

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK'S COLLEGE OF STATEN ISLAND: LIBERAL ARTS, COMMUNITY (AND) IMPACT

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Abstract

Liberal arts education, once central to American higher education, faces challenges, and two of them are: encroachment by professional and technical schools, perceived to provide higher incomes over a person's lifetime, and lack of vocabulary to show advantages of a liberal arts education. The liberal arts remain vital for fostering critical thinking, democracy, and informed citizenship while delivering significant economic benefits. The City University of New York's College of Staten Island exemplifies this impact, contributing millions annually to the local economy through operations, research, alumni earnings, and more, with strong returns for students and taxpayers. To ensure relevance and funding, educators must highlight the economic value of liberal arts education, demonstrating its importance for both individual success and societal progress.

Keywords: civic engagement, community impact, democracy, economic impact, liberal arts education, public funding, return on investment, workforce development.

1. Introduction

Liberal arts, once seen as the keystone of higher education in the United States, is dramatically and consistently, if not replaced at least supplemented by professional and technical training. The liberal arts play an important part in producing critically thinking citizens of course, but beyond that, the data clearly illustrates this core education's positive effect on local economies in dollars and cents. As higher education professionals, it will be important to find the vocabulary to discuss the economic impact that a liberal arts education offers to those who hold financial oversight for our institutions.

Visiting Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, one eventually arrives at the gravesite of the third president of the United States, marked by a stone obelisk. The inscription, like those of Roman antiquity that highlighted a person's most memorable achievements, lists Jefferson's as well. Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, but sometime earlier that spring, as he prepared his last will, he also designed his own gravestone. The inscription reads:

'Here was buried
Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of American Independence
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom
& Father of the University of Virginia' (Library of Congress, undated)

These three achievements, Jefferson explained stood 'as testimonials that I have lived, [by which] I wish most to be remembered'. What is omitted from this list, is the fact that Jefferson was president and with the Louisiana Purchase he doubled the size of the United States. He wanted to be remembered not for political power, the presidency, and territorial expansion, which is the physical expression of power, but for the protection of freedoms. Like many of the founding fathers, Jefferson was deeply steeped in the literature of Greece and Rome. His favorite reading was Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*¹. Ancient Rome demonstrated in its transformative phase from the republic to the empire and senatorial power gave way to the rule of one, what happened when the voices of free men were systematically silenced, and a system of checks and balances gradually gave way resulting in the rule and will of one.

A liberal arts education at the time of the founding of the United States was still very much linked to the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music) and *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) of ancient and medieval Europe. The American Civil War (1861–1865) and the creation of land grant institutions in the 19th century (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, undated) ushered in a new era. This reshaped higher education in the United States with the natural and social sciences now included in the liberal arts curriculum. Content knowledge and intellectual skills allowed an individual to

1 Cicero wrote the *Tusculanae Quaestiones* in 45 BCE after the unexpected death of his daughter, Tullia, and mourning her and without political power, Julius Caesar was in full control of the Roman state, he devoted himself to the exploration of philosophical questions (on virtue, pain, grief, death).

prosper—and by extension the society—and be free². Modern democracy requires an educated populace and in upholding our democracy, the liberal arts taught at our institutions play an integral role.

As public universities become privatized, depending more and more on tuition and private monies rather than tax levies, and state legislatures make political demands on their public institutions, remaining free and unencumbered by political agendas is ever more difficult. In addition, the arrival of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the educational sphere is speeding up the reckoning of a college/university's purpose or purposes as are the constantly increasing calls for profession-oriented and workforce development. With these additional layers, it will be our task to keep the liberal arts (or liberal) education relevant as the core of higher education. This endeavor, in turn, ensures the continuance of our democracy, our individual autonomy, the guarantee of freedom of speech, and the same opportunity for all citizens to participate in a decision-making process that impacts their society.

2. The College of Staten Island—City University of New York (CUNY): Its community impact

Staten Island, one of the five boroughs that make up the City of New York, has a population just short of half a million, which makes it the least populated of the boroughs. The College of Staten Island (CSI) is the only public institution of higher education on the island. Its creation was a result of a merger in 1976. At that time the City of New York experienced a financial crisis. Closure threatened Richmond College, while Staten Island Community College as a community college received state support. Since 1993, CSI has occupied the grounds of the former (infamous) Willowbrook State School (College of Staten Island, undated) and with its 204 acres has the largest physical plant of all CUNY colleges. CSI is one of CUNY's eleven senior colleges as well as a comprehensive college (offering associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees) and a Hispanic-serving institution³. At the present, we enroll over 11,000 students.

