

Chapter 3

Reclaiming Funding and Benefits for the Liberal Arts: Why Colleges and Universities Should Add More Practical Training

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ABSTRACT

The current focus on promoting STEM disciplines is, on the surface, an understandable reaction to the present economic environment. But a defense of the liberal arts does not need to be blind to today's economic and educational climates. In fact, now is the time for liberal arts academic programs to modernize and develop. Just as it is clear that proponents of STEM programs should recognize the value of creative and comparative thinking fostered by the broader educational fields, the time has clearly arrived for the liberal arts to also recognize, and be infused with, more practical, tangible training. In addition to enhancing graduates' preparedness for the workforce, these tactics would also buttress the argument for continued funding of liberal arts programs by appealing to the current desire to allocate resources to practical disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

Since taking office in 2011, Florida Governor Rick Scott has proposed a “freeze” in university tuition rates for those enrolled in engineering or biotechnology degrees. He signed an education bill that would see Florida educational institutions judged,

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in part, on the percentage of degrees awarded in areas of “strategic emphasis” such as science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) and taken other budgeting steps to ensure that STEM fields receive priority over other disciplines (Curry, 2016). Scott’s aim is to educate students in areas most likely to result in employment following graduation (Curry, 2016).

In North Carolina, Governor Pat McCrory has been advocating legislation since 2013 that would base funding for the State’s public colleges and universities on post-graduate employment rather than enrollment. Governor McCrory has publicly questioned the value of liberal arts studies, saying in one representative statement “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”(Kiley, 2013). McCrory has since announced the *Connect NC* bond initiative that will pump hundreds of millions of dollars into the North Carolina university and college system. The funds will be targeted to “...preparing students for careers, particularly those studying in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics” (Governor.nc.gov, 2015).

In early 2016 Governor Matt Bevin of Kentucky announced, during the rollout of his proposed two-year state budget, his vision that over time all state funding of higher education will be incentive-based and directed to programs that lead to STEM careers (Blackford, 2016).

It is tempting to write off the above anecdotes as merely examples of Republican politicians seeking to penalize academic areas they feel to be at odds with conservative ideology. But even the Obama administration has encouraged STEM job placement, versus Art History, and performance-based metrics for colleges, a system to rank and measure programs based in part on earnings post-graduation (Cohen, 2016).

We can easily identify the factors leading to this focus on developing the STEM disciplines at the expense of the liberal arts. The financial crisis that began in earnest in 2007 plunged the U.S. economy into the longest and most severe recession since the Great Depression. The recession led to unprecedented job loss and unemployment rates, which have remained high even after the worst of the recession seemed to pass. Even for those that are employed, growth in wages has been anemic.

Add to the mix the ever-increasing cost of higher education and the country’s burgeoning student loan debt problem, and it is entirely unsurprising that politicians and policy makers have sought a “fix”. And what have they concluded is the cure for what ails us? Simple: encourage our students to pursue degrees that clearly lead to jobs in science and engineering. Visit the website for the Department of Labor and you will learn that “STEM occupations are actively promoted by many federal agencies, such as the National Science Foundation, and are viewed as having some of the best opportunities for job growth in the future” (Jones, 2014). The Department of Labor also asserts that while only five percent of U.S. workers are employed in

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