Millersville's Responsibility to Prepare Graduates with Skills Employers Need

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Ask business and civic leaders what concerns them most about today's workforce and the answers are remarkably consistent. Employers across sectors are searching for graduates who can think critically, communicate clearly, collaborate effectively and adapt to constant change.

These are not abstract ideals; they are the competencies most frequently cited in job postings and employer surveys nationwide.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers, drawing on data from thousands of employers, identifies critical thinking, communication, teamwork and the ability to work effectively with individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives as foundational to career readiness in the modern economy.

Yet despite this clarity, skepticism persists about the very educational approach that has long been most effective at cultivating these skills: a strong liberal arts core.

This skepticism reflects a misunderstanding of what liberal arts education is meant to be. Too often, the term evokes images of impractical coursework disconnected from real-world needs. In reality, the liberal arts, often described as general education or core curriculum, are not about mastering a narrow body of content. They are about developing habits of mind: how to analyze information, evaluate evidence, communicate ideas and engage thoughtfully with complex problems across disciplines.

That is precisely why nearly all colleges and universities, regardless of whether they emphasize professional or technical programs, require a core curriculum. The competencies developed through liberal education are universal needs, not luxuries.

In a rigorous liberal arts classroom, students do far more than memorize facts. A history student analyzes primary sources, weighs competing interpretations and constructs evidence-based arguments. A political science student conducts research, identifies assumptions, communicates nuanced ideas to diverse audiences and revises

conclusions in light of new evidence. These experiences are not tangential to career preparation; they are the essence of it.

Employer perspectives reinforce this connection. Research from the Association of American Colleges and Universities shows that roughly 80% of employers believe all students should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences. Longitudinal studies further demonstrate that while career-specific training may offer an initial advantage, graduates with strong liberal arts foundations often match or exceed their peers in earnings over time and are disproportionately represented in leadership roles.

At Millersville University, we take this evidence seriously. Recently, we completed a comprehensive review of our general education program, not because it was failing, but because continuous improvement is essential in a rapidly changing world.

As Lancaster County's largest public university, Millersville has a responsibility to prepare graduates who will strengthen the regional workforce and contribute meaningfully to civic life.

Our newly launched Gateway Model reflects that responsibility. It establishes clear learning outcomes aligned with employer expectations, including effective written and oral communication, critical thinking and problem-solving across disciplines, civic and social responsibility, engagement across diverse cultural contexts, responsible use of technology and lifelong well-being.

These are not abstract ideals; they are the competencies graduates need to thrive professionally and personally.

This integration of liberal education and professional preparation is especially important at Millersville, where many students pursue career-focused programs such as nursing, teacher education, social work and applied engineering. Technical expertise alone is not sufficient in these fields. A nurse must pair clinical knowledge with empathy and teamwork. A teacher must combine pedagogical skill with cultural awareness and reflective judgment. A social worker or engineer must navigate ethical complexity, communicate clearly and adapt to evolving conditions. Liberal education strengthens, not detracts from, professional readiness by producing adaptable, reflective practitioners prepared to lead and innovate over time.

In an era of rapid technological change, this foundation matters more than ever. The software or platform students learn today may be obsolete within a few years. The

ability to learn continuously, evaluate information critically, collaborate across differences and communicate effectively will endure across careers and industries.

The question, then, is not whether liberal arts education is practical. It clearly is. In a world shaped by artificial intelligence, globalization and constant disruption, the distinctly human capacities fostered by liberal education — ethical reasoning, creative synthesis, cross-cultural understanding and sound judgment — are increasingly valuable. These skills cannot be automated or outsourced; they must be intentionally cultivated.

Employers do not need to choose between technical competence and intellectual agility. They need graduates who possess both.

Institutions such as Millersville demonstrate that the most effective preparation for career success and meaningful lives comes from an educational approach that has always integrated the two: a rigorous, contemporary liberal arts education.

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