CSI is an open-access college so admission does not depend on college aptitude (ACT/SAT) scores, high school grade point average, or the like. All students are provided with the opportunity to pursue a degree that requires focused institutional support including tutoring, developmental coursework, etc. The core of our curriculum are the liberal arts which are enhanced with co- and extracurricular programming as well as intern- and externships. Most of our students are commuters and are working. Thus, integrating experiences outside the curriculum proves not an easy task and can be more easily accomplished in professional disciplines.

2 Skills in Latin translates to 'artes' (sing. 'ars'); free in Latin is 'liber', hence the liberal arts.

3 The total enrollment of Hispanic students constitutes a minimum of 25% of the total headcount enrollment.

With a rapidly changing world, we have to prepare students for jobs that do not exist yet, to solve problems we do not yet know how to define; this is a world in which the today's learners will have ten to fourteen different jobs before they are 38-years old (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, undated) and are exposed to exponentially growing unique information. What skills are we to teach to ensure continued innovation, when content information is as easily accessible as manipulated? How will we teach analytical skills at the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom *et al.*, 1956; Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001), and safeguard the various freedoms guaranteed in a democratic and diverse society? This is a tall order for us educators and administrators—but one we should embrace wholeheartedly and see as something beyond our own institutions and nations' boundaries.

At the present moment of profound paradigm shifts, networks and communities are key in helping us chart a steady course toward the new and yet unknown. Faculty recruitment, hiring, and retention as well as finding ways to leverage existing programs (e.g., Fulbright, COIL⁴, Erasmus+) to foster the creation and dissemination of knowledge and attract students to see the value of higher education not just in the context of getting a well-paid job but also of acquiring knowledge and intellectual tools to thrive as an ethical person and be able to think, speak, and make informed choices freely.

At public universities and colleges in the United States, part-time or adjunct instructors outnumber full-time faculty⁵ (also see American Association of University Professors, undated). Their hiring allows us to continue our delivery of necessary courses, mostly at the lower levels. However, this practice limits a faculty's ability to create, innovate, and advance knowledge; in short, the tenured professoriate is getting older, exceptional in its employment status, and less inclined to embrace change. Thus, the external educational networks and communities we create and maintain become crucial to advance the educational enterprise. We are used to making arguments that a college or university degree, a liberal arts education, is a good personal investment, although, on the whole, we are not very convincing. Economic data, on the other hand, shows how profitable investing in higher education actually is not just for a person but for a community as well.

3. Economic impact of higher education

The College of Staten Island's economic impact and investment analysis based on fiscal year (FY) 2019–2020⁶ (Economic Modeling Specialists International, 2021) showed that its:

- Operations spending added \$198 million in income to the regional economy;
- Research spending generated \$2.8 million in added income for the Staten Island and Brooklyn economy;

4 Collaborative Online International Learning, more details at <https://coilconnect.org>.

5 As academic administrators we deal with adjunctification, an employment practice that started in the 1970's, and the limited hiring of full-time faculty due to budget constraints every hiring cycle.

6 The Fall 2019 enrollment stood at 12,782 students.

- Construction spending impact added \$2.5 million to the income for Staten Island and Brooklyn;
- Spin-off companies generated \$91.5 million in added income for the Staten Island and Brooklyn economy;
- Visitor spending (attracted for activities at the College of Staten Island) added approximately \$2.8 million in income to the Staten Island and Brooklyn economy;
- The expenditure of relocated and retained students in FY 2019-2020 added \$33 million in income to the Staten Island and Brooklyn economy; and
- The net impact of the College of Staten Island's former students currently employed in the regional workforce amounted to \$445.7 million in added income in FY 2019-2020.

The investment analysis showed that:

- For their investment (tuition, fees, supplies, and interest on student loans of \$53.7 million + \$84 million they forewent in money they would have earned), students will receive \$758.2 million in increased earning over their working lives. The annual rate of return is 19.8% (the stock market 30-year average annual return is 9.9%);
- For every dollar of public money spent, taxpayers will receive \$2 in return, over the course of students' working lives. The average annual rate of return for the taxpayer is 6%; and
- For every dollar invested, people in New York will receive \$7.80 in return, as long as FY 2019-2020 students remain active in the state workforce.

4. Conclusion

A liberal arts education, with its modern roots in the Enlightenment, offers students knowledge, analytical skills, and the ability to adapt to many professions. It is a cornerstone of citizenship as well. But in today's market, with its shift toward consumerism, value is tied simply to economic realities.

We, as liberal arts educators, must begin to find ways to frame in economic language, backed up by hard data, our institutions' positive economic effects on local economic development. In fact, liberal arts educated students are good for the bottom line and in today's world, we offer a good product.

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