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Wabash College president: We need to save liberal arts

Dr. Scott E. Feller Wabash College

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Journal & Courier received the following commentary from Wabash College President Scott E. Feller.

CRAWFORDSVILLE, Ind. – The University of West Virginia made news in September when its Board announced the elimination of 28 academic programs, including many that are the cornerstones of a liberal arts education. All foreign language degree programs and mathematics were cut, and the university reduced its fine arts programs, saving only one faculty position each in art and music.

The primary justification is not enough students are enrolling in these programs and resources should be focused on majors more directly related to careers. Many companies are doing away with bachelor's degree requirements for certain positions and focusing on skills-based hiring.

That's a fantastic development — but it should not be interpreted to mean college is no longer a worthwhile investment or that companies don't need anyone with a bachelor's degree.

Senior executives need to better broadcast the skills they value.

I recently spoke with two alumni of Wabash College, the school where I'm president, both of whom are CEOs. They graduated in different decades, are based in different parts of the country, and work in different industries. Yet, each told the same story when asked what traits they seek in their employees.

They need people with critical thinking skills, strong communication skills, and the ability to work well with others. They need people with strong habits of mind who can wrestle with difficult questions and ideas. These were their top priorities.

My experience aligns with findings over several decades from Dr. Michael Hicks, the Director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Ball State University. He, too, has found these qualities—the ability to think and communicate clearly and to understand how a piece of

information fits in a wider context, among other things—are what companies look for in recent graduates.

The skills a liberal arts education delivers are precisely those business and entrepreneurial leaders say they need for long term growth.

The business environment is constantly evolving. Industry functions can change drastically in just a few years, which requires workers with flexibility, intellectual curiosity, and an ability to learn. Simultaneously, companies are becoming more heterogeneous and need employees who can navigate different ideas and outlooks. These are hallmarks of the liberal arts.

The most reliable way to advance from the entry level to the director's level is with those skills of critical thinking, communication, and collegiality that come from higher education — specifically the skills emphasized in the liberal arts.

Senior management is rarely filled with narrowly trained specialists. The best managers, directors, and executives tend to be well-rounded individuals with a wealth of skills like the ones engendered by liberal arts. They can solve problems, manage others, and drive a company forward.

Unless companies stand up for liberal arts, they may find themselves unable to hire people with the skills to help them thrive in the 21st century.

When employers identify an appreciation for fundamental skills, students will gravitate toward majors that foster them, parents will encourage kids to major in them, and universities will value those departments. Similarly, a message direct from the C-suite carries a different kind of weight in students' ears — not to mention college and university presidents.

We are in this together. Let's change the conversation about skill sets, training, and the solid return on investment that come from the liberal arts.

Scott E. Feller is the president of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana.