Are college and universities meant to crank out workers? Or should they be elevating the collective mind and spirit? Should they prepare students for productive lives that help build a vibrant economy? Or inspire them beyond the marketplace with civic-minded commitment to the good of humankind? Perhaps all of the above.

Feeding the Economy

As anyone who has spent time on a college campus knows, the reasons for attending school vary widely, but many students expect to prepare themselves for a lifetime of productive work. This concept, underscored now as the economy continues to falter and job prospects become more elusive, is not lost on policymakers. The ideas of “workforce readiness” and “job creation” are often key to the discussion among state lawmakers facing a still-faltering economy and scrutinizing education budgets to make the most of what funding is available.

Some have embraced a business-first model for higher education. In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott grabbed headlines—and outraged many academics—when he suggested that science, technology, engineering and math (the STEM disciplines) should get more funding than the liberal arts. “If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I’m going to take that money to create jobs,” Scott said. “So I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state. . . . Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so.”

Others have also made the direct link between business and higher education. The National Association of Manufacturers is working to standardize community college curricula that would certify students in industrial skills like welding. Pearson Learning Solutions, known for its textbooks, is partnering with...
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—Janet Dudley-Eshbach

Monster Worldwide, which runs the Monster.com online job site, to help schools tailor course offerings to the regional job market.

Lorain County Community College’s Nord Advanced Technology Center in Ohio has created courses to prepare students for work at specific employers in their area. And in South Carolina, technical colleges often customize their courses for companies like BMW AG, in exchange for investments and job creation.

While she is a strong proponent of the liberal arts for every student, Janet Dudley-Eshbach, president of Salisbury University in Maryland, also recognizes the reality of employability. “Workforce readiness involves meeting the needs of employers and our students,” she says. “Students deserve to know that, with their investment of time and money spent on a college education, they will be well-prepared to find a job and be successful.” Salisbury connects even freshmen with career services, urging them to consider their work life at the beginning of their studies, and programs weave experiential learning into coursework to ground students in real-world skills.

“If higher education is truly going to help drive economic growth, students’ academic success must be tied to the needs of the marketplace,” notes that National Governor’s Association (NGA) report, “Degrees for What Jobs? Raising Expectations for Universities and Colleges in a Global Economy,” released last March. “Degrees that do not fit the job market and raise the standard of living will not lift the economy.” The report goes on to highlight several states that are aligning postsecondary education with state economic goals.

In Minnesota, the NGA reports, state college and university leaders recently visited more than 300 private-sector companies to better understand workforce needs; they are developing a plan to meet them. Washington is aligning credentials with market demands, focusing on an undersupply of mid-level workers in science, technology, manufacturing and production, and health. The University of North Carolina’s UNC Tomorrow reframes education as “demand-driven,” and takes its cues from key economic needs, addressing, for example, a nursing shortage in western North Carolina and a demand for multi-skilled scientists in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals.

In general, the NGA report urges state schools to do five things: embrace their role in economic development; use labor market data to direct higher education programming; seek employers’ input to develop programs that will serve industry’s needs; publicly report employment outcomes, such as graduates’ wages and employability; and award funding based on criteria like industry-oriented curricula and how well institutions meet state goals and workforce needs. “The degrees must match the needs of the marketplace,” the report states.

If they do not, graduates can expect a challenge as they search for employment after graduation. The old trope about liberal arts majors slinging burgers or tending bar has changed only slightly: now they are also steaming milk as coffee shop baristas. “Unfulfilled Expectations: Recent College Graduates Struggle in a Troubled Economy,” released by Work Trends: America’s Attitudes about Work, Employers and Government at Rutgers, shows a dismal job market. Just 56 percent of the 2010 graduating class surveyed found work within a year, compared to 90 percent from 2006 and 2007. It also shows that area studies and humanities majors were least likely to be employed, and if they are employed, it’s likely they are driving taxis, pumping gas, waiting tables—displacing less educated people who are also unemployed. Of course, a college degree is still worth a great deal, even in the marketplace: Income for people with undergraduate degrees is 84 percent higher than for those who only graduated from high school. But it is no guarantee.

Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, ties degrees directly to the workplace in his report, “What’s it Worth? The Economic Value of College Majors,” showing which majors garner the highest salaries (petroleum engineering leads the pack; counseling brings up the rear). “The inescapable reality is that ours is a society based on work,” he writes. “Those who are not equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to get and
keep good jobs are denied the genuine social inclusion that is the real test of full citizenship."

In other words, he explains in an interview, "If you don’t have a job, you’re sunk."

**The Case for the Liberal Arts**

The question for those anxious to serve (and become part of) the job market becomes, what sort of an education does the marketplace demand?

Many would argue that liberal arts is the answer.

Even as industry demands specific skills, it rates more general qualifications higher. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, people who are hiring new workers favor graduates with degrees in business, engineering and technology-related subjects. But the qualities they value most are the ability to work well with other people, strong verbal communication, decision-making and problem solving skills, the ability to obtain and process information, and good planning, organizing and prioritizing—qualities learned in a liberal arts program.

“The economic value of general knowledge, skills and abilities exceeds and is growing much faster than the value of job-specific competencies,” writes Carnevale. Students need “problem solving, critical thinking and then a set of skills that aren't cognitive—interpersonal skills, conscientiousness,” he tells Public Purpose. “In theory, the liberal arts teach a lot of those skills.” The only flaw to this argument, he adds, is that these skills should be learned in context. “Problem solving in engineering is different from problem solving in a social worker. Problem solving if you’re a doctor is different from problem solving if you’re a lawyer.”

