Every session we have with parents and students on college planning inevitably leads to this question: “Why should my child go to a liberal arts college? How will it prepare him/her for a job or career? Why not jump right into a specialized major?” In this chapter, we answer that question. We have found that there is a great deal of misunderstanding and a general lack of information about the nature of a liberal arts education, its value in society, and its role in preparing students for graduate programs and careers. Many students are unaware of the differences between a “college” and a “university,” between a graduate and an undergraduate education and degree, and between degree programs specializing in technical, business, arts, or other fields and those offering or demanding study across the arts and sciences disciplines.

We defend the value of a liberal arts education, building on the work of many prominent scholars who have argued that an education spanning multiple academic disciplines and requiring that students learn core concepts, methods, and content builds unparalleled strengths in reasoning, understanding, and communication, preparing students for any academic or professional challenge they may choose. At the same time, we avoid for the most part the disagreements among “liberal” and “conservative” thinkers on necessary reforms in liberal arts education and on whether changes over the past several decades have been “good” or “bad.” However, we must add that in our minds, liberal arts colleges have changed for the better and significant choice exists among these institutions to give students a great deal of leeway in determining which curriculum and environment best suits their needs and interests.
GOALS OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

As Nathan Glazer recently stated: “Liberal education has meant many things, but at its core is the idea of the kind of education that a free citizen of a society needs to participate in it effectively.”* In a complex, shifting world, it is essential to develop a high degree of intellectual literacy and critical-thinking skills, a sense of moral and ethical responsibility to one's community, the ability to reason clearly, to think rationally, to analyze information intelligently, to respond to people in a compassionate and fair way, to continue learning new information and concepts over a lifetime, to appreciate and gain pleasure from the beauty of the arts and literature and to use these as an inspiration and a solace when needed, to revert to our historical past for lessons that will help shape the future intelligently and avoid unnecessary mistakes, to create a sense of self-esteem that comes from personal accomplishments and challenges met with success.

- Think and problem-solve in a creative, risk-taking manner.
- Express ideas and feelings in organized, logical, coherent, descriptive, rich language both orally and in writing.
- Analyze, organize, and use data for meaningful solutions.
- Develop the capability of setting goals with appropriate information and research and then achieve these goals with proper means.
- Help define a personal-value and ethical system that serves throughout life in making the challenging decisions one will face.
- Have the capacity and instinct to work in a cooperative, collaborative manner with others in one's professional and community life.

These are ambitious goals! How different colleges and universities achieve them reveals variations in educational philosophy, institutional personality and history, and particular social and academic strengths and missions. All the liberal arts colleges share a commitment to disciplinary and student diversity, intellectual and otherwise. To varying degrees, these colleges require students to pursue courses in key academic subject areas, some with more specificity, others with a great deal of freedom, in order to expose students to multiple areas of knowledge, diverging perspectives on the world, and different paths to scientific, ethical, social, and humanistic understanding.

Content is important, but so are process and style. Liberal arts colleges may expect students

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to master a core body of knowledge, including Western and, increasingly, non-Western masterworks in fields ranging from physics to music to government, comparative literature, history, and language. Students will build on their secondary school education by majoring in one or more specific areas of knowledge (academic “disciplines” or “fields”), but will pursue areas of interest within key general academic areas: the physical sciences; mathematics; the humanities (history, English and other languages, visual and performing arts, and so forth); and the social sciences (political science, sociology, etc.). So-called “cross-disciplinary” courses of study are offered in such areas as women’s studies, African-American studies, environmental studies, and social psychology. Students will be exposed to a wide range of subjects that they may not have encountered previously: anthropology, genetics, philosophy, criminology, economics, engineering sciences, religion, education. But all of this will be in the context of a broad-based approach to learning. One cannot graduate from a liberal arts college without having experienced coursework in a multitude of subject areas. The goal: an intelligent and “well-educated” student who can converse knowledgeably about a wide range of topics and who has learned how to learn about anything under the sun.

Thus, style and process undergird a liberal arts education. Students learn how to think, approach problems, write, present information intelligibly, and make coherent arguments in their field of choice and others they may encounter. A liberal arts education challenges students’ conceptions and pushes them to ask difficult questions, question established answers, and develop their own arguments through logical reasoning and the discovery of new understandings. A liberal arts education strives to help a student specialize in at least one particular area, but also to see and make connections among multiple fields of inquiry. As Ernest Boyer, a former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has argued, traditional research designed to promote the advancement of knowledge should be complemented by the “scholarship of integration,” which makes connections across disciplines; the “scholarship of application,” which concentrates on the interrelationship between theory and practice; and the “scholarship of teaching,” which both educates students and attracts them to the academic world. Such a view of scholarship clearly relates to the goals of a liberal arts education.

