

The Importance of the Liberal Arts & Social Sciences

By Elizabeth D. Capaldi and Mark Lussier

During a discussion of research metrics and the realization of benchmarks for sponsored research established by the Arizona Board of Regents (June 2012), the question of the value of the humanities and social sciences emerged, since these fields do not generally generate large amounts of sponsored research dollars. While some humanities and social science research does generate big funding (one example being the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at ASU, which received two large grants from the Department of Defense [\$1.2 million and \$1.9 million]), most do not, in part because research is not as expensive as that conducted in the sciences and in engineering and in part because the external resources available for these scholars are limited. Research in the humanities and social sciences is valuable because of the perspective given on our own place and time. Scholars in these areas provide the backbone of undergraduate education in the United States, which is the great strength of the American higher education system. Unlike countries in Asia and Europe, students in the United States are required to develop an understanding of other cultures and times, which provide perspective on their own experience and those of others they will encounter, and they are also required to learn to write, to speak, and to think clearly and to be exposed to the arts as a way of deepening their cultural understanding at home and abroad.

David J. Skorton (President, Cornell University) found that training in the humanities was eminently “utilitarian” in a wide range of important contexts, from international affairs and national security to scientific breakthroughs and technological innovation: “when our generals and diplomats speak of securing our future by ‘winning the hearts and minds of the people,’ they are talking about understanding the language, culture, religion, and values of people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and elsewhere.”¹ Only the humanities and social sciences take such dimensions as their purview of research, and universities would be hampered in achieving their long-term commitments to the citizens of the state and country in neglecting them in favor of purely short-term fiscal concerns. In addition, there is no necessary connection between undergraduate major and employment. Students in specific majors frequently find careers outside of the major. For instance, physics students are highly valued on Wall Street. *The New York Times* (Nov 3, 2010) summarizes a study by an acclaimed University of Texas economics

professor, Daniel Hamermesh, who researched career earnings data sorted by choice of major. His research concluded that: “Perceptions of the variations in economic success among graduates in different majors are exaggerated. Our results imply that given a student’s ability, achievement and effort, his or her earnings do not vary all that greatly with the choice of undergraduate major.”

As it turns out, starting salaries are not highly correlated with earnings growth. “The survey looked at how much salaries increased over time. Liberal-arts-school graduates see their median total compensation grow by 95% after about 10 years, to \$89,379 from \$45,747. At the bottom: Engineering-school grads, who earn the highest starting salaries, yet see their paychecks expand just 76% by their career midpoints to \$103,842 from \$59,058 ... History-majors-turned-business-consultants earn a median total compensation of \$104,000, similar to their counterparts who pursued a business major like economics.” Although career-based curriculum policies seem to satisfy the demands of the customer, or students and parents in most cases, these students may soon find themselves less marketable in the business world. In fact, a survey conducted by Hobart and William Smiths Colleges found that only 37 percent of the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) questioned in the survey stated their belief that “the purpose of a diploma is to acquire work skills” (*Fortune*, 1997). The same study found that 90 percent of these CEOs believe that critical thinking is derived from an education with a core humanities curriculum and the ability to solve problems is derived from an education specializing in liberal arts studies (*Fortune*, 1997). Highly successful business professionals – e.g. CEOs Carly Fiorina, Michael Eisner, and Bruce Bodaken – endorse liberal arts training as the best preparation for life and work, emphasizing the scope, rigor, and flexibility of thinking it encourages (as we will cite below). In addition, students who are experts in teaching and learning methods and well versed in the core subjects of English, math, science, and history become strong PreK-12 teachers, who positively impact the achievement of children.

Liberal arts education actually has higher payoffs in the long run as this education prepares an individual to be adaptable and more flexible when changing careers. Forces of change and innovation in our society demand a workforce educated and motivated to learn and develop new skills and new competencies as new opportunities arise. Applied majors do better a few years out of college, but max-out on their earnings potential fairly quickly. They short-

change their long-term prospects because they miss a form of education that sharpens the skills and qualities of mind that promote upward social mobility and the ability to think in creative and innovative ways.

Anecdotal Testimonials

Statistical data often offers dry analysis, but the findings enumerated above are borne out by direct testimonials offered by leading CEOs of major corporations and those in leadership positions in government, and we will close with a brief discussion of five such individuals. Carly Fiorina (former CEO of Hewlett-Packard), with a degree in Medieval History and Philosophy (Stanford 1976), has argued that her curiosity about social transformation in the Middle Ages folded neatly into the digital awakening encountered in her daily management operations, and Michael Eisner (CEO of Walt Disney) took no business classes but obtained a degree (Denison 1964) as a double major in English and Theater and urged his own sons to study the liberal arts. Sue Kronick (group president of Federated Department Stores) found her Asian Studies degree (Connecticut College 1973) allowed her to analyze India's economic system and slash import costs, saying "My background served me well ... Liberal arts is about approaching problems from a different point of view."

Shifting from the realm of business to that of national service, two examples seem paramount. General David Petraeus, who served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and currently serves as Director of National Intelligence, earned an MPA and a PhD in Public Administration from Princeton University (1974, 1987). His dissertation work, grounded in cultural and military history, provided the template for the counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq. Finally, one last statement offered by Robert Gates, who was past Secretary of Defense and former President of Texas A&M University, takes a similar view. Dr. Gates has served eight presidents in a variety of posts, and in an interview two months ago (May 24, 2012) he spoke directly and eloquently about the current situation while at Yale University to deliver its commencement address: "I'm very worried about the liberal arts today . . . education is not just technical skills—it's history, economics, literature[.] . . . As budgets come under pressure, people are more concerned about finding jobs and wonder whether liberal arts is the place to be. If I had to do it all over again I would certainly major in history again."² Whether in business or in national service, each of these individuals places considered emphasis on the value of the liberal arts and the importance

of unsponsored research, since the outcomes of this educational approach can, in fact, solve specific problems beyond mere technical skills and thereby are capable of transforming the world in which we live.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-j-skorton/humanities-fundamental-utilitarian_b_877386.html

² “Listen and Compromise: Robert Gates at Yale University,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEpz3YPjLLA>. Secretary Gates holds a BA in History from William and Mary (1965), an MA in History from Indiana (1966), and a PhD in Russian and Soviet History from Georgetown (1974).