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Liberal Arts Colleges and Why We Should Care about Them



Which colleges are liberal arts colleges seems a simple question to answer: “They’re, you know, like Oberlin or Wellesley.” Actually, it isn’t simple. The word *liberal* used in the context of education has not been well understood and is a source of confusion, especially outside the academy. Former Lawrence University president Rik Warch recalls a graduating senior who told him, “When I came to college, I really had no idea what the liberal arts were. I just thought there would be a lot of Democrats here.”

Defining the Term

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary has a long entry for the word *liberal* and, happily, the first definition is right on the money: “of, belonging to, being, or consisting of liberal arts or one of the liberal arts.” *Webster’s* adds another definition: “of, belonging to, or befitting a man of free birth, also, of, belonging to, or befitting one that is a gentleman in social rank.”¹ This latter definition, however, is said to be archaic, something those who have read Cardinal Newman on the subject already suspected (“Liberal education makes not the Christian, nor the Catholic, but the gentleman”).²

What does “belonging to the liberal arts” mean? *Webster’s* is ready with an answer—the liberal arts are “studies . . . not in one of the technical fields.”³ Definitions such as this are known to rhetoricians as definitions by negation, like defining tiddledywinks as a game not played

with a ball and bat.⁴ *Webster's* explains that “technical” fields are “practical knowledge” fields, leaving us with the following: liberal arts are fields of knowledge that are not practical.

The dictionary includes a separate entry for *liberal arts*, but it is not entirely helpful either. We can safely pass over the first definition, “the studies comprising the trivium and quadrivium in the middle ages” (although it is the most explicit and straightforward definition we have encountered thus far) and go straight to the second, “the studies (as language, philosophy, history, literature, abstract science) especially in a college or university, that are presumed to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop the general intellectual capacities (as reason or judgment).”⁵ Unhappily, however, *Webster's* feels constrained to clarify the second definition by adding “as opposed to professional, vocational or technical studies,” and we are back to defining liberal by what it is not. Like it or not, “not practical knowledge” has long been the basic descriptor of liberal education, at least for persons of common sense and sensibility.⁶

The day the word *liberal* stopped being used to describe education “befitting a gentleman in social rank,” it should have been scrapped by the academic community. If academics want nonacademics to understand what they are talking about when they refer to liberal education, they would do well to find a different adjective. Almost anything—*broad, open, inclusive, general*—would be more descriptive.⁷ (One person has suggested calling it “awesome education.”)

The best plan, in my view, would be for liberal arts institutions to take exclusive possession of the word *education* by dropping the word *liberal* altogether and assigning the word *training* or *instruction* to professional, technical, and vocational fields. Even without the adjective *liberal*, embedded in the noun *education* is the implication of liberal education. When we refer to an “educated person,” we do not think of someone who possesses a vocational skill or trade. Rather, again following *Webster's*, we have in mind a person of expanded “knowledge, wisdom, desirable qualities of mind or character, . . . or general competence.”

In 1970 Clark Kerr developed a classification of higher education groups to improve the precision of research at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.⁸ Since then, Carnegie has taken

responsibility for classifying higher education institutions, including defining liberal arts colleges. Obviously, liberal arts colleges are ones that offer courses in liberal arts fields of study. What constitutes a liberal arts field has stayed strikingly constant over the years, although a few new disciplines have been added. Carnegie has identified the following broad fields of study as liberal arts disciplines:⁹

English language and literature	Psychology
Foreign languages	Social sciences
Letters	Visual and performing arts
Liberal and general studies	Area and ethnic studies
Life sciences	Multi- and interdisciplinary studies
Mathematics	Philosophy and religion
Physical sciences	

There is also broad consensus about the disciplines Carnegie has identified as vocational:¹⁰

Agriculture	Home economics
Allied health	Law and legal studies
Business and management	Library and archival sciences
Communications	Marketing and distribution
Conservation and natural resources	Military sciences
Education	Protective services
Engineering	Public administration and services
Health sciences	Theology

The difficulty, of course, is that there is a spectrum of colleges, ranging from those that offer only liberal arts courses to those whose offerings are 100 percent vocational. For example, even though few would dispute that Swarthmore and Smith are liberal arts colleges, both have engineering departments and engineering majors. Where should we place the cutoff between liberal arts and vocational colleges?

