

# Cornell College

W H I T E P A P E R S E R I E S

## **HOW THE LIBERAL ARTS AND PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS WORK TOGETHER**

A Presidential White Paper  
from Jonathan Brand

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*This white paper is on the topic of professionally focused programs in the context of the liberal arts. More specifically, what is Cornell College's role in the evolution of the arts and sciences to include professional programs, and how are we accomplishing it? I welcome any comments or observations you might have on this white paper. You can always reach me at 319-895-4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu.*

A decade ago I might have revealed my perception that there existed a strange and even dirty little secret within the liberal arts college sector—that many national liberal arts colleges have offered robust “professional” programs, but that they could not talk about them openly. After all, if an institution wished to be recognized as a member of the most prestigious group of “pure” national liberal arts colleges, it could not speak overtly of its professional programs or even of the ways in which it prepares students to succeed in a professional setting. Such a “shallow” message would have been anathema to the liberal arts, through which the primary goal has been to educate students broadly so that their minds could be freed from preconceived notions—students are, thus, able to reconsider issues from previously unconsidered perspectives. An enriched life demands a liberated and curious mind with the skills to satisfy that curiosity.

At the same time these liberal arts colleges have been on the defensive for years regarding their value in preparing students for life beyond their collegiate years. Part of the problem is that people do not entirely understand what the liberal arts means. The liberal arts does not mean anything specific about politics (“liberal”) or art (“arts”). That is, some believe that you must have a liberal political agenda to be liberally educated. Not true. Others believe that you must love art. Not necessary (though I do recommend it). Even the notion that students have to get their general education requirements “out of the way” wrongly implies that their liberal education is distinct and separate from their entire educational experience. (See Liberal Education vs. Professional Education: The False Choice, Larry Shin, Association of Governing Boards, January/February 2014.)

As it turns out, this distinction between the liberal arts and sciences versus

professional fields is not just an “academic” debate. It has dramatic consequences for schools in terms of their reputation and position in the marketplace. If a school wishes to remain recognized with and among the most prestigious national liberal arts colleges in the U.S. News and World Report ranking (as one example), it has to ensure that at least half of its graduates major in the arts and sciences (and it must be above 80 percent—as Cornell is—to be with the “pure” liberal arts colleges).

This liberal arts-professional divide also assumes that the arts and sciences represent a rigid and unchanging curriculum that is entirely detached from professional sectors. And, never the twain shall meet. However, such a simplistic statement does not track reality. The liberal arts, evolving from classical antiquity’s quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) and trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric), has necessarily evolved far beyond those disciplines at every college or university. Certainly, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have moved well beyond the notion of a fixed liberal arts canon for all students to acquire. At Cornell, for example, we now offer 54 different majors, minors, pre-professional programs, and cooperative programs. That is a far cry from the original seven disciplines contemplated by the quadrivium and trivium! Just look at computer science as one example. Now considered a liberal arts field, how could we have even recognized it as one before the invention of a computer? This has far reaching ramifications—most importantly, what we consider as a part of the arts and sciences has necessarily developed over time to meet the expanding scope of knowledge and changing needs of society, and will continue to do so.

What the research fortunately shows is that student learning has not deteriorated as more schools have added “professional” programs. One 2014 study, conducted at the University of Iowa, concluded that “growth in ... critical thinking, moral reasoning, the need for cognition, intercultural effectiveness, and psychological well-being—over four years does not differ by major at liberal arts colleges.” (See “Abandoning the Liberal Arts? Liberal Arts Learning Outcomes of Professional Majors,” Miller et. al., 2014, page 17.) “Findings from this study suggest that a student’s academic major field category—liberal arts versus professional/vocational—is not a significant predictor of gain on most of the liberal arts student learning outcomes.” (Id., page 2.) Put another way, as long as student learning occurs within the context of the liberal arts college—with small classes, on a residential campus, with a good portion of students’ studies taking place within a

broad program of liberal education, with the faculty's primary focus on teaching, learning is not being diminished as a result of the addition of professional programs.

In writing this, let me be clear: I am NOT suggesting that Cornell College should deviate from its liberal arts core. Quite to the contrary: Our very mission is rooted in the liberal arts. Today, we offer it through a distinctive and powerful educational model, One Course At A Time. At this stage in our history, it is imperative that we participate as leaders in the continued evolution of the liberal arts—not only in the academic programs we offer through a Cornell education, BUT also in our understanding of the professional preparation that we believe benefits our students **regardless of their major**.

I am also not suggesting that Cornell College should focus on specific job training. There is a vast difference between broad professional preparation within a liberal arts context and job training. In fact, most Cornell students follow their passions into fields that are not, at first blush, professionally focused, and they then find their way in the world through graduate study and further life experiences.

If there is anything good to have emerged from the Great Recession, it is that it has more quickly eroded the divide between the arts and sciences and professional fields. After all, the increased and heated competition for students has forced schools to confront more squarely a range of market realities, including the confusion around what the liberal arts even means for prospective students.

