

TODD S. HUTTON

The Conflation of Liberal Pipedream, Aspiration, or Nascent Reality?

PERSPECTIVES

WHEN I ADDRESS prospective students and their parents each year during our fall open house, I like to talk about how Utica College brings together professional preparation and liberal education so that students are prepared for the first step in their careers, for lifelong learning and career adaptability, and for community leadership and global citizenship. And every year, I see the eyes of seventeen-year-olds glaze over and the heads of parents nod in hesitant agreement. I suspect there are a number of reasons for the glaze and hesitation. Most students and parents really do not understand what it means to integrate liberal

and professional learning. We at Utica

College don't yet fully understand it ourselves, after all, and we are spending considerable time working on it. So it is asking a lot to expect students and parents to comprehend the advantages in a few short minutes.

Students and parents arrive at our open house having heard different messages from high school counselors, teachers, and family friends about the relative merits of professional programs and liberal arts programs. For many, a college education is the road to a better life. It is, first and foremost, about preparing for a good job. Few would deny that a college education will impart other important benefits, but the sacrifices that so many students and their families make to pay for a college education are substantially about financial return and, more generally, personal welfare. How often do academic advisers on campuses across America hear (and, I fear, sometimes say) that it is important to get core courses out of the way early?

Liberal learning, often synonymous with general education, is too frequently seen as part of the rite of passage. It is not regarded as having intrinsic value or as contributing to personal welfare and career preparation (at

least at a comprehensive college like my own institution). Many parents believe that the liberal arts are for those who can afford such luxury. They do not want their son or daughter tragically imitating the cartoon that shows a college graduate standing on a street corner with a sign that reads, "Liberal arts graduate. Will think for food."

Part of the confusion is also the result of students and parents thinking of Utica College as a liberal arts college, based solely on the fact that it is a small, private college. This confusion, which is even shared by some of Utica's faculty and staff, is not uncommon in the world of higher education. The idea of a liberal arts college is confounded by the imprecise and evolving classifications we have for colleges and universities, as well as by the market decisions that determine the use of the word "college" or "university."

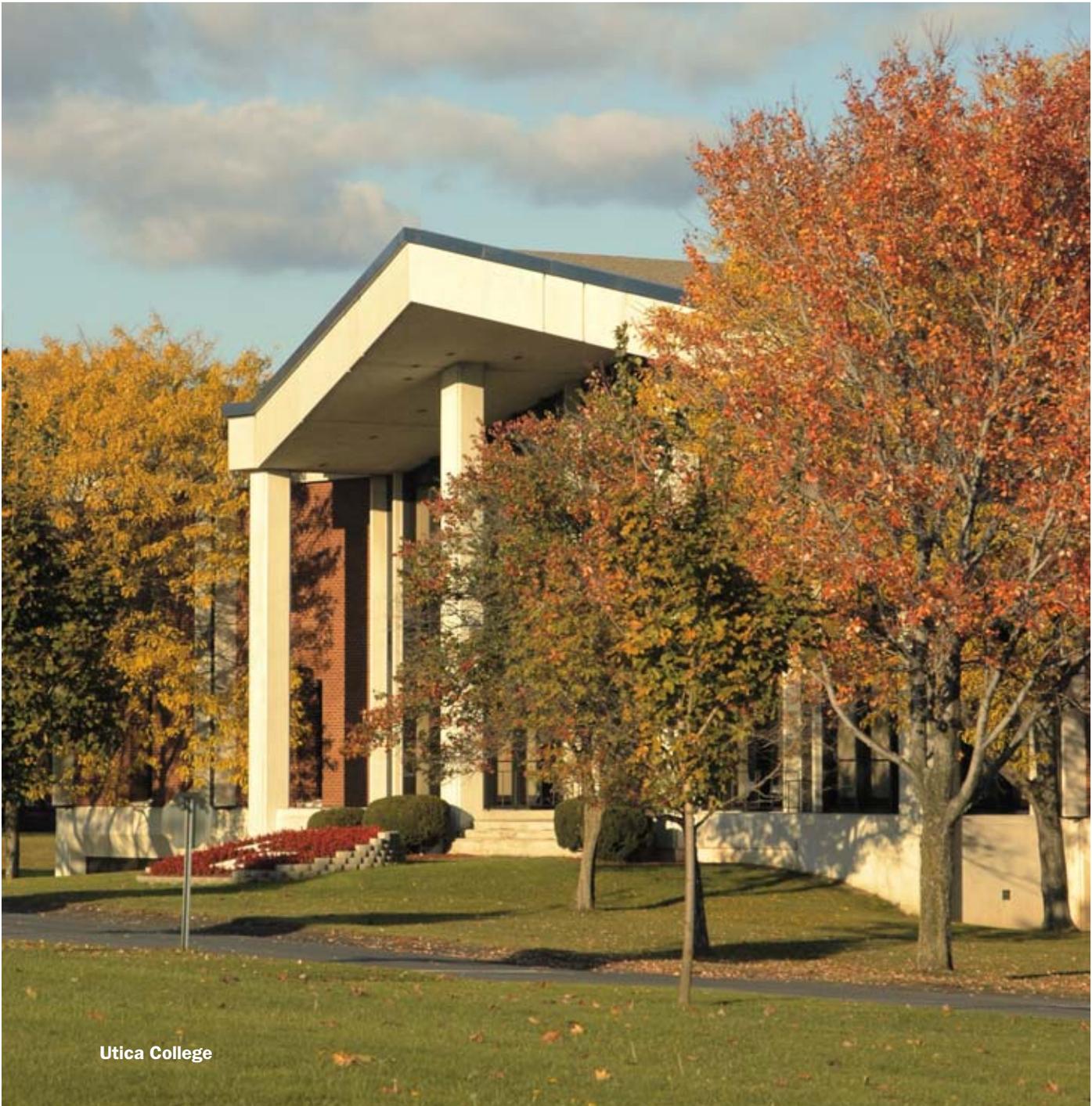
Take, for example, the classifications defined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Prior to 1994, the foundation classified baccalaureate institutions that awarded more than half of their degrees in the arts and sciences as "Liberal Arts Colleges I & II," with the distinction between the two based upon the selectivity of admissions standards. In 1994, the foundation changed the name of the classifications to "Baccalaureate (Liberal Arts) Colleges I" and "Baccalaureate Colleges II." Institutions included in the Baccalaureate I classification had to award 40 percent or more of their baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields and had to be "restrictive" in admissions. In other words, an institution could conceivably award 60 percent of its undergraduate degrees in professional fields but still be classified as a liberal arts college.