“College and universities have an obligation to scan and assess the economic environment for which they prepare students,” writes Carol Geary Schneider, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* last May. “But students’ long-term success does not depend on short-term business cycles or the technical demands of the latest ‘hot’ industry.”

Dudley-Eshbach sees it first-hand at Salisbury State: “Courses in the liberal arts—whether in literature, philosophy, or some other academic field—help students develop analytical and critical thinking skills, as well as effective writing and oral expression,” she says. “So many employers over the years have told me that, ultimately, these are the skills they are seeking in their employees.”

Roberta Ness, dean of the school of public health and M. David Low chair in public health at the University of Texas, adds that innovation is crucial in a 21st-century workforce. Ness, a physician and scientist, founded Innovation Generation, a technique for training people to think more creatively. A former “linear thinker” herself, she now believes an “out of the box” approach can be applied to any field. The idea extends to employability as well.

“Do you want a workforce that consists of folks that have kind of automatic processing skills, or do you want a workforce that has the flexibility to be able to think?” she asks. “It’s really simple. Do you want your workers to be able to think, or not?”
To educate thinking graduates, schools like Portland State University (Ore.) and James Madison University (Va.) weave the liberal arts into all their programs, not just the traditional humanities departments. “Our school of engineering doesn’t have a separate liberal arts core,” explains Jerry Benson, interim provost and senior vice president at James Madison. “It’s the same liberal arts core as our theater and dance and English majors have taken.”

Similarly, Portland State carries the general education program through all four years of study, ensuring that students in even the most technically specific subject areas will have a broad background. “I don’t think anybody would be an advocate for accountants who can only make sure that Column A adds up to Column B,” says Kevin Kecskes, associate vice provost for engagement, and director for community-university partnerships at Portland State. “We want more than that or else what are we doing? We need open minded, multi-skilled, multilingual thinkers who are nimble on their feet, who can problem solve for their communities.”

Beyond the Workforce

“Public education should do more than provide new technology and foot soldiers for the American economy,” writes Carnevale. “Education . . . is more than dollars and cents. We rely on education for other purposes, and that is to create a well-informed citizenry.”

For one thing, he argues, it is central to a democratic society. Educating the least among us theoretically gives everyone the opportunity to participate meaningfully in society. Also, he writes, the market generates taxable wealth that pays for public education. “Liberal education and market systems are inextricably bound in very pragmatic ways at the core of democratic capitalism.”

Learning, Carnevale continues, is “an innate and seductive human urge,” with intrinsic value for everyone. But learning for learning’s sake is a privileged endeavor; lower-income people are often too focused on making a living to consider civic engagement and the life of the mind. If they go to college at all, they are forced to choose career-oriented programs.

“I think liberal arts and general education will survive above the median income level,” says Carnevale. “The real tragedy here is that we’re creating a highly stratified system where some people get access to that, the icing on the cake. And other people just get biscuits.”

There are exceptions. People sometimes get one credential that allows them to enter the workforce, and then return to school to further their education.

Bridging the Gap

But why not offer the liberal arts with skills-specific education, in as many programs as possible? That is part of the AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), a national initiative that champions the importance of a “21st century liberal education.” Its aim is to take liberal arts concepts beyond the traditional confines of a college of arts and sciences, and apply them to professional and occupational education as well.

Quoting poets—“It is difficult/to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/of what is found there,” William Carlos Williams—and industry—“Only 50 percent of high school and college graduates who apply for a job pass the employment exam,” Edward B. Rust Jr., CEO, State Farm—LEAP embraces the importance of both. Its four “essential learning outcomes” are meant for all disciplines:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world;
- Intellectual and practical skills;
- Personal and social responsibility; and
- Integrative learning.

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Its seven “principles of excellence” are meant to keep educators on track:

- Aim high;
- Give students a compass;
- Teach the arts of inquiry and innovation;
- Engage the big questions;
- Connect knowledge with choices and action;
- Foster civic, intercultural and ethical learning; and
- Assess students’ ability to apply learning to complex problems.

Liberal education is not by definition “non-vocational,” LEAP insists. Just as vocational sensibility is prescribed to be part of liberal arts education, liberal arts must be part of even the most professional and technical fields, interweaving their hallmarks—inquiry, analysis, written and oral communication, teamwork, critical and creative thinking, civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and ethical reasoning—through every discipline.

Kecskes, at Portland State, rejects the “either/or” frame and suggests instead, “both/and.” “Do we need workforce development? Absolutely,” he says. “It’s a no brainer. Do we need to be able to provide ample time for all of our students to chew on timeless ideas that are the bedrock of our democracy? Can you be a good citizen and have a job? I certainly hope so.” “It’s just plain wrong to pit the liberal arts against preparation for work,” says Geary-Schneider. “What new employees too often lack, business leaders complain, are the skills and abilities that enable them to continue learning on the job.” Skills they can get with a liberal arts education.

“To say ‘liberal arts education or career preparation’ is a false dichotomy,” says Dudley-Eschbach, at Salisbury. “One complements the other.”

“Education is more than dollars and cents. We rely on education for other purposes, and that is to create a well-informed citizenry.”

—Anthony Carnevale