The Most Practical College Degree

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I recently found myself having a Howard Beale moment. “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!”

Beale, the TV news anchor in the film Network, is feeling dismay about the state of television news and makes his declaration during a broadcast. Since the February announcement that Sweet Briar College would close—citing, among other things, the “declining number of students choosing to attend small, rural, private liberal arts colleges”—Wilson College seems to have become inextricably linked with the story because Wilson’s planned closure in 1979 was reversed in court, preserving the institution.

I’m not going to add to the long list—from Moody’s to marketers to former college presidents—offering pronouncements on what Sweet Briar did or what they should have done. Those weighing in on Sweet Briar are doing so based on general information given by the college, not any specific knowledge of the college’s particular circumstance. This is problematic, given that the solutions to the problems faced by small tuition-driven colleges are not equally prescriptive.

Having gone through an open, in-depth process to examine the marketplace for Wilson and to develop a plan toward sustainability, I can tell you that each institution is unique and needs to weigh its own challenges, not against a single standard, but within its own context.

While being linked with a troubled institution that has announced closure can be frustrating, it is not this connection that led to my Howard Beale moment. It is the notion that the liberal arts were a deciding factor in Sweet Briar’s demise, which has only added to the crescendo of an unwarranted requiem for the liberal arts. In short, the liberal arts have become an easy scapegoat. The mission of colleges and universities to provide a deeper educational experience that often finds the liberal arts at its core has been deemed obsolete. The entire discourse around the value of a degree has become a politically driven narrative most often based on first jobs after graduation, and looks to paint colleges and universities as latter-day trade schools whose primary concern should be providing skilled labor to the American workforce.

All the problems with this simplistic view—designed to be sound-bite ready—are too broad to cover here, but I do want to point out that this line of thinking ignores the very sector it claims to support: business leaders. That’s right, the same constituency that politicians claim to represent has a contrary view. Yes, you will always find business owners that need skilled workers, but a 2013 study by Hart Research—It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success—found consensus among employers “that innovation, critical thinking, and a broad skill set are important for taking on complex challenges in the workplace.” In fact, 93% agreed that a “candidate’s capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than an undergraduate major.” These qualities are the very essence of the liberal arts.

A college degree is an investment in one’s life. The focus on the first job out of school is shortsighted and, I would argue, actually reinforces the need for the foundation provided by the liberal arts. Narrow training prepares students for a job, not a career(s). Because of technology and a constantly
evolving global marketplace, graduates need to be adaptable to succeed, even within a narrow field and especially within STEM disciplines.

A 2012 Bureau of Labor Statistics study found that the average person had 11.8 jobs between the ages of 18 and 46, with approximately eight of those coming before age 29. This is why employees with broad-based knowledge and the ability to think critically, communicate and solve complex problems are in demand.

There has been no shortage of articles written by or about top CEOs touting the value liberal arts graduates add to their companies. And liberal arts degrees are disproportionally represented at the executive level in American business. While it is often cited that a third of Fortune 500 company executives have liberal arts degrees, I’d be willing to bet that many of the remaining top executives with specialized degrees came from programs with a strong liberal learning core to them. Why? Because the liberal arts imbues a fully dimensional perspective—of ethics, culture, history and aesthetics—that allows graduates to explore issues in their work and professions from a variety of viewpoints, which is a fundamental characteristic of leadership.

I’d like to make one final point. It may seem idealistic, but it is essential to the fabric of our nation. Now more than ever, as we see widening socioeconomic gaps and a disappearance of civility and the political middle, the liberal arts are critical. Liberal learning springs from the very idea of citizenship and liberty. It creates engaged and informed individuals that make the notion of innovation and economic exceptionalism possible.

At the end of Wilson’s examination of our marketplace and our future, we came to some very different conclusions than did Sweet Briar. We were able to develop a business plan that makes sense for our location, for our institution, for our future. And it is working for us. Our research and the thousands of hours of work and input from faculty, trustees, alumnae, staff and students led us to a five-point plan that included a commitment to our liberal arts tradition. In so many ways, a liberal arts degree is the most practical degree a student can earn.