Readers not interested in the complexities of definition and classification may want to skip over the next few paragraphs devoted to the Carnegie Foundation's forty-year struggle to define a liberal arts college.

These paragraphs do, however, confirm how very difficult it is to say what a liberal arts college is.

Carnegie now classifies about 4,300 higher education institutions—public and private, nonprofit and for-profit, two-year and four-year schools, and undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. From 1970 until 1976, it identified 721 liberal arts colleges, 689 of which were private, 32 public. Carnegie divided them into two groups, Liberal Arts Colleges I and Liberal Arts Colleges II, both of which included institutions that were “primarily” undergraduate and awarded more than half of their degrees in liberal arts fields.¹¹ The 146 Liberal Arts Colleges I (2 of which were public) were said by Carnegie to be “highly selective”; the 575 Liberal Arts Colleges II, “less specialized.” These quoted terms were not defined, perhaps because to do so would have been too obviously subjective.

By 1976, while Carnegie's classifications had not changed, the number of colleges included in the groups had. The total number of liberal arts colleges had fallen from 721 to 583, only 11 of which were public, and the number of group I colleges was down from 146 to 123, none of which was public. In 1987, the total number of colleges classified as liberal arts fell further, from 583 to 572, although the number of public colleges that were included rose from 11 back up to 32, and the number of group I colleges (highly selective) climbed from 123 to 142 (including 2 public schools).

In 1994, Carnegie completely revised its definitions, classifying all institutions on the basis of the highest degree they conferred. Liberal Arts Colleges I and II were replaced by Baccalaureate (Liberal Arts) Colleges I and Baccalaureate Colleges II. Both groups were described as “primarily” undergraduate colleges with a “major emphasis” on baccalaureate-degree programs. The group I colleges awarded 40 percent or more of their baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields and were “restrictive” in admissions. The group II colleges either awarded fewer than 40 percent of their degrees in those fields or were “less restrictive.”¹² Again, the terms set off here in quotation marks were not defined.

The new classifications were, to say the least, as imprecise as the ones they replaced. What was clear was that the percentage of liberal arts degrees required for inclusion was reduced from 50 to 40 percent. What

was less clear was why the Baccalaureate Colleges I category included the parenthetical notation “(Liberal Arts)” whereas the Baccalaureate Colleges II category did not. It seemed to indicate that, so far as Carnegie was concerned, only the 166 group I colleges (7 of which were public) were unequivocally liberal arts colleges. The 471 colleges in group II might or might not be, depending on how “restrictive” they were in their admissions. The definitions left open the possibility that group II colleges could grant higher percentages of baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields than group I colleges but still be excluded from the liberal arts identification because they were not sufficiently restrictive in their admissions. This was not helpful.

In 2001 the Carnegie Foundation tried again. The first thing it did was eliminate the word *liberal* from both its classification descriptions and its definitions. Given the confusion that word had caused, at first blush this seemed a sound move. Carnegie’s new classification scheme, however, maintained the distinction between “arts and sciences” disciplines (leaving out “liberal”) and “occupational and technical” disciplines (which it renamed “professional” disciplines), and added to it the extent to which institutions offer graduate degrees in the same fields in which they confer undergraduate degrees.¹³

The new classification structure radically increased the number of college categories. What were formerly either group I or II colleges can now fall into any of fifteen categories, including “arts and sciences focus” (A&S-F), that is, at least 80 percent of bachelor degrees go to majors in the arts and sciences); “arts and sciences plus professional” (A&S + Prof), meaning 60 to 79 percent of bachelor degrees are awarded in arts and sciences fields; or “balanced arts and sciences/professions” (Bal), indicating that 41 to 59 percent of degrees are awarded in either arts and sciences or professional fields. Each of these classifications is subdivided into NGC (no graduate degrees are awarded in fields corresponding to undergraduate majors), SGC (some such graduate degrees are awarded, but in less than half the fields), and HGC (some such graduate degrees are awarded in at least half the fields). (Bizarrely, in my view, NGC, SGC, and HGC stand for “no graduate coexistence,” “some graduate coexistence,” and “high graduate coexistence,” respectively.)

