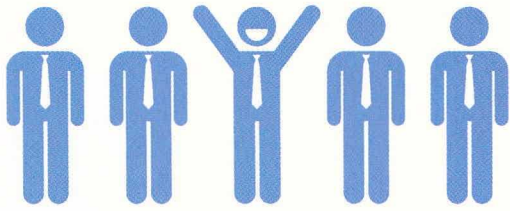


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The Value of Student Agency

By Michael Zimmerman

Not surprisingly, parents and college students alike often wonder what employers are looking for in new employees. Research recently conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities¹ provides a clear signal that they're searching for individuals with a broad set of skills and capabilities rather than those with narrow but deep knowledge in a specific field.

More specifically, the study which surveyed more than 300 employers found that:

- 93% said that candidates' demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major;
- 91% said that, whatever their major, all students should have experiences in solving problems with colleagues whose views are different from their own; and
- 95% agreed that their companies put a priority on hiring people with the intellectual and interpersonal skills to help them contribute to innovation in the workplace.

When these same employers were asked about the characteristics that colleges and universities should stress to ensure that their graduates were best positioned to be productive in the workplace, they recommended a suite of traits traditionally associated with the core of a liberal arts education. For example:

- 82% wanted more attention paid to critical thinking/analytical reasoning;
- 81% wanted more attention paid to ability to analyze/solve complex problems;
- 80% wanted more attention devoted to improving oral and written communication skills; and
- 67% were interested in more teamwork/collaboration in diverse group settings.

The question that should immediately spring to mind is, how might students best acquire the attributes employers so clearly articulate and value? While there's no single answer that will be the perfect response for all people, I want to explore an under-recognized possibility, a possibility that has been shown to positively and powerfully lead to success in some students.

In the constellation of American colleges and universities there is a collection of institu-

tions that offers students a rich liberal arts education while asking them to think deeply about their academic choices. The theme that ties these schools together is their belief in the importance of student agency – the concept that students should be in control of their educational decisions rather than following a prescribed path determined by others.

The institutions in this category typically don't have traditional majors. Instead, students, with guidance from faculty mentors, choose courses, programs of study, independent learning opportunities and internships to craft a concentration that suits their specific needs and desires.

The statement that introduces Bennington College's student handbook describes the process remarkably well:

Bennington regards education as a sensual and ethical, no less than an intellectual, process. It seeks to liberate and nurture the individuality, the creative intelligence, and the ethical and aesthetic sensibility of its students, to the end that their richly varied natural endowments will be directed toward self-fulfillment and toward constructive social purposes. We believe that these educational goals are best served by demanding of our students active participation in the planning of their own programs, and in the regulation of their own lives on campus.²

Similarly, the following sentences from Hampshire College's vision statement³ explains how such academic freedom can empower students to think holistically about their education leading them to be more fully engaged with course material and more likely to ask and answer questions that cross disciplinary boundaries.

Hampshire students take charge of their own intellectual and artistic development and integrate an active, independent, critical and reflective perspective into their lives as a whole. Hampshire aims to graduate lifelong learners with the courage to challenge boundaries, ask questions and ignite knowledge with creativity.

Education of this sort requires significantly more contact between students and faculty members than is the norm at most institutions, but it can lead to results unlikely to be

found in more traditional settings.

It's well worth noting that a focus on student agency is not limited to private colleges. Indeed, The Evergreen State College, where I serve as the vice president for academic affairs, shares values and a sense of purpose with both Bennington and Hampshire. At Evergreen, students are required each year to reflect on their academic journeys.⁴ This reflection, with guidance from faculty members, takes the form of a written academic statement that helps students formulate future plans based on previous actions. As one Evergreen student explained it, "I've learned I want to use my education to prepare me to be an agent of change in the world. I don't know if this realization would have jumped out at me with such clarity had I not been told to critically reflect on my experiences and my education in a formal way like the academic statement."⁵

Students who graduate from liberal arts colleges valuing individual agency, students who have to actively decide how to shape their own academic career, are particularly likely to have developed the types of skills employers claim they want.

There's a critical point I've not mentioned. The kind of education that positions students to best meet the desires of employers, in actuality, does much more than that. That sort of education also helps people develop into active citizens and enables them to build a life rather than simply acquire a first job. Who could ask for more than that! ●



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