With the most recent revision in 2001, Carnegie returned to the 50 percent threshold and revised the classifications to "Baccalaureate Colleges—Liberal Arts" and "Baccalaureate Colleges—General." Add to the equation the fact that a liberal arts college with a traditional

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arts and science curriculum, one master's degree, and 1,200 students can call itself a university; a college with a medical school can call itself a college; a college with twelve master's degrees and two first-professional doctorates cannot legally (at least in one state) call itself a university; and a community college in some states can drop "community" from its name. Is it any wonder there is confusion, and there are even qualms, among the general public about what defines a liberal arts college and liberal arts education?

This confusion over what is liberal and what is professional, over what is a liberal arts college and what is not, provides an interesting backdrop to the question about the conflation of liberal and professional education.

Integration of liberal learning objectives into professional curricula

When I talk with prospective students and their parents—and also alumni—about the integration of professional preparation and liberal learning, I have in mind two characteristics of this curricular and pedagogical phenomenon. The first is the mutual integration of liberal and professional learning objectives. With greater emphasis placed on general education during the last couple of decades, one should not be surprised to see the integration of liberal learning objectives into professional curricula. However, the reverse is not true. It is much more surprising to see professional or career-related goals integrated into a liberal arts curriculum.

Second, a core curriculum is frequently the foundation for both liberal and professional programs—a foundation that resembles the intellectual skills and breadth dimensions of liberal learning. Unfortunately, we less frequently see career goals as part of the foundation for liberal learning programs. By career goals, I mean goals related to the application of knowledge, understandings, and intellectual skills learned in a liberal program of study (such as history) to the skills and knowledge requirements; economic, political, and social challenges; and practical problems of a particular career field or related fields.

Almost twenty years ago, Joan Stark and Malcolm Lowther (1988) insisted that the two domains of study need not be mutually exclusive, that the demands of the world in which we live today require new ways of

thinking about old divisions between the liberal arts and professional programs. Progress has been made in bringing the two together, although it appears that the professions have reached farther across the aisle to bridge the old divisions. As I have learned more about particular professional programs, I have been surprised to find learning goals that incorporate characteristics of liberal learning.

The business curriculum at Utica College, for example, has been restructured within the past three years. In describing the revision of the program, the business faculty emphasized



that “the focus will be on students developing effective skills in research, analysis, critical thinking, and problem solving. Issues of diversity, globalism, and ethics will be integrated in every part of the curriculum.” The new “Strategic Charter” for the Department of Business and Economics includes the following language in describing the department’s mission: “Our strong foundation in liberal arts strengthens a student’s writing, speaking, analytical, and interpersonal skills. Technology, ethics, leadership, and a global perspective are integrated in both foundation courses and in advanced study of business and economics.” The statement of values in the charter stresses that the department is “dedicated to the promotion of freedom of expression and to diversity of perspective, background, and experience.” If I did not know that this was written by business faculty, I could easily mistake it for a description of goals in a liberal arts major.

The importance of liberal learning for business education is also reflected in specialized accreditation standards. For example, the accounting standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business include a number of requirements related to liberal learning. One of these states that “the general education component should focus on developing student capacities essential to a broad education.” The interpretation section of this requirement goes on to say that

essential capacities should include: the development of written and oral communication competencies; critical thinking skills (including their application to unstructured problems); an appreciation for the arts, literature, history, and science; and an understanding of and ability to effectively utilize computer-based technology, value systems, and the legal, international, and multicultural environment of society.