With all respect to Carnegie, and recognizing that category design is

extraordinarily complex, this restructuring seems at best less than a bold step forward, and at worst obscurantist. There are 89 private, not-for-profit colleges in the A&S-F/NGC category, all of which were included in the former Baccalaureate (Liberal Arts) Colleges I category.¹⁴ The A&S-F/SGC subgroup includes more of the colleges from that prior category (e.g., Bard, Bryn Mawr, Middlebury, the two St. John's Colleges, Williams, and Wesleyan University), but also Dartmouth College, John F. Kennedy University, Maharishi University of Management, Naropa University, University of Judaism, and Xavier University of Louisiana, to mention a few. It is fair to say that the current Carnegie classification scheme is of little help in deciding which colleges are liberal arts colleges.

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, virtually every four-year, postsecondary institution that was not a trade or professional school offered a broad, nonvocational undergraduate curriculum and could reasonably be viewed as a liberal arts college. It was not until after Yale College became the first U.S. institution to grant a Ph.D. degree, in 1861, and passage of the first land-grant bill, the Morrill Act of 1862, launched the state universities, that undergraduate education outside the liberal arts began its ascent toward the preeminence it now enjoys.

Especially in the mid-nineteenth century, the founding of colleges spread rapidly across the United States. The Midwest proved particularly fertile ground for liberal arts colleges. Some were established, with missionary-like zeal, to bring East Coast-college liberal education to the frontier. Yale graduates were especially active, establishing a number of Midwest colleges designed to cleave faithfully to Yale's classical curriculum. Beloit College in Wisconsin, for example, was founded by Yale men in 1847 with the express mission of replicating the Yale curriculum for those who, for whatever reason, could not get to New Haven. Beloit was called "the Yale of the West," which was not a marketing slogan but a literal description of its educational offerings.

Colleges sprang up seemingly at every crossroad. Often, after the citizens of a new village built a lumber mill and a grain depot, the next

order of business was to found a local college. In 1851 Reverend Absalom Peters told the Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education at the West, “Our Country, in the whole extent of it, is to be a land of Colleges.”¹⁵ Frederick Rudolph has aptly observed that “college-founding in the nineteenth century was undertaken in the same spirit as canal-building, cotton-ginning, farming and gold-mining”: not “completely rational,” but “touched by the American faith in tomorrow, in the unquestionable capacity of Americans to achieve a better world, . . . the romantic belief in endless progress.”¹⁶

Today, most liberal arts colleges are small, residential, often located in a rural setting, and devoted primarily to educating undergraduates. Student enrollment is typically between 1,000 and 2,500. Students can, and usually do, know a substantial percentage of their classmates. Students and faculty often interact outside the classroom. Most instruction is provided by full-time tenured or tenure-track professors, not graduate students or teaching assistants. Classes tend to be small; large lecture courses are the exception. Course enrollments of fifty students are uncommon, and those with twenty or fewer are the norm. In contrast, in 2007 at the University of Colorado, there were 33 undergraduate courses that had 400 or more enrollees.¹⁷ The numbers of majors and courses offered at liberal arts colleges also tend to be small. In 2007, for example, Beloit College’s course catalog reported 56 majors and 543 courses. That same year, the University of Wisconsin–Madison offered 214 majors and 11,200 courses.¹⁸

Amherst College history professor emeritus Hugh Hawkins has offered the following succinct definition of a liberal arts college: “A four-year institution of higher education, focusing its attention on candidates for the B.A. degree who are generally between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, an institution resistant to highly specific vocational preparation and insisting on a considerable breadth of studies . . . [that hopes to develop] interests and capabilities that will enrich both the individual learner and future communities.”¹⁹