Learning How to Learn: The Luxury of Time

Alan Ryan writes: “At its best, liberal education opens a conversation between ourselves and the immortal dead, gives us voices at our shoulders asking us to think again and try harder.” How many of us, academics or not, would not relish the notion of taking four years of our lives to keep open that conversation, enjoying what we call the luxury of time, to think, to make connections, to question, and to learn? Howard Bowen, a highly respected

teacher/researcher of higher education, writes in a reprint of an earlier important study:

As compared with others, college-educated people on the average are more open-minded toward new ideas, more curious, more adventurous in confronting new questions and problems, and more open to experience. They are likely to be more rational in their approach to issues. They are more aware of diversity of opinions and outlooks, of the legitimacy of disagreement . . . They are less authoritarian, less prejudiced, and less dogmatic. At the same time, they are more independent and autonomous in their views, more self-confident and more ready to disagree. They are more cosmopolitan. *

Bowen's point is that attempts to measure the value-added benefit of a college education often consider the wrong issue. The major benefit of a liberal arts education is that it will produce the kinds of educated leaders that will benefit our economic, political, social, and family lives. Such leaders include Carleton S. Fiorina, a woman recently named chief executive of Hewlett-Packard. Breaking gender barriers in leadership in the important telecommunications and computer industries, Ms. Fiorina has an undergraduate degree from Stanford University in liberal arts. Her fields? Medieval history and philosophy.+ 

John Wooden, the great basketball coach at UCLA, once quipped, "It's what you know after you learn everything that counts." A liberal arts education, particularly one obtained in a residential college setting, seeks to provide that learning experience and that sense of knowing a lot, but also knowing what you do not know. "We go to college," the poet and teacher Robert Frost said, "to be given one more chance to learn to read in case we haven't learned in high school. Once we have learned to read, the rest can be trusted to add itself to us." As with the majority of his observations and commentary, Frost is full of irony in his view of the purpose of the liberal arts experience. His message, as true today as it was many years ago (when Frost was at Dartmouth College and Amherst), is that reading intelligently and analytically, with a critical mental eye, will enable one to carry on his/her education for the remainder of a lifetime. In a sense, once one has "learned to read" in its broadest meaning, he/she is prepared to go out into the world. It is the definition of reading that counts.

Ernest Martin Hopkins, a former president of Dartmouth College, characterized in his 1929 convocation address to the entering class the view of the essential qualities of the liberal arts college: "The liberal arts college is interested in the wholeness of life and in all human activity . . . It is characterized as liberal because it recognizes no master to its limit to seek knowledge and no boundaries beyond which it has not the right to search. Its primary concern is not with what


men and women shall do but with what they shall be.” The liberal arts education is the means by which outstanding young men and women will develop those skills and qualities of mind and spirit that will enable them to lead productive and valuable lives. This means not only for their own well-being, but also for the good of their families, communities, and the larger society. The colleges we have selected are among the leaders in higher education in preparing young adults to take their places as responsible and enlightened leaders in the world. To think critically and with a conscience, to be resilient in an accelerating world of technological, intellectual, cultural, and social change are critical skills for the individual and society’s maintenance.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE LIBERAL ARTS IN ACTION

Pomona College’s faculty has a ten-point list of what skills it teaches to help students succeed in later life through exposure to the arts and sciences curriculum. The college educates students to:

1. Read literature critically.
2. Use and understand the scientific method.
3. Use and understand formal reasoning.
4. Understand and analyze data.
5. Analyze creative works critically.
6. Perform or produce creative art.
7. Explore and understand human behavior.
8. Explore and understand historical cultures.
9. Compare and contrast contemporary cultures.
10. Think critically about values and rationality.

