill Education show that career service centers are a relatively underused campus resource: About one-quarter of college students say they have never used career services and just 14 percent say they use career services frequently. Unsurprisingly, given these numbers, less than one-third of students believe that the career offices are effective (McGraw-Hill Education 2015). According to David DeLong, a "smarter workforce" consultant associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Motivating students to engage early and often in the career development process may be the greatest challenge facing higher education leaders today" (DeLong 2014).

## Questions to Consider

The leaders of independent colleges and universities may want to consider the following questions about preparing students for future jobs and careers:

- How can independent colleges and universities, individually and collectively, challenge the perception that liberal arts institutions do a relatively poor job of preparing students for jobs and careers? What can institutions do to become more explicit about the kinds of career preparation they offer and the positive career outcomes of their students? How can institutions help students understand and explain the value of their education to potential employers?
- How can institutions do a better job of tracking and publicizing the career success of their graduates? Note that the National Association of Colleges and Employers has developed a set of recommended standards for collecting student data, and the website of **St. Olaf College** (MN) offers an especially clear example of tracking and presenting student career outcomes (see <http://wp.stolaf.edu/outcomes/what-happens-after-graduation>).
- How can independent institutions challenge the perception held by many students, their families, and public observers that economic success is the primary purpose of higher education? This may be especially important for first-generation college students, who face additional pressures to pursue clear vocational paths.
- How can institutions engage *all* staff and faculty members, including those in the liberal arts, in the preparation of students for the workforce and careers? How can they make sure that faculty members in professional programs are likewise engaged with the liberal arts or general education curricula? How can institutions “actively pursu[e] opportunities to embed career services in the greater college experience” (CLASIC 2014, 6)? How can they assure that career centers have the necessary resources and responsibility to help students develop career paths over multiple years?
- What resources should institutions devote to undergraduate internships and other experiential learning opportunities? As noted, “provid[ing] more internships and work/study programs that enable students to immerse themselves in the world of work and learn professional skills through direct experience” can be a highly effective approach to career preparation, especially when the internships are paid, well integrated with the undergraduate curriculum, and closely supervised. But internships can involve pedagogic trade-offs, as “this type of on-the-job training [might] have to either substitute for time spent in the classroom—thereby watering down the curriculum—or extend the time needed to graduate” (London 2015, 5).



- One defining feature of independent colleges is their responsiveness to new student needs and changes in the external environment. But the employment market can change more rapidly than even the nimblest institutions, while “concrete business skills tend to expire in five years or so as technology and organizations change” (Glenn 2011). How should institutions decide which economic changes, nationally or regionally, require new programs or the allocation of new resources—and which existing programs no longer match current economic needs? Where is the appropriate line between preparing graduates for new opportunities in a changing economy and what one journalist describes as “rolling out trendy job-specific majors” (O’Neill 2001)?

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Note: All web links were working and accurate at the time of publication.

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## Suggestions for Further Reading

Consortium of Liberal Arts Schools and Independent Colleges (CLASIC), “Outcomes of a Liberal Arts Education,” *CLASIC Response Paper* (April 2014). [www.clasic.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CLASIC-Outcomes-White-Paper.pdf](http://www.clasic.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CLASIC-Outcomes-White-Paper.pdf). An overview of career preparation models at liberal arts colleges, prepared by a consortium of career centers at private colleges and universities in Southern California.

Tim Ewest and Julie Kliegl, “The Case for Change in Business Education: How Liberal Arts Principles and Practices Can Foster Needed Change,” *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 12:3 (2012), 75–86. [www.na-businesspress.com/JHETP/KlieglJ\\_Web12\\_3\\_.pdf](http://www.na-businesspress.com/JHETP/KlieglJ_Web12_3_.pdf). Although this article by two Wartburg College faculty members focuses on undergraduate business education, the analysis and practical recommendations for “reconciling” the liberal arts and professional training can be applied to many other vocational majors.

Scott London, *The Changing World of Work: What Should We Ask of Higher Education?* (Dayton, OH: National Issues Forums Institute, 2015). [www.nifi.org/en/catalog/product/changing-world-work-issue-guide-downloadable-pdf](http://www.nifi.org/en/catalog/product/changing-world-work-issue-guide-downloadable-pdf). A discussion guide developed by a consortium of eight organizations including Augsburg College and the National Issues Forums Institute. Includes an overview of transformative changes in the American economy and the recent performance (both real and perceived) of higher education in preparing students for the workforce, as well as specific recommendations for colleges and universities that would like to focus more closely on career preparation, education for citizenship, and/or community economic development.

David C. Paris, *Business and the Liberal Arts: Integrating Professional and Liberal Education* (Washington, DC: Council of Independent Colleges, 2007). [www.cic.edu/News-and-Publications/CIC-Books-and-Reports/Documents/BLAS2007.pdf](http://www.cic.edu/News-and-Publications/CIC-Books-and-Reports/Documents/BLAS2007.pdf). This report on a symposium sponsored by CIC and the James S. Kemper Foundation includes many examples of innovative professional education at smaller independent colleges and universities.

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