Intimacy distinguishes the liberal arts college experience—intimacy with the entire academic entity, because of the colleges’ small size, and especially with faculty members, most of whom are primarily engaged in teaching rather than research and scholarship. In 1995, a Pew Char-

table Trusts–sponsored Higher Education Roundtable of liberal arts college presidents put it this way:

For many of those outside the academy and even more of us within, it is the liberal arts college—residential, devoted to instruction in a broad curriculum of the arts and sciences, designed as a place of growth and experimentation for the young—that remains the mind’s shorthand for an undergraduate education at its best. Architecturally and philosophically, the liberal arts college embodies the ideal of learning as an act of community, in which students and faculty come together to explore and extend the foundations of knowledge. The intimacy of the residential setting, the emphasis placed on teaching, the celebration of the liberal arts as the foundation for a lifetime of learning—all define the ideal form of scholarly purpose and endeavor in undergraduate institutions. . . .

When larger institutions wish to design special undergraduate environments that would provide a quality experience in residential learning and mentorship, they build small sub-communities that replicate the model of the liberal arts college.²⁰

The other key distinguishing quality of liberal arts colleges is their singular commitment to teaching undergraduates. According to University of California, Berkeley, professor David Kirp, “Professors at liberal arts colleges, even[!] elite colleges like Swarthmore and Amherst, are expected to take their classroom obligations seriously.”²¹ In discussing the financial challenges facing Arizona State University and other public research universities, Jane Wellman observed, “Universities aspire to prestige that is achieved by increasing selectivity, getting a research mission and having faculty do as little teaching as possible, not by teaching and learning and taking students from Point A to Point B.”²²

There are now hundreds of small, private, residential colleges scattered around the country. Not all of them, of course, are liberal arts colleges, and there is no “official” list of the ones that are. Which colleges should be included in the analysis for this book?

In a thoughtful book on liberal arts colleges, David Breneman looked at 212 colleges with a combined enrollment of 260,000 students, among

whom 40 percent or more majored in a liberal discipline as defined by the Carnegie Foundation in 1988.²³ In 2000, economists Michael McPherson and Morton Schapiro estimated that fewer than 100,000 students, less than 0.6 percent of all U.S. higher education enrollees, attended liberal arts colleges—colleges, as they put it, “where the majority of students major in the liberal arts and live on campus, and where admission is moderately selective (turning down, say, more than a third of those who apply).”²⁴ In 2004 the 89 private, not-for-profit colleges included in the Carnegie Foundation’s A&S-F/NGC category had an undergraduate enrollment of 124,670.²⁵ All of them are unquestionably liberal arts colleges.

Another group of institutions that could be defined as liberal arts colleges are the members of the Annapolis Group. In 1993 a group of private-college presidents formed an organization they called the Annapolis Group, taking the name from the Maryland site of their first meeting. The group’s express purpose is to strengthen and promote private, not-for-profit, residential liberal arts colleges. In 2007–2008, the combined full-time undergraduate enrollment of the 126 Annapolis Group–member colleges included in this book was about 218,000.²⁶

In 1983, while the Carnegie Foundation was struggling with its definitions, *U.S. News and World Report* blithely began publishing its annual list of the “Best Liberal Arts Colleges.” *U.S. News* claims the colleges on its list “award at least half of their degrees in the arts and sciences,” although a close review reveals that more than a quarter of them do not. Nonetheless it is somehow comforting that, unlike the Carnegie Foundation, *U.S. News* has saved the word *liberal*, even if it does not define it. While college administrators love to complain about the inaccuracy of *U.S. News*’s rankings—and there are significant flaws in its methodology—it is hard to quarrel with the broad picture the rankings paint. Further, the magazine’s “Best Liberal Arts Colleges” list is the most familiar, most often referred to, and most influential list of liberal arts colleges in the United States and, despite its flaws, it is no more arbitrary than any other list would be.²⁷

In this book, the 225 private, not-for-profit colleges ranked in the 2009 *U.S. News* list of “Best Liberal Arts Colleges” are analyzed.²⁸ The Carnegie Foundation’s A&S-F/NGC colleges and the Annapolis Group

Table 1.1 2007–2008 undergraduate enrollment at colleges included in this study

Tier	Number of colleges	Total enrollment	Average enrollment
I	51	103,497	2,029
II	68	111,666	1,642
III	63	86,230	1,414
IV	43	47,258	1,099
<i>Total</i>	225	348,651	1,567

Note: See Appendix, Table A.1.

members list are too limited, as each omits colleges that are reasonably classified as liberal arts. Breneman's list is similar to the one used here but somewhat out of date.

