
The Future of Liberal Arts in Higher Education: A Policy Delphi Study

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A comprehensive undergraduate experience encompasses a broad survey of the humanities, arts, social sciences, and multicultural and global education, as well as mathematics, science, and technology. These disciplines are essential components of a liberal arts education that prepares students with the skills and knowledge to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic future, regardless of disciplinary major. In recent decades, decreasing enrollments and shrinking budgets have begun to threaten the very existence of many of these programs. In response, some leaders are electing to eliminate liberal arts majors in favor of supporting career and workforce preparation programs, while others are piloting innovative curricular redesign across disciplines that coherently integrates liberal arts programs with professional and career pathways. Many are currently caught in the struggle to determine the best path forward. In this contentious financial and political environment, higher education leaders across the country would benefit from guidance to address this pressing issue. This study utilized the policy Delphi method to engage a panel of education experts in an iterative conversation around how to manage decreasing enrollments in liberal arts courses and programs. The goal was to generate a robust set of policy options designed to enable higher education leaders to optimally respond to the myriad internal and external threats to the liberal arts disciplines.

Methodology

The Delphi is a technique for structuring group communication processes to address complex problems or issues (Linstone and Turoff 1975). It was popularized by Dalkey and Helmer in the 1960's as a method that could mitigate negative effects of group interactions in the process of data collection, which were highly problematic in conventional group decision making processes (Dalkey and Helmer 1963). Such negative group effects include dominance by the minority, groupthink, and low productivity, which are demonstrated in classical interaction group approaches (Hasson and Keeney 2011). The Delphi also supports group interactions that might otherwise not be feasible given the various financial, temporal and geographic constraints of the expert panel. The policy Delphi allows

the researcher to gain expert and impacted stakeholder opinions as to how policies or changes to policies can alter programs and institutions that they are targeted to impact (Manley 2013).

This study harnessed expert thinking and experience to generate a set of actionable policy recommendations to be shared with higher education leaders in the form of a culminating policy brief. To achieve this goal, the panel was guided through three iterative survey rounds over a two-month process of exploration and deliberation. The prospective panelists were identified through snowball sampling which ensured access to a targeted population (Atkinson and Flint 2001). In this case, the population of interest included leaders and experts from several key areas in higher education: accreditation commissioners and board members, leadership and policy scholars from higher education policy and advocacy organizations, and campus leaders including chancellors, presidents, provosts, deans and faculty experts. An invitation email including the purpose of the study and precise dates of administration for all three survey rounds was sent to 57 people. Of those, 41 agreed to participate, 33 completed the Round One survey, 30 completed the Round Two survey, and 21 completed the Round Three survey. The demographic characteristics of the panel can be found in Table 1.

All survey rounds were completed using an online survey tool, which was linked to each invitation email. A pilot survey was conducted prior to the creation of the Round One survey to improve the panelist experience by minimizing unnecessary, redundant, and poorly written items. This type of preliminary "scoping" helps resolve issues with survey wording and length (Frewer et al. 2011). The Round One survey contained open-ended and Likert scale questions. The analysis identified nine overarching themes. Themes I-VII contained detailed information regarding the key issues and conditions that contributed to the decreased demand for liberal arts programs. Theme VIII detailed the way higher education leaders have responded to the problem, and theme IX provided guidance for higher education leaders on the best way forward.

The Round Two survey, which consisted primarily of Likert-scale questions, contained 11 policy solutions developed from the themes identified in the analysis

TABLE 1. Panel Characteristics

DEMOGRAPHIC	Round 1 (n=33)		Round 2 (n=30)		Round 1 (n=21)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
POSITION						
Faculty	7	21.2	7	23.3	4	19.0
Dean	4	12.1	4	13.3	2	9.5
Provost/VP/CAO	8	24.2	7	23.3	5	23.8
President/VP/AVP/Chanc.	5	15.2	5	16.7	4	19.0
Accreditor	2	6.1	2	6.7	2	9.5
Policy Consultant	6	18.2	4	13.3	3	14.3
Administrator	1	3.0	1	3.3	1	4.8
YEARS OF EXPERIENCE						
9–20	9	27.3	8	26.7	6	28.6
21–39	17	51.5	16	53.3	10	47.6
40+	7	21.2	6	20.0	5	23.8
SEX/GENDER						
Female	17	51.5	16	53.3	11	52.4
Male	15	45.5	13	43.3	9	42.9
Prefer not to answer	1	3.0	1	3.3	1	4.8
RACE/ETHNICITY						
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	3	9.1	3	10.0	2	9.5
White	24	78.8	21	70.0	14	66.7
Hawaiian	3	6.1	3	10.0	2	9.5
Portuguese Hawaiian-American	1	3.0	2	6.7	2	9.5
Prefer not to answer	2	3.0	1	3.3	1	4.8

of Round One. Panelists were provided with a summary of the Round One findings along with the link to the Round Two survey. They were asked to rank the policy solutions by desirability, importance, cost, and impact. The results were analyzed and synthesized into a set of six comprehensive policy options which were shared back with the panel in Round Three. In the third and final survey round, the panel was asked to select three preferred policy options and elaborate on key elements, including trade-offs, pros, cons and urgency, for each selection. Since the panelists were also the intended end-users of the summary brief, a decision rule was applied to the analysis of the Round Three survey to omit any policy option that was not in the top three selections of the majority of the panel. The two

preferred policy options presented below were shared back with the panel in the summary brief.

