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More Than Liberal Arts Needed

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Connecticut College President Leo I. Higdon Jr.'s Jan. 28 Other Opinion article, "Liberal Arts Schools Are Producing Tomorrow's Leaders," offers an eloquent argument for the traditional liberal arts college model. I disagree, however.

The demands of a fast-paced, knowledge-based global economy and the new realities of American society require a different, more sophisticated educational model.

It is the model we have adopted at the University of New Haven. The starting point is our belief that today's college graduates need a professional education that is infused with courses in the liberal arts, just as liberal arts students should have preparation in professional fields to best meet the needs of both students and society.



In engineering, for example, our nation faces a dangerous shortage as the generation inspired by President John Kennedy's space program begins to retire. China — with about 3 1/2 times our population — now graduates 10 times as many engineers. The European Union, with a population comparable to ours, produces three times as many.

To remain competitive, we will need to train more engineers, and the workplace of the future will require them to be equipped with the skills that a liberal arts education provides. At UNH's Tagliatela College of Engineering, we accomplish this through our nationally recognized spiral curriculum. We incorporate a similar model in most of our programs, from our international criminal justice studies to the business college's communications across the curriculum.

The goal is the liberation of the mind from the rigid, compartmentalized thinking that is a principal flaw in traditional professional programs. Technical competency at UNH is joined with liberal arts skills in rational analysis, innovative and ethical decision-making, oral and written communication and leadership. The result is a graduate who is fully rounded technically, professionally and intellectually.

UNH is proud to pioneer this new educational model, but the philosophy is not unique to us. Last year's report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education called for just this integration of liberal and professional education.

Those who adhere to the traditional liberal arts model assume that students will go on to professional or graduate schools to acquire the skills they will need in their careers. But an elitism underlies this argument, because it assumes students and their families can afford the cost of a graduate education.

The reality is that fewer than 20 percent of college students come from families that can readily fund a graduate degree after covering four years of undergraduate tuition. The vast majority of students must thus either pursue limited graduate scholarships or assistantships or get their professional training as undergraduates.

Although I don't support the vocational attitude many students have toward obtaining an undergraduate degree, I do think it is the responsibility of educators to provide students with a bachelor's degree that will enable them to move successfully into the workforce.

I have great respect for the liberal arts tradition. But social, economic and competitive realities require fresh thinking and a more democratic model.

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