Colleges included in the *U.S. News* ranking are usefully divided into four tiers. In this book, Tier I includes the 51 highest ranked, best known, and (for the most part) richest private liberal arts colleges. Sixty-eight colleges (ranked between 52 and 122 by *U.S. News*) make up Tier II. *U.S. News* does not publish numeric rankings for the colleges included in its Tiers III and IV but rather lists them alphabetically. Sixty-three of the colleges included in *U.S. News*'s Tier III and 43 of the colleges included in its Tier IV are included in the analysis here. Much of the discussion that follows distinguishes among the four tiers.

Table 1.1 summarizes the enrollment data for the 225 colleges included in this study.

Why Should We Care?

The thesis here is simple. Society needs well and broadly educated citizens. The more liberally educated citizens it has, the stronger it will be. Individuals benefit from being well and broadly educated. The more they are liberally educated, the stronger they will be in both their personal and their professional lives, and as citizens. Liberal arts colleges, while not the only vehicles for producing liberally educated citizens, are among the best.

Thoughtfulness as a “habit of mind” is what liberal education offers.²⁹ And as Lord Brougham neatly observed nearly two centuries ago, “Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.”³⁰ In the ever more complex and contentious society in which we live, thoughtful citizens are a precious resource.

Certain qualities characterize the thoughtfulness of liberally educated persons. First and foremost is curiosity, a desire to know and, especially, to understand. From this flows a questioning attitude, a lack of self-certainty, and a propensity for unfettered inquiry. Full acceptance of the proposition “I may be wrong” is a baseline quality. Liberally educated persons are moved to ask such questions as, “What is good?” In addition to being drawn to explore what is, they ask, “What could be?”

A liberal education defines the relationship of its holders to the world around them. They are seldom satisfied with their level of knowing. They wonder, and bring their analytical resources and knowledge to bear on their wondering. The life of their minds is not limited by or to their daily experience. For them, the fact of not knowing can be a source of pleasurable challenge. Creativity is central to what they value.

These qualities, I have observed again and again, lead liberally educated persons to develop a set of skills that are broadly useful, fully transferable, and applicable to any challenge, vocational or other—skills that serve society as well as the individual. Liberally educated persons are capable and desirous of:

- Critical self-examination;
- Persuasive and graceful disputation;
- Effective written communication, that is, the ability to say in writing what is intended to be said;
- In Martha Nussbaum’s phrase, “narrative imagination,” that is, compassion and the inclination and ability to put oneself in another’s shoes;³¹
- Sophisticated technology-based exploration;
- A continuing drive to generalize, to search for the common denominator;
- A well-developed understanding of the human condition, re-

flected in the ability to predict the conduct of others with substantially better than average accuracy;

- An appreciation of creativity and beauty;
- An understanding of history and its consequences;
- An intellectually entrepreneurial spirit;
- A commitment to service to others and the community, that is, a sense of social responsibility; and
- An examined life.

More than eighty years ago, while a Williams College freshman, filmmaker Elia Kazan told his immigrant father that he was studying math, astronomy, English, Latin, and French. His father responded, “Why you no study something use-eh-full?”³² I believe the very fact that everything a liberal arts student studies is not “use-eh-full” is the genius of the uniquely American liberal arts education. It is the nonvocational, non-career-based “uselessness” of the subject matter that opens the door to appreciating knowing for the sake of knowing and that drives home the fact that learning is of value in and of itself, without regard to whether it is directly linked to a marketable skill. It is possible to realize these things while studying vocational subjects but it is much more difficult, because the student is constantly distracted from the utility of acquiring knowledge by the utility of the knowledge being acquired. Liberal arts education eliminates this distraction. Its lack of career-directed purposefulness separates knowing from need to know, learning from need to learn, and desire to understand from need to understand.

