

September 2015

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Recommended Citation

Crabtree, Robbin D. and Gudelunas, David (2015) "Analysis and Response to Media Coverage of Liberal Arts Education," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 48, Article 7.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol48/iss1/7>

Analysis and Response to Media Coverage of Liberal Arts Education

By Robbin D. Crabtree and David Gudelunas

Faculty, especially those of us in the liberal arts, feel beleaguered by frequent stories in the media that question the value of college education in general and liberal arts (aka, “the humanities”) in particular. These questions arise in a context of escalating educational costs and mounting student debt, falling family discretionary income and related declines in access to home equity loans, and much anxiety about the employment prospects for our graduates, influenced in part by the slowed pace of retirement among early baby boomers whose 401Ks took a sizeable hit during the same period. Not surprisingly, then, throughout the economic downturn there were corresponding shifts of college applicants towards fields like business, engineering, and health care.

In response to this perceived media war on education, many articles and editorials countered the negative narrative and sought to broaden discussion of return on investment beyond its narrow focus on immediate post-graduation employment and starting salary. Educators, along with liberally educated people in business, politics, and many other fields, have defended higher education as a public good and detailed the many ways the liberal arts cultivate professional success and flexibility, informed citizenship, and lifelong learning. Organizations such as the AAC&U have delineated and documented liberal arts learning outcomes, not only those related to cognitive development and intellectual capacity (for example critical thinking, broad content knowledge) but those that

also translate as workplace skills, such as writing, communication, and diversity awareness.

As this battle for the soul of American education unfolds, we conducted a systematic analysis of media content about higher education to trace trends during the economic downturn and recovery and to better understand correlations among media coverage and preferences of prospective students and their parents. This analysis shows robust media discussion about a crisis in the liberal arts. Mainstream newspapers and magazines, academic trade publications, and social media channels have all contributed to a conversation that has intensified and morphed since the 2008 economic downturn.

In *The New York Times* alone, there were 795 articles with some mention of the liberal arts between January 2008 and January 2015. The discussion of the liberal arts in the nation’s newspaper of record is significant in that it captures and initiates and also reflects and shapes larger cultural conversations about the academy in general and the liberal arts in specific.

Articles in the *Times* fall into four main categories: substantive articles and features, op-eds, letters responding to op-eds, and brief mentions of the liberal arts that are seemingly incidental to the overall article content.

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This last category may seem like insignificant data, but when a wedding announcement says that the bride has a background in the liberal arts and married an engineer or that the new CEO of a technology startup has a liberal arts degree these brief mentions become very telling. Similarly, through using the term “liberal arts” as a descriptor (for everything from small colleges to comprehensive master’s universities, or simply for schools that are not primarily research institutions, or as a modifier for nouns other than “college” or “university”), the *Times* constructs notions of what the liberal arts are and are not.

In those articles where the liberal arts are the primary focus, themes become readily apparent from headlines like: “Demanding more from college,” “Is your student prepared for life,” “How to get a job with a philosophy degree,” “In tough times humanities must justify their worth,” “Making college ‘relevant,’” “Private colleges worry about a dip in enrollment,” and “The fraying ties between education and jobs.” While letters work largely to counter the negativity of op-eds and feature articles, the overarching theme is that the liberal arts, if not in danger, are most certainly in transition.

A cluster analysis used to discover frames prominent among the articles shows that the *Times* most

often discusses the liberal arts in relation to a “career and jobs” frame. A secondary frame is “technology and larger economic forces” that require liberal arts institutions to re-evaluate their role in preparing students for a rapidly shifting global economy. The third most prominent frame concerns the cost of private education and the sustainability of liberal arts institutions.

None of these three primary frames is surprising to those of us who work in Jesuit colleges and universities. Still, knowing the lenses through which those who are less familiar with our collective mission view our work is powerful information. Importantly, even as these media frames and many concrete challenges continue to shape our daily work in Jesuit institutions, the most recent application trends at our institutions offer cautious optimism for the return of the liberal arts.

As academic leaders in liberal arts environments, we must buoy faculty spirits in the face of what has felt like the most hostile climate for the humanities in a generation and continue to reframe the discussion of the liberal arts in the media. In this changing environment for higher education, we also must defend the liberal arts as practically valuable to compete for students and resources. And we must relentlessly promote the inherent and enduring value of education, most especially a liberal arts education. For those of us in Jesuit higher education, this is a sacred commitment. ■