Within the standards for an accounting curriculum per se, language such as the following can be found: “Coursework in accounting should emphasize theory, concepts, principles, problem solving and research techniques, and should prepare students to solve complex and unstructured problems. It should also prepare students for life-long learning” (AACSB 2000, 44).

The need for students enrolled in professional programs to be liberally educated was acknowledged by a group of accreditors who participated

in the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Project on Accreditation and Assessment (PAA). The PAA project report, *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*, describes the consensus.

It is noteworthy that representatives from the four specialized accrediting agencies in PAA—business, education, engineering, and nursing—are unanimous in declaring that a strong liberal education is essential to success in each of their professions.

Whereas some in the general public may see liberal education as impractical, as an unnecessary luxury, or as unrelated to their intended career, these leaders see it as a central aspect of educational quality in their fields. Further, their agencies have established standards and procedures that place a high priority on liberal education in the accreditation of these specialized programs. (AAC&U 2004, 2–3)

Indeed, when I examine the goals of other professional programs, I see a similar trend toward infusing professional “training” with goals traditionally associated with intellectual skills of liberal learning.

Majors such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, and economic crime investigation (which at Utica College is an interdisciplinary major that combines criminal justice, accounting, and computer science) expect students to develop a capacity for critical thinking. They expect them to develop the ability to think broadly, to work outside the confines of the customary, and to master skills of analysis and synthesis through research. They expect them to understand and respond positively to diversity, to understand and apply ethical principles and tenets of social responsibility, and to demonstrate competency in verbal and written communication.

Increasingly, the professions are appropriating the language and intellectual goals of the liberal arts. It might be said that where professional study was once about learning how to “do” and liberal arts was once about learning how to “think,” the professions have made a concerted effort to bring “doing” and “thinking” closer together within their own curricula. And like the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, the professions are more explicitly acknowledging that professional preparation must include a grounding in general education. Education for profession and

career is more often seen as a continuum that includes the liberal arts as well as specific knowledge and skills in a professional field.

Conflation of liberal and professional education

If institutions are to realize a conflation of liberal and professional education, then the liberal arts must also participate in the mutual integration of liberal and professional learning objectives. I have suggested that the professions have reached farther across the aisle to bridge the old divisions between liberal arts and professional programs. This is not to say, however, that the liberal arts are not extending their hands. At Utica College, for instance, I see majors like English endeavoring to bridge the divide between “thinking” and “doing,” between the theoretical and practical, and between intrinsic and extrinsic value. In describing the English

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program, our English faculty assert that students who complete a major in English will be prepared “to teach, do graduate work, or enter any occupation that requires critical thinking, good writing, and a broad perspective.” Detailed advising outlines prepared by the department will help students “prepare for careers in business, civil service, law, or publishing and for graduate work in English language, English as a second language, linguistics, literature, or writing.”

English faculty at institutions similar to my own describe such English and humanities-related learning outcomes as the ability to ask questions, analyze data, synthesize information, communicate effectively, and learn new concepts as particularly relevant for success in a variety of professions. Too often, however, the curricula of liberal arts majors do not take that next step. They do not incorporate learning



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objectives related specifically to career or professional preparation, even though they allude to preparing students for careers in business, law, public service, and the like. The reasons for this are many and varied. The challenge is to overcome the reticence and to achieve an authentic mutual integration of liberal and professional learning objectives.

As liberal study in the form of general education becomes more pervasive and rigorous for all fields of study—professional and liberal arts majors alike—I predict that the primary differentiator between professional and liberal study will increasingly become the knowledge base of the major field itself. Both will be about “doing,” “thinking,” and “knowing.” As this transpires, the lines between liberal and professional or career programs will blur even more.

It is in this light, and in the face of the professions’ appropriation of liberal arts—like intellectual goals, that a redefinition of liberal education becomes more urgent.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities’ clarion call for a more pragmatic

liberal education resonates strongly in this regard. Carol Geary Schneider has pointed to the need to redefine liberal education to “embrace and address the way knowledge is actually used in the world, including the world of work and civil society.” She further asserts that we must make liberal education more “consciously, intentionally pragmatic, while it remains conceptually rigorous,” and we must make the various themes and practices of liberal education more “intentional, connected, and cumulatively powerful frameworks for *all students’* learning” (2004, 5).

Calls for accountability are all around us. America’s leaders are looking to colleges and universities to educate the next generation of scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and leaders. They are looking to us to do our part in making America competitive in a global marketplace where new giants are emerging. They are looking to us to produce the thinkers, ethicists, and philosophers who can grapple with complex moral issues. Joan Stark and Malcolm Lowther’s twenty-year-old warning could not be more relevant today: liberal and professional study need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, the demands of the world in which we live today more than ever require new ways of thinking about old divisions between liberal arts and professional studies. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

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