It is often said that a liberal arts education well suits a few persons, but for most, vocational courses of study are the right path. In my view, this is elitist and wrong. Liberal arts education is not an alternative to vocational training. Rather, it facilitates and enhances the vocational experience by honing the way the mind works and stimulating enthusiasm for using it, and by enriching the entire life experience.

Today, for many persons, a high-paying job is a grail, not merely a goal; self-certainty is admired and self-questioning derided; and much contemporary “culture” is commercial, not creative. In a lecture she delivered at Amherst College in 2007, novelist Marilynne Robinson gloomily reported that “every aspect of contemporary life assumes a

lowest common denominator that is very low indeed.”³³ (One of the currently popular cultural forms is “reality TV,” the common denominator of which is that it is not real.) In this regard, I was heartened by a statement made by a Beloit College trustee, a highly successful corporate CEO whose formal education ended with high school. When I asked him whether he regretted not having gone to college, he answered in the affirmative. “Because you feel you lack critical thinking or communications skills?” I asked. “Not at all,” he replied. “Then why?” I asked. “Because,” he said, “I feel left out of art, music, literature, and culture.”

Perhaps paradoxically, it may be business leaders who most persuasively articulate the value of a liberal arts education. A few years ago, history professor Warren Goldstein interviewed a number of executives who had attended Yale as undergraduates:

“A liberal arts education teaches you how to think: how to analyze, how to read, how to write, how to develop a persuasive argument. These skills are used every day in business. A liberal arts education also offers the ability to focus on large ideas. We live in a world where everyone is multitasking, often skimming the surface and reacting to sound bites. But as undergraduates, we had the opportunity to read great literature and history, to focus and to consider. This developed a standard of depth and care that calibrates our work for the rest of our lives.” (Susan Crown, principal, Henry Crown and Company investment firm.)

“Because I was a well-educated person, I was able to use that education in the forging of relationships. I did a lot of business abroad, in cultures where being liberally educated matters more than it does here.” (Robert M. Rubin, commodities and currency trader, Drexel Burnham.)

“For leaders and managers, an undergraduate degree in business is a genuine, serious mistake. What you’re going to learn is an advanced version of bookkeeping; you never learn the most rigorous thinking taught in professional business schools. I don’t know anybody who recommends undergraduate study in business, certainly not over liberal arts, and I include science.” (Donna Dubinsky, CEO, Numenta.)³⁴

One can, of course, succeed in life without obtaining a liberal arts undergraduate degree. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are famously successful college dropouts. Abraham Lincoln left school when he was fifteen years old. Even though Ben Franklin received his last schooling when he was eleven years old, he was a champion of formal liberal arts education as, among other things, the founder and first provost of the University of Pennsylvania.³⁵

Like many self-educated people, he was aware of the gaps in his education. He had filled most of them better than they would have been filled in school. But it had required a great deal of work, more than ought to have been necessary. And it required a sense of discipline, a devotion to learning, and a knack for absorbing information that were not given equally to all. Though he deliberately downplayed it, Franklin understood his own exceptionality; unlike many self-made men, he did not set his own experience as a standard for others.³⁶

Former University of Chicago president Edward Levi correctly pointed out that universities and colleges are entitled to great credit for keeping liberal education alive:

They have continued the traditions of culture and rediscovered cultures which had died. They have inculcated an appreciation for the works of the mind, developed the skills of the intellect, emphasized the continuing need for free inquiry and discussion, the importance of scientific discovery, the need to understand the nonrational. Thus they have stood for the concept of the wholeness of knowledge, the morality of that intellectual criticism which is so difficult because it is self-criticism, requiring the admission of error. They have helped to create thoughtfulness about values. They have held to the conception that these skills, this appreciation, this examination of values, this way of inquiry are the possession of the free man to be acquired through education. This is what a liberal education is about.³⁷

