

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Liberal Arts Align With Employer Needs

Small college presidents often feel their programs aren't valued by the labor market, but they heard otherwise from a major employer Monday.

By [Rick Seltzer](#)

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MARCO ISLAND, Fla. -- Whenever presidents of private liberal arts colleges gather, the topic of their graduates' career readiness is near the top of their minds.

This year's Council of Independent Colleges Presidents Institute is no different. Since the program officially began Saturday, presidents in various settings have touted their institutions' **track records** preparing students for careers and what they believe to be strong long-term **prospects** for students who earn degrees in the liberal arts.

But among this group, worries run high that the liberal arts are being marginalized in America and the workplace. Some presidents are concerned that parents, students and employers are overlooking their institutions and instead turning toward campuses that tilt more heavily toward science and technology majors.

So it was notable Monday when a managing director at one of the world's largest investment firms told presidents that the leaders who are its best employees are the ones who have the ability to operate outside of silos and to speak to many different types of people.

“That sounds roughly like a liberal arts education,” said the speaker, Jonathan McBride, managing director and global head of inclusion at the investment management company BlackRock.

If the companies BlackRock invests in seek the same characteristics, it suggests liberal arts colleges are right to tell students about the long-term benefits of their education. The characteristics in demand add up to the ability to avoid sameness or not to favor the familiar. And it might be easier to teach those instincts when a student is on campus, surrounded by ideas, instead of at the workplace for only a part of the day.

The discussion also suggests some changes liberal arts colleges could make to keep employers happy. At some point, institutions could start certifying

skills that contribute to what McBride calls inclusive leadership, just like some institutions provide certificates for coding skills.

McBride urged college leaders to fight the urge to promote too much specialization. The next big skill will be learning itself, he said.

Nonetheless, some liberal arts college presidents feel they struggle to communicate their value to students and families.

“No matter what research we put out there on outcomes, nobody seems to be hearing it,” said Ann McElaney-Johnson, president of Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles, which draws many of its students from its local area and has a large percentage of Pell-eligible students.

McElaney-Johnson spoke at an afternoon session about promoting the labor market outcomes of the liberal arts. Like many small private institutions, Mount St. Mary's isn't entirely disregarding technical skills as it teaches human skills or soft skills. It's trying to embed technical skills into students' educational experience.

But institutions have to help students understand and tell others why their mix of skills is valuable, McElaney-Johnson said.

Communicating the value of a liberal arts degree is made more difficult by the fact that liberal arts graduates have nonlinear career paths.

About 70 percent of liberal arts graduates do something completely different when they go from their first stable job to their second, said Rob Sentz, chief innovation officer at the labor market analytics firm Emsi. But even technology majors change paths between first and second jobs more than half the time.

“It almost doesn't matter what kind of degree you have,” Sentz said. “You're moving in the market.”

The labor market is demanding skills such as project management, strategic planning, marketing, writing and sales, Sentz said. Why? When a company hires someone to build a new machine, it also has to hire someone to talk about that machine and someone to sell it. It has to hire a manager to oversee teams involved in production.

How can colleges bridge the gaps between employers and campuses -- and between what students think they want and what the labor force is demanding?

The experience of Brandman University in California might offer some insight. Brandman is part of the Chapman University system, with 25,000 degree and certificate students, classes offered online, and campuses in California and Washington. It is also heavily involved in employer-funded degree programs and competency-based education.

Brandman's chancellor and chief executive officer, Gary Brahm, described what he called "backwards program design." It involves designing degree programs by looking at the knowledge, skills and capabilities that will help employment outcomes.

Competencies from professional certifications can also be important, whether they are drawn from the Institute of Supply Management or Microsoft. Competencies can be acknowledged through credentials other than a degree, such as badges students can earn.

Degree programs can be validated by employers and outside sources of workplace data, such as Burning Glass, to ensure the skills really match employer needs and wants.

Brahm also stressed a need to make sure students are picking up the competencies.

“Because we will embed these competencies across the curriculum, we need to have institutionally developed standardized testing to measure how well you're doing,” he said.

Much of that is a way for colleges to learn from employers and about the job market. It may be necessary work and work that some institutions are already doing -- and it may be largely new for some institutions.

Many of the college presidents in attendance Monday were happy to hear an employer, BlackRock, valuing what they already do.

“In a world where in fact the most important expertise is learning, how much do we have to learn from you all?” McBride said. “Everything.”

Read more by [Rick Seltzer](#)

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