Preferred Policy Options

Recommendation #1: Liberal Arts Course and Program Revitalization

Provide financial and training support to faculty/ departments to encourage the revitalization of traditional Liberal Arts (LA) courses to make them more relevant to diverse student populations; develop courses around contemporary issues utilizing new pedagogies and technologies; and create coherent, transdisciplinary thematic pathways based around specific learning themes making upper-division general education coursework relevant to both civic and professional preparation.

This policy option would provide resources to support the development, implementation and evaluation of revitalized liberal arts programs with clearer pathways from enrollment to career. Control of the curriculum would remain in the hands of the faculty, who would be empowered with resources and support from campus administration to reinvigorate their programs through collaborations with faculty across campus. This approach would support and help grow new and existing transdisciplinary programs that link the knowledge and skills of the liberal arts to workforce and professional preparation. This greater integration of programs across campus, in tandem with enhanced program-to-career advising and pedagogical growth and improvement, would enable liberal arts disciplines to reclaim their well-deserved value and legitimacy through clear demonstration of their 21st century relevance.

Benefits

These improved programs and delivery models would be more appealing to students and their families and ultimately lead to increased enrollments. As a result, increased resources would be directed toward the liberal arts colleges that would enable the preservation of existing liberal arts programs and courses as they grew alongside the new, transdisciplinary courses and programs. These new and revitalized programs would be more inclusive and equitable and utilize high-impact teaching, learning, and co-curricular environments. This would help programs recruit and retain students and faculty from diverse backgrounds as their needs and demands are met by the more relevant, responsive programmatic offerings.

Challenges and Limitations

There were several potentially problematic issues surfaced by the panel regarding this policy option. It would be cost-intensive to implement. Funds for professional development, office and personnel resources, faculty stipends and buy-outs, rewards for successful programs, etc., would require significant and sustained campus investment. Increased enrollments would take time to assess as students benefitting from this structural and curricular innovation began to graduate, therefore it would require patience, commitment, and sustained support by campus leadership. The faculty investment required to reinvigorate the curriculum and update pedagogical approaches would be substantial. Many may resist based on the perception of administrative overreach or be offended by the implication that their current practices

and curriculum require change/defense. Furthermore, some may perceive such discussions as a threat to their disciplines. Campus-level administration may not be nimble enough to support collaborative initiatives of the scale needed to make institutional change, as innovation can be stifled by bureaucracy and reliance on past data to support future programming. Ultimately, this initiative would require a bold pivot from the strategic decision-making models at many institutions. The greatest trade-off would be shifting limited resources away from other projects and priority areas to support this costly endeavor.

Recommendation #2: Public Relations Campaign

Mount an extensive PR campaign to broadly and effectively communicate (to the public, press, politicians, and other stakeholders), the research findings that demonstrate the positive outcomes of LA education including but not limited to the civic, fiscal, and cultural benefits to society; the employer/workforce preference for the characteristics and skills of students who have received a liberal education; and the career/advanced degree outcomes and job satisfaction levels of LA majors in relation to non-LA majors.

Overview

Effectively communicating the value of higher education has been consistently problematic for campus leadership, particularly in relation to the liberal arts disciplines. This current era of increasing political polarization and anti-intellectualism has catalyzed increased skepticism and misinformation regarding the value of liberal arts. This has negatively shaped public attitudes toward higher education, which impacts program enrollments and damages campus morale. Higher education leaders must launch coordinated public relations campaigns to disseminate a powerful counter-narrative to these derisive attacks by summarizing key findings of literature demonstrating the efficacy of liberal arts education in preparing students for career and civic life; clearly communicating ways in which the liberal arts are relevant to 21st century learners through examples and success stories; and reaffirming the value of American higher education as a public good (deserving of public support) that promotes democracy and equality through research, education, and community service.

Benefits

This campaign would lead to increased and more diverse enrollments in liberal arts programs as students and their families better understand the benefit of liberal

arts education for career, life, and community well-being. More importantly, they must see themselves as welcome and included. If the case for higher education as a public good can effectively be made with state and national policymakers, funding may be restored to more manageable levels, enabling institutions to innovate programming and practices and provide better financial aid and services to students in need.