A superb undergraduate liberal arts education is certainly available at the great private universities and at the honors colleges that an increasing number of distinguished public universities are creating. But the university undergraduate experience and the liberal arts college experience are different. Universities are diverse and complex. Their mis-

sions emphasize research and scholarship. Yale University history professor Jaroslav Pelikan pointed out that even when university professors divide their time equally between scholarship and teaching, and divide their teaching time equally between graduate and undergraduate students, the undergraduates get only one-quarter of their time.³⁸ In contrast, liberal arts colleges focus entirely on teaching undergraduates. Their goal is singular: to instill in their young students the capability and the desire to become liberally educated.

Society's need for thoughtful leaders has never been greater. Do liberal arts colleges have any special value in satisfying this need? The answer is a resounding *yes*. Even though their students represent no more than 1 or 2 percent of the total U.S. higher education enrollment, for two centuries tiny liberal arts colleges have produced a hugely disproportionately large percentage of leaders. Their graduates have been and continue to be at the forefront in every field: educators, scholars, jurists, statesmen, diplomats, politicians, scientists, business executives, artists, musicians, literary writers, journalists, and on and on. Many have received Nobel, MacArthur, Fulbright, Pulitzer, and other awards recognizing their high achievements. For example:

- Twelve U.S. presidents (27 percent) and six U.S. Supreme Court chief justices (35 percent) attended liberal arts colleges.³⁹ One president, James Garfield, attended two: Hiram College and Williams College.
- Three of the four first members of President Obama's transition team were liberal arts college graduates (from Sarah Lawrence, Knox, and Colby), as were three of the fifteen original executive department heads in his cabinet and two of the six holders of other cabinet-level positions.
- In the One Hundred Eleventh Congress (2009–2011), fifty-nine representatives (14 percent) and nine senators (9 percent) graduated from one of the liberal arts colleges analyzed in this book.⁴⁰
- Over the ten years from 1999 to 2008, twelve of the fifty-three Nobel laureates (23 percent) who received their undergraduate education at a U.S. college or university received it at a liberal arts college.⁴¹
- Twelve of the ninety-nine recipients of MacArthur Fellowships

(so-called Genius Awards) over the four years from 2005 to 2008 attended a liberal arts college (Bates, Bennington, Calvin, Carleton, Hampshire, Haverford, Illinois Wesleyan, Kalamazoo, Oberlin, Smith, Trinity, and Wesleyan University).⁴²

- In 2010 at least thirteen of the ninety-one tenured and tenure-track professors at Harvard Law School had graduated from a liberal arts college.⁴³
- Harvard University president Drew Gilpin Faust is a liberal arts college graduate (Bryn Mawr College), as are two other presidents among the fifty highest-ranked national universities: Mary Sue Coleman, president of the University of Michigan (Grinnell College), and Nathan O. Hatch, president of Wake Forest University (Wheaton College).⁴⁴
- Twenty-eight of the fifty baccalaureate-granting institutions that, proportionate to their size, graduated the most science and engineering doctorate recipients from 1997 to 2006 were liberal arts colleges. Five of them, Harvey Mudd, Reed, Swarthmore, Carleton, and Grinnell, ranked ahead of Harvard; nine of them ahead of Yale.⁴⁵

It would be foolish to abandon such successful enterprises.⁴⁶

The Pew-sponsored Higher Education Roundtable of college presidents neatly summarized the unique value of liberal arts colleges: “It is the liberal arts college that best retains the language and imagery of education as a social compact between a community and its individual members—even as ‘community’ has come to encompass a broad range of people and responsibilities. In this setting, acquiring knowledge is defined not just as a means to individual advancement but as a basis for assuming the mantle of social responsibility, of making constructive contributions to the community and larger society of which one is part.”⁴⁷

It would be a tragedy if, as the Roundtable participants said, the exceptional educational experience liberal arts colleges provide were to become “a quaint relic, more precious than important, pursued by a handful of students who seek mainly the status and credentialing that a degree from a private institution confers.”⁴⁸