
THE PBK PRESIDENTS POLL

College's Raison d'être

British literature or software engineering?

Q.

Andrew Delbanco, in *College*, warning that liberal arts education is at risk in America, says college should be “a place where young people fight out among and within themselves contending ideas of the meaningful life.” At the moment, the most popular college major is business administration.

Given the job market, can you make a persuasive argument to your students for a liberal arts education over professional training?

A.

YES: 97% NO: 3%

For our third poll of the 255 college or university presidents whose institutions have Phi Beta Kappa chapters, we asked, essentially, what is college for? Should students study HTML code or Shakespeare? Most of the 33 respondents vouched for the value of a liberal arts degree over vocational training. (The response rate was 13 percent: May is a busy month at universities.)

“Good professional training must include the kind of intellectual scope and imaginative flexibility that one develops only through liberal learning,” said Brennan O’Donnell, president of Manhattan College. “I’ve heard many times from graduates of our school of engineering (all of whom take required liberal arts courses) some version of the following: ‘My engineering courses got me my job; my arts courses got me my promotions.’”

But when faced with a choice between finance and Faulkner, some respondents balked. “It should never be one or the other! That’s how small minds

work,” wrote John Dunn, president of Western Michigan University, who answered “no” to our narrowly posed question.

Besides, the job students train for may not exist in a decade, several presidents pointed out. “The more narrow the ‘training,’ the shorter the shelf life,” said Philip Glotzbach, of Skidmore College. Linda Hanson, president of Hamline University in St. Paul, suggested that a liberal arts degree can serve as a safety net: “Having knowledge

and skills that are one dimensional, as in preparation for a specific profession, puts graduates at greater risk of market volatility than graduates who are prepared more comprehensively, with the ability to adapt over time to jobs that in some cases, have not yet been defined.”

The consensus was that college should teach you to think clearly, whether about Proust or politics. As Taylor Reveley of the College of William & Mary summed it up: “Whatever your job (and most young people will have several different ones over their careers), if it’s at all sophisticated, you’ll need to be able to think rigorously, solve problems creatively, communicate effectively, have a breadth of perspective rooted in familiarity with ideas and cultures different than your own, and know how to keep learning for life. A first-rate liberal arts education helps get you in gear on all these fronts, and more.” —MARGARET FOSTER

To read all the responses to our question, go to theamericanscholar.org/presidents-poll.

Copyright of American Scholar is the property of Phi Beta Kappa Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.