TRENDS IN THE LIBERAL ARTS OVER TIME

The liberal arts colleges in America are dynamic institutions, constantly, if slowly, evolving in reaction to their environment, the demands of students, parents, graduates, policy makers, and others, and the leadership of administrators and faculty. Important changes have taken place in the liberal arts and in post-secondary education over the past several decades, including diversification of staff, student body, and curriculum; provision of financial aid; accentuation of the continuing struggle between teaching and research; expansion of educational access; and pursuit of graduate degrees. We discuss these trends and others on the following pages.
Inclusion

Perhaps one of the most powerful changes in liberal arts colleges since the 1950s has been the expansion of educational opportunities for non-white, non-Protestant, non-wealthy, and non-male students. The policy of exclusion at the elite institutions based on racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic factors is clearly a thing of the past. These colleges have redefined their missions and have worked assiduously to attract, retain, and assist a student body that better reflects American society.

In addition to doing away with formal, public, or hidden policies of exclusion, selective colleges have actively tried both to "change their image" and broaden their appeal and impact. They recruit students from "non-traditional" backgrounds by visiting their schools and writing to them. They hire special admissions officers of color, put together targeted informational materials, work with the College Board to identify talented test-takers, and form close associations with organizations like A Better Chance and Prep for Prep, which help students of color succeed and go on to college. Colleges have boosted financial aid resources and expanded efforts of alumni to identify appropriate candidates. They have hired multicultural advisers and staffed centers on campus to encourage tolerance and diversity and to support each student's needs. Of course, this is a continuing process, and colleges, not to mention American society, are learning about what it takes to promote and maintain diversity in a way that is successful for everyone. But a major shift in thinking has occurred so that not only do colleges prohibit and discourage exclusion, they see inclusion and diversity as essential elements of their educational missions.

Liberal arts colleges have also continued to diversify their faculty, who serve as role models and offer differing voices to expose students to multiple perspectives. In the past, class snobbery extended to the college faculty as well as to the students. Very few teachers were not white, male, Protestant, and educated from the same small band of institutions. Today, liberal arts colleges certainly cross-fertilize each other's faculties, but representation of multiple groups and viewpoints on the faculty has dramatically increased.

Not only are the faculty more diverse at the liberal arts colleges, but the courses they teach have broadened and fragmented. At most liberal arts colleges today, students can access courses in new areas of scholarship, including African-American studies, women's studies (gender studies), environmental studies, non-Western literature, ethics and science, and so forth. The "core curriculum" of the great works of Western literature, history, philosophy, mathematics, sciences, and the arts has splintered and branched. Few colleges have completely dismantled the "core." Most have found a middle path, combining "traditional" scholarship with exposure to new and alternative ("critical," "postmodern," "non-Western") fields of study.

Finally, we should mention the prominent role of athletics as a means of recruitment among disadvantaged and nontraditional groups over time. This was one of the first vehicles by which colleges identified talented students in nontraditional environments. While the Ivies still do not offer athletic scholarships, their need-based financial aid has allowed them to attract and enroll
“scholar-athletes” regardless of ability to pay. The fact that at many selective liberal arts colleges some 50 percent of students are receiving some sort of financial aid indicates their willingness to promote socioeconomic diversity. Many potential students and families may still react negatively to the cost of private liberal arts colleges and the image they may still carry of being snobbish, elitist places. However, while these colleges do not have the natural diversity that many state universities likely attract, they have pursued diversity through active recruitment of various student populations. And the public universities have launched similarly active programs to attract students of color and other underrepresented groups.

**Liberal Arts Colleges: A Small But Important Sector**

Only 4 percent of today’s collegiate student body is enrolled in residential liberal arts colleges, yet these institutions remain a vital force in setting high standards of teaching and intellectual rigor. Many larger institutions have modeled their undergraduate liberal arts programs on the traditional residential college model. What also appears to be true is that the small band of such colleges carries a disproportionate influence in higher education. The recent Carnegie Report on teaching, as well as many prominent educators, urge the large universities to follow the residential colleges’ emphasis on intellectual standards and teaching and interaction with students. The growth in honors programs and residential colleges within larger universities testifies to this fact.

What drives the degree of excellence of education at the liberal arts colleges is the caliber and commitment of the faculty. Endowment building and alumni support are the keys to creating and sustaining a first-rate faculty. This is the essence of the commitment of these colleges. One does not find an inexperienced graduate teaching assistant or an adjunct instructor, or a large lecture hall outfitted with a large video screen. An education in the liberal arts fits hand-in-glove with a teaching style that emphasizes faculty-student interaction, discussion-based learning, and opportunities to practice writing, speaking, and becoming involved.

