

Liberal Arts Colleges and the Spellings Commission: Carpe Diem

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LiberalArtsOnline is a monthly publication that promotes inquiry and reflection on liberal arts education.

The long-awaited Spellings Commission Report cites several areas of increasing concern in higher education. According to the Report, unacceptable numbers of students fail to complete their studies and graduate, and the ability of adults to understand narrative texts has decreased among those with at least some college education or a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, the Commission cites employers who have repeatedly reported that many new graduates are not prepared to work because they lack critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills. The Report has stirred up a turbulent atmosphere of debate and discussion that has brought to light an important distinction within the higher education community; namely, the significant differences between liberal arts colleges devoted solely to undergraduate education and universities that are much more focused on graduate education and research.

While the phrase "liberal arts college" typically conjures up an image of old brick buildings, wide grassy lawns, selective admissions, and hefty endowments, the reality is that many liberal arts colleges face the same challenges as public colleges and universities. They seek to educate a broad range of learners with limited and even shrinking resources. In addition, their greatest competition for students and philanthropy dollars is no longer the other liberal arts college 100 miles away but the public university just down the road. The Report, however, provides a dual opportunity (no doubt inadvertently) for liberal arts colleges. First, colleges can seize the rhetoric used by the Commission and make the case that they are already engaged in innovative and successful learning experiences for students. In this way, liberal arts colleges may be able to better differentiate themselves from other institutions. Second, the Report can be used by colleges to convince internal audiences, primarily faculty, of the usefulness of assessment in improving the education we provide for our students.

The Commission suggests that there are "disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates. Over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined. Unacceptable numbers

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of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy where, as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever.” [1, p.7]

Liberal arts colleges can address these challenges to the future of higher education, and not simply because they are often considerably smaller (in terms of students, faculty, and infrastructure) and thus potentially more nimble. Although this institutional and curricular dexterity may or may not be real, what is apparent on campuses of many liberal arts colleges is a commitment to and success at student retention, admirable graduation rates for students, and literacy and critical thinking skills embedded and expected throughout the curriculum.

Additionally, the Report expresses concern that some undergraduate students “never complete their degrees at all, at least in part because most colleges and universities don’t accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed.” [1, p. 7] Even in areas of student support services, where large public institutions may seem to have the upper hand because of state funding assistance, the understanding and practice of advising and mentoring at liberal arts colleges, when at its best, allows articulation of the mission of higher education, including lifelong learning, global citizenship, and pedagogical innovation, flexibility, and learning support. Most specifically, direct faculty engagement with students at liberal arts colleges in advising and mentoring provides a learning experience for each student that is not overly mediated by others (an office of undergraduate advising, for example), but is instead personal and individual.

Assessment tools are increasingly being utilized by liberal arts colleges to measure student learning and achievement throughout undergraduate education. Individual departments at liberal arts colleges often have their own assessment plans that can yield useful information about student successes. Institutionally, the College Learning Assessment (CLA), the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE), and various focused evaluation tools—often developed via consortia or several schools working together with grant and foundation funding (such as those clusters of institutions working on value-added assessment and funded by the Teagle Foundation)—are not only providing liberal arts colleges ample data about their students’ academic achievement, but also presenting a more holistic picture of student learning.

What we’ve articulated thus far paints a rosy picture of liberal arts colleges. But we know that not all liberal arts colleges enjoy the same resources, figured primarily as endowment, and the resource that is often in shortest supply is a willingness

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to engage in honest assessment. Liberal arts colleges need to commit to using evidence to improve and strengthen the quality of education for students. And faculty are the most important participants in this process; only through their commitment can meaningful assessment be done. The Spellings Commission, then, provides campus administration the opportunity to engage faculty in the assessment process by working with them to determine how assessment can help them improve their teaching. Once the merits of assessment have been presented to faculty, it may be easier to convince them of a need for systematic evidence collection, not only to disseminate the successes but, just as importantly, to address the real weaknesses, gaps, and challenges liberal arts colleges face; namely, are our best experiences accessible to the greatest number of students? And what are we doing to ensure this access?

Liberal arts colleges around the country are working hard to differentiate themselves from each other and also from the often less expensive public institutions. To the extent that we can use empirical evidence to demonstrate superior educational results, the faster and more effectively we can differentiate ourselves from our competition. It may seem counterintuitive to believe that the current criticism of higher education, fueled by the Spellings Commission Report, actually assists liberal arts colleges in focusing and expressing the value of our particular type of education. Yet it does provide enterprising and confident liberal arts colleges with an opportunity to promote liberal learning; to fully, actively and creatively engage with student learning assessment; and to publicly become not more intentional about student learning, but more intentional about promoting the effectiveness of a liberal arts education.

To that end, here are several suggestions that may allow liberal arts colleges to seize the day:

1. Organize conversations on campus with faculty and deliberately connect the Spellings Commission Report to assessment strategies and data collection as a means to demonstrate the important ways assessment can help us develop a better understanding of our students and improve their education.
2. Address a letter to alumni and interested friends of the college in order to educate them about the Spellings Commission Report. Most importantly, include how the college already successfully addresses many of the Report's criticisms of higher education, including graduation and retention rates, stories of faculty-student advising and mentoring, and vital curricular components

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and initiatives such as international education.

3. Seek opportunities, either as individual liberal arts colleges or consortia, to promote the uniqueness of a liberal arts college education in places such as newspaper editorials and college web pages and promotional materials.

4. Consider the ways student learning already is being assessed on campuses. Many liberal arts colleges don't lack for assessment plans or even data, but they do lack a coordinated approach to gathering, examining, and promoting evaluation data. Unlike universities, where the sheer amount of assessment data requires a dedicated staff or office to coordinate, liberal arts colleges often employ a faculty committee or institutional researcher to keep track of the assessment work being performed. Liberal arts colleges would be well served by employing a full-time assessment coordinator who could provide information about the variety of ways colleges are measuring student learning.

5. Conscientiously link the assessment program to the college's public relations office by formalizing conversations between the two offices; providing opportunities for the assessment data to be used in marketing campaigns; and facilitating collegial relations between faculty assessing student learning in courses, administrators implementing the college's overall assessment plan, and staff responsible for promoting the college's expertise to prospective students and prospective donors.

The Spellings Commission Report offers a remarkable opportunity for liberal arts colleges to address these challenges, provide leadership to the higher education community in toto, better define our strengths to external and internal audiences, and still remain committed to our mission of educating undergraduate students. Carpe diem.

Reference

1. "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education," A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. Pre-publication Copy. September 2006.