Challenges and Limitations

This may be an overly idealistic policy option given the current political environment where truth and evidence are undervalued and all educational sectors are consistently derided and under-resourced. It would be very costly to mount a successful multi-tiered public relations campaign that effectively targets diverse audiences. The greatest trade-off would be the significant investment in time from administrators and faculty that could otherwise be focused on research, teaching, and other priority areas.

Effectiveness of the Policy Delphi

The summary brief was emailed to the 21 panelists who completed all three survey rounds, along with a link to a brief experience survey. The experience survey was designed to ascertain how effective the panelists found the Delphi process and whether they would use the recommendations presented in the summary brief at their own institutions. Of the 21 panelists, 13 completed the experience survey. Seven indicated that the policy Delphi method was very effective and six said it was somewhat effective as a tool for generating useful policy recommendations. One panelist commented, "I think the results are quite credible, and gathering information this way is a lot easier (and less expensive) than flying all these folks around the country to talk it through. The outcome would probably have been about the same." Four panelists said it was very likely and five said it was somewhat likely that they would use the recommendations at their own institutions.

Lessons and Limitations

One of the primary lessons learned from email and experience survey feedback was that the Round One and Round Three surveys required too much time to complete. The one-week survey administration window allotted for each of the survey rounds was not enough time for everyone. Several panelists indicated that they would have preferred more time to complete the surveys. Another issue identified was question creation. One panelist commented that the questions were too

similar to one another in the Round One survey. Several panelists responded to questions by either referring back to their response to a previous question or by repeating their response in more than one question. One could conclude that the questions were either too similar, were not clearly worded, or were redundant with other questions in the survey. In future administrations of the policy Delphi, it would be advisable to add psychometrically trained individuals to the research team and engage in more rigorous pilot testing. This would help mitigate several of the issues identified above.

Implications and Recommendations

The Delphi method has been available for over a half-century, but technological advancements have made it even more convenient and cost-effective for both the researchers and the panelists. The results and comments from the experience survey indicated that not only was the method effective, but the panelists believed the results were useful and would consider using them at their own institutions. This study could be enhanced by engaging in complementary research methods such as focus groups and interviews to illuminate a richer understanding of the promising practices, pilot initiatives, and lessons identified in the findings. This data could inform the creation of an even more detailed policy briefing document supported by concrete examples to accompany each recommendation, making them even more compelling and perhaps increasing usability. Given these findings, it would be advisable for further policy Delphi studies to be coordinated at the national level to support important policy discussions among higher education leaders.

There are many options to be explored regarding ways to incorporate the policy Delphi into current group communication practices. This study provides some evidence that it was effective and yielded useful, practical findings. Higher education leaders engage in a multitude of national meetings and conferences throughout the year, many of which are designed to engage them collectively around emerging problems and pressing policy issues. These events are costly to attend and cannot always support the kind of deep-dive into an issue that might be necessary to affect real policy change. The policy Delphi approach should be considered as a viable alternative to in-person sessions, or perhaps even as a complementary tool for engaging leaders and decisionmakers in a richer conversation around important policy matters that could be incorporated into other planning agendas as advanced preparation for future in-person discussions. Several panelists noted that they would like to continue

this discussion with their peers and colleagues. This suggests that perhaps the policy Delphi would be a useful tool to help determine possible topics for future national conferences and meetings.

The two policy recommendations included in the summary brief will require strong leadership to implement. They are bold initiatives that may be costly to implement and require significant cultural change within institutions in order to be successful and sustainable. Perhaps the easiest to implement is the recommendation to more effectively communicate the benefits of liberal arts education, and higher education in general, to the public, the media, and the government. Nearly every university president has a communications team. These existing structures already have their public relations strategies in place. What they need is to be equipped with the right knowledge and data. By linking these teams with the existing research, the broken informational pipeline can begin to be repaired and a truly effective public relations campaign can begin to take root.

The recommendation to innovate liberal arts programs and courses could take years to operationalize, but with good strategic planning and faculty engagement, it may be the key to saving liberal arts education. If the desired outcomes are realized, the results would be a radical re-visioning of liberal arts in American higher education that simultaneously transforms courses and programs into high-demand, interdisciplinary career pathways, while providing the resources to preserve the traditional disciplines and engage a new generation of students in the liberal arts. These reinvigorated programs would draw diverse students and faculty, becoming more inclusive of and responsive to our increasingly multicultural society.

Liberal arts education provides students with access to an extensive array of knowledge and skills essential to creating and maintaining a thriving democratic society. When the spirit of inquiry into a broad field of diverse knowledge systems and multicultural perspectives is diminished, so too departs the empathy and understanding that defines and distinguishes humanity from the rest. Now more than ever, we need to re-engage the populace in critical inquiry and self-reflection. The policy recommendations produced by this expert panel can work in concert with existing campus agendas to help move American higher education into a new era where it may finally act as the great equalizer that our country is so desperately in need of today.

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