There is a natural tension between the more career and vocationally directed curriculum offered at the majority of colleges today, particularly in the public colleges and universities, and the more general liberal arts–based programs that emphasize a coherent intellectual experience for students. The latter group aims to provide exposure to the full range of disciplines—the humanities, the sciences, the arts, the social sciences, and languages—that have influenced our development as a democratic nation and people. We will discuss below the important skills for success in virtually all endeavors of work and living. It is noteworthy that the best of the career-oriented programs model the liberal arts curriculum to the extent of requiring students to take courses in the humanistic tradition.
THE SUCCESS OF THE LIBERAL ARTS: WHY DOES SUCH AN EDUCATION WORK?

What is it about a liberal arts education that makes it successful, and what is the definition of success? What are the advantages of the liberal arts “experience”? Here, we will discuss the other factors that make a liberal arts education work.

Positive Effects of the Residential College Experience

It is difficult to extricate liberal arts education from its traditional American home base, the residential college. We are speaking here in general of the classic small to middle-size colleges (1,500–5,000 undergraduate students) that offer a liberal arts curriculum through a four-year program leading to the bachelor of arts (B.A.) degree. And we are talking more specifically about the Hidden Ivies, the select group of colleges we are recommending. They have in common with the Ivy League colleges (see Chapter 2) the advantages of large financial endowments relative to their enrollment, very high admissions selectivity, a top-flight faculty, a large administrative/student personnel support team, excellent facilities for academic and residential life, a strong ethos of community and one’s place within it; and very high rates of graduation within four or five years. For graduates, there is a high percentage of placement in graduate schools, fellowships won, eventual completion of masters and doctoral degrees, and support from alumni. In researching the most selective colleges, we have found that particular schools like Dartmouth, Williams, and Princeton had extremely positive ratings by students of faculty, sense of community, school spirit, support of adult mentors and staff, peer interaction and influence, rate of graduation, and graduate school admission.* The positive effects of all of these interacting factors contribute to student happiness, learning, and success.

Factors That Make a Liberal Arts Education Work

These are some of the most important factors that lead to student success during and after a liberal arts education:

• Faculty commitment to teaching and interacting with students. There is a clear emphasis on the value of the undergraduate, the student pursuing the B.A. degree, as opposed to the graduate, the student pursuing the M.A., Ph.D., or other advanced degree. In part, this is because graduate students are found mainly on the campuses of universities rather than colleges. Faculty at the freestanding liberal arts colleges and smaller universities with strongly developed "col-
Liberal arts colleges tend to self-select. In other words, they choose to serve at these institutions because they are committed to teaching, mentoring, and interacting with their undergraduate students.

**Opportunities to participate in research projects.** Since there are no or few graduate students present, undergraduate students often have the chance to work with their full-time professors on challenging research, writing, and internship experiences.

**Intimacy of and opportunity for peer interaction.** Residential living and easy participation in campus organizations—athletic, social, political, journalistic, musical, academic—foster community connections and student-to-student learning and engagement. Since most students live on campus in dormitories, particularly during the early college years, they forge bonds with one another that last a lifetime, and they continue to learn from one another informally during “downtime” and even during formal residentially based mentoring and faculty seminars.

**Opportunities for leadership.** Due to the smaller size of the colleges and their emphasis on involvement, students can develop their leadership skills in community service, class leadership, sports captioning, club presidencies, and so forth. They can lead a balanced life on campus, combining academics, extracurricular involvement, and social life. They can identify themselves in their college community by taking on the mantle of leadership in one area or another.

**A broader exposure to activities and experiences.** Due to the soft boundaries in small to medium institutions, whether in academic disciplines or extracurricular life, students encounter multiple learning opportunities, pushing them to expand their perspective and to take on new roles.

**Accessible support services.** Students find it easier to get academic, financial, personal, and career counseling in a more intimate setting.

**An historic and articulated sense of the college.** This is conveyed through the classroom, the dormitory, and the activities available on campus. Students gain an understanding of the mission of the school, whether through the emphasis on the honor code at Haverford College or a commitment to a core liberal arts curriculum at Reed College. A sense of identity, individually defined by each student but broadly shared by the college community, permeates college life and stays with students when they leave.
• **A strong commitment to developing essential skills.** An emphasis on promoting rigorous critical thinking, analytical abilities, and communication skills, especially writing, inspires the entire curriculum.