Particularly in a tougher economy, students and parents are looking for the value-added aspect of a college education. Parents rightly ask, “Can my child get a job straight out of college, especially when I believe that I will have to pay so much for my child to get that education?” Last year we acquired a market study that explored factors on the minds of prospective students and their families when they consider and select a college. What we learned, while not shocking, was quite telling. In 2012 students considered “academic strength” and “career preparation” to be the most important factors undergirding their decision to attend a particular college. (See Eduventures 2013 College Bound Market Update, page 7.) Just one year later, though, “career preparation” was the primary driver, surpassing “academic strength.” (Id., page 7.) More specifically, students identified as most important the following three outcomes of a college education: 1) in-depth knowledge and expertise in a major; 2) pursuit of a

personally fulfilling career path; and 3) skills to help enter into a specific career. Career preparation is clearly on their minds.

Interestingly, what students and their families say they seek in a college education does not match what employers say that they are looking for in employees. The top three skills that employers seek are: 1) the ability to work in a team structure; 2) the ability to verbally communicate with people in and out of an organization; and 3) the ability to make decisions and solve problems. In fact, “only two of the traits employers look for are in the top ten outcomes students want to achieve.” (Id., page 8.)

These results place into stark relief what we, at Cornell, have to accomplish and also communicate through the implementation of our Strategic Plan. We must market to prospective students in a manner that speaks to those outcomes that they believe they need to achieve through college, and, at the same time, we must educate them in a manner that reflects what employers say they seek. In so doing, we must also help students and their families appreciate that what a Cornell education provides goes above and beyond what they initially were looking for.

At one level, the growing alignment of the liberal arts and professional preparation is woven into Cornell’s fabric by our distinctive One Course calendar, which reinforces the immersive and “professional” aspects of the Cornell experience. Our students become experts in a specific area or field in just a matter of weeks, mastering the pace of life beyond Cornell’s borders, including in the workplace, well before they ever graduate from Cornell. This is problem-solving and execution on a real time frame.

At another level, in a very important step by the faculty, Cornell embraced educational priorities and outcomes a few years ago. This has focused everyone at Cornell—faculty and staff—on those broader liberal learning skills that represent the essence of a powerful education and also parallels what employers seek in employees. Beyond breadth (exposure to multiple disciplines across the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences) and depth (a major in, at least, one discipline), we expect our students to: 1) respond to the complexities of contemporary and enduring problems using information literacy tools, research skills, creative thinking, and analysis; 2) evaluate evidence, interpret data, and use logical, mathematical, and statistical problem-solving tools; and 3) speak and write clearly, listen and read actively, and engage with others in productive dialogue, among several other outcomes. In so

focusing, we recognize the vital importance of these outcomes to our students' lives post-graduation, in and out of professional settings.

It is also the case that an education, if it is to prepare students well, must not only occur in the classroom. It must also occur beyond the borders of the classroom so that students learn to apply their learning to real issues. President Les Garner said as much in his 2008 white paper, "The Vitality of the Liberal Arts at Cornell College," in which he wrote: "... we do see ways that we can enhance the value of a Cornell education through integrating into [One Course At A Time] more technology, internships, international study, service learning, and student research." President Garner's prescient words gesture to an area that has come to be known as experiential learning—and, under our Strategic Plan, we believe that every Cornell student should have at least one opportunity, if not multiple ones, to take what he or she has learned and develop those skills and abilities further in the context of an actual problem or issue—with real application.

We recently added two new academic programs, both of which have historically had a professional patina to them: business and engineering sciences. The faculty overwhelmingly endorsed these new programs because we believe that they play to our institutional strengths and reflect what we know is demanded by prospective students and employers alike. These new academic majors will also help us to further unravel the artificial divide between the liberal arts and professional programs. These offerings are not at all unprecedented, as Cornell College had a very well-recognized engineering program in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And, many other fine national liberal arts colleges, such as Swarthmore, Smith, and Hope colleges, offer engineering. In addition, Cornell College offered various forms of a business curriculum from 1867 into the 1960s.

Leaders in higher education are increasingly recognizing that the distinction between professional fields and the liberal arts is an illusion generated by history. The liberal arts as an educational philosophy is preparation for ANY profession, and the nondiscipline-specific skills instilled by the liberal arts are sought devoutly by employers in *all* fields. How, then, can one argue that a liberal arts education is not already a professional preparation?

The most courageous institutions are now speaking openly not only about the fact that they offer "professional" programs, BUT also that their mission is intended to help

all students lead not only enriched lives but successful ones, regardless of their major. The current environment plays perfectly to our institutional strengths. Given our history of courageous decision-making, including by the faculty, Cornell College is uniquely positioned to honor the liberal arts, while helping to expand its very definition through the honest recognition that all Cornell students must be prepared to succeed professionally. In so doing, we are also able to fully marshal the distinctive benefits of our immersive One Course calendar, through which our students are able to apply what they have learned to “real” problems in “real” settings as well as gain confidence working at the relatively rapid pace of life before they even graduate.

Cornell College has always prepared students for their lives beyond the Hilltop, and thus, the curriculum has necessarily changed throughout the years to meet the needs of a changing society. In a world that changes rapidly, we must continue to develop our offerings to ensure student success for a lifetime.