• **Synthesis of teaching and research.** Faculty are required to combine teaching with scholarship in order to be up-to-date in their fields and serve as models for students. The teaching and research processes inform one another, as faculty learn from students and combine historical knowledge of their field with current findings and theories.

• **Small classes.** Fewer students in each class and a lower student–full-time-faculty ratio on the whole provide more opportunity for discussion, questions, and collaborative student projects. There is a difference between listening to a lecture twice weekly by a professor in a class of five hundred students, reinforced by one class a week of forty students taught by a graduate teaching assistant (the model at the larger public universities for many of the introductory and even second-level courses), and learning in a class of fifteen to twenty-five, or even forty to seventy-five, taught by a full-time professor in a more discussion-oriented or Socratic format (the model at the smaller liberal arts colleges). In fact, the larger universities have instituted “critical thinking” and “honors” programs, offering more challenging courses taught by professors in a seminar style in order to emulate the format of the smaller colleges. Educators recognize the value of addressing students’ multiple learning styles in collaborative, more personalized, and more intellectually stimulating ways.

• **Less emphasis on multiple-choice exams.** With the classroom format and teaching style discussed above, the liberal arts colleges can more easily conduct the examination of student knowledge in ways other than the multiple-choice formats so necessary to test large numbers of students. And when professors give essay examinations or multiple writing assignments, they themselves do the grading rather than assigning the task to a graduate-student assistant. Undergraduates thus receive more informed feedback from professors and are able to express themselves more fully and subtly in their answers. Learning the writing and thinking skills necessary to make coherent arguments is a key facet of the examination process in the liberal arts college.

• **Engagement in the classroom and on campus.** Students have opportunities for engagement on many fronts. The peer influence that raises everyone’s personal expectations results in a very high rate of graduation, which varies from 85 to 97 percent of each class. This is extraordinary when you consider that the national rate of graduation from college over a five-year period now averages 40 percent! Even at
the most selective large universities the rate of graduation in a normal time frame is only 65 to 75 percent.

**Successful Graduate School Admission**

As the B.A. degree has become more common in society, the M.A., M.B.A., Ph.D., J.D., M.S.W., M.S., M.D., or other graduate degree has become even more important in distinguishing individual accomplishments and abilities. There is impressive data to reinforce the advantage of choosing the right college on an individual basis, looking for the college that will provide the best foundational and formative educational experience where students can pursue the right courses in their areas of interest. Most families are naive in thinking that one has to attend an Ivy college in order to qualify for the best graduate schools. The liberal arts colleges we review here and many others have equally distinguished records in training and preparing their undergraduates for professional and academic graduate school programs. Let us offer the following as an example in the disciplines of science and engineering for students who attain a Ph.D.: The following Hidden Ivies—Carleton, Grinnell, Haverford, Oberlin, Pomona, Swarthmore, and Reed—on the basis of the number of students per 100 enrolled, send more of their undergraduates on to Ph.D.'s than all of the large and distinguished research universities with the exception of MIT, and at an equal or better ratio than Columbia, Yale, Harvard, and Johns Hopkins. Of course, the latter group's total numbers are much higher. Other liberal arts schools like Bryn Mawr, Amherst, and Williams also have a remarkable record of preparing students for doctoral work in science and technology.

We often talk about attending a top liberal arts college as “not closing any doors.” In fact, attending such a college can open many previously unknown doors. Even in an area as competitive and well-known as medicine, liberal arts colleges do an outstanding job of sending their graduates on to become M.D.'s. These students often do not major in a hard science. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) reports that of all students in 1997–1998 who entered medical school, over 5,000 of a total of over 43,000 students reported majoring in a nonscience subject. For example, 525 history majors entered medical school, with an acceptance rate of 50.7 percent. That compares to a whopping 16,337 biology majors, whose acceptance rate was only 38.1 percent. And 202 philosophy majors were accepted at a rate of 53.0 percent. The AAMC's guide explains some admission goals this way:

> **Medicine demands superior personal attributes of its students and practitioners.** Integrity and responsibility assume major importance in the classroom and research laboratory as well as in relationships with patients and colleagues. Medical schools also look for evidence of other traits such as leadership, social maturity, purpose, motivation, initiative, curiosity, common sense, perseverance, and breadth of interests. Anyone considering a career as a physician must be able to relate to people effectively. The increasing emphasis on a team approach to medical care adds another dimension to the need for this skill. Because of the demanding nature of both the training