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Abstract

The 2008 financial crisis called into question, for many, the value of a college education—in particular, the value of a liberal arts education. Increased competition for jobs caused students, parents, and policy makers to emphasize the need for career-specific skills in order to secure a lucrative position. However, during this time, many academics maintained that a liberally educated populace would be better equipped to deal with the turbulence of such an economic downturn. What was missing from the conversation was an in-depth look at how leading practitioners felt about the value of a liberal arts education in business. Thus, I interviewed Jane Miller, former President and CEO of Rudi's Organic Bakery in Boulder, Colorado, to glean an in-depth perspective of at least one successful business leader. This paper details our discussion and explains why Jesuit universities are well positioned to offer the kind of education that Miller promotes.

Introduction

The 2008 financial crisis called into question, for many, the value of a college education and, in particular, the value of a liberal arts education.[1] Increased competition for jobs caused students, parents, and policy makers alike to emphasize the need for career-specific skills in order to secure a lucrative position, especially given the rising costs of tuition.[2] In a sense, some argue, the Great Recession caused people to become financially short-sighted and to think more narrowly about the role of higher education.[3] Students became more vocationally oriented when selecting colleges and took into greater consideration the immediate return on investment of the degree, defining the degree's value largely in terms of the student's ability to secure a job right out of college.[4] As a result, liberal arts colleges faced increasing pressure to defend their value and model of education.

In the present paper, I will provide one such defense of a liberal arts education by sharing the perspective of Jane Miller, former President and CEO of Rudi's Organic Bakery in Boulder, Colorado. The articulation of Miller's argument comes from an interview I conducted with her on May 26, 2015 at her Boulder office. To contextualize Miller's argument, I will begin by presenting a brief history of the liberal arts more generally, as well as background on the role of the liberal arts in business education, specifically. I will then summarize my interview with Miller and her argument as to why the liberal arts are imperative for business practitioners. Finally, I will conclude with an argument as to why Jesuit universities are well positioned to offer the kind of education for which Miller advocates.

Background on the Liberal Arts and Business Higher Education

The origin of a liberal arts education dates back to the ancient Greeks, particularly to Socrates and Plato.[5] A liberal education was considered to be a framework for developing free people to be active members of civic life.[6] The liberal arts were those subjects or skills deemed necessary for achieving this outcome.[7] Specifically, they consisted of music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy (later known as the Quadrivium) as well as grammar, logic, and rhetoric (later known as the Trivium).[8] Nowadays, the definitions of a liberal education and of a liberal arts college are more nebulous than they were previously;

however, the American Association for the Advancement of Science states that, "[i]deally, a liberal education produces persons who are open-minded and free from provincialism, dogma, preconception, and ideology; conscious of their opinions and judgments; reflective of their actions; and aware of their place in the social and natural worlds."[9] In turn, liberal arts colleges typically seek to achieve the ideals of a liberal education by featuring an interdisciplinary common core based in the arts and sciences, offering small class sizes, fostering close student-faculty relationships, providing undergraduate research experiences, requiring senior capstone projects, valuing service learning and community engagement, and providing a broad array of options for co-curricular life.[10] Moreover, liberal arts colleges seek to provide students with a "breadth of awareness and appreciation, clarity and precision of thought and communication, critical analysis, [and a] honing of moral and ethical sensibilities."[11] Because of these qualities, a liberal arts education, at its height, was considered to be a greatly valued model of higher education.[12]

Since that time, academics have continued to tout the importance of a liberal education, even for those going into business.[13] For example, in 1890, Charles William Eliot, former president of Harvard, asserted that the ability to make accurate observations, learn new subjects, think critically about information, communicate effectively, and make ethical decisions is paramount for business people.[14] More recently, Bobko and Tejeda argued that embedding liberal arts content in business education best prepares students to be flexible, to think critically, and to make ethical decisions, which are greatly important as the workplace becomes increasingly global and diverse.[15] Meanwhile, other academics have argued that students must be able to connect concepts and skills between business and the liberal arts and even just within business.[16] The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International), the largest and oldest accrediting body for business schools, even has standards for achieving liberal arts learning outcomes.[17] Clearly, the academic community perceives, and has been fervently defending, the value of a liberal arts education. What is missing from this conversation, however, is an equally in-depth perspective from external stakeholders, specifically from business leaders. After all, these are the individuals whom students, parents, and policy makers are trying to appease when they call for a more vocational education, as they have been ever more loudly since the Great Recession of 2008.

Perspectives of a Multi-time CEO

Jane Miller, Former President and CEO of Rudi's Organic Bakery, Courtesy: Jane Miller

Trying to determine the kind of education that is most valued by hiring managers is confusing at best. Although business leaders tend to be more inclined to hire graduates with industry-specific skills, these same individuals rate soft skills, those skills central to a liberal arts education, as being far more important than either industry or job-specific skills.[18] Moreover, assessing the kind of education that is most valued by industry practitioners is further complicated by the fact that much of the research in this area involves survey data, and it goes into little depth regarding business leaders' valuation of a liberal arts education, per se, rather than of simply the types of skills that are most valued. Given that business leaders are seasoned practitioners in their fields who have had the time and experience to determine the relevance of their educations to their work, I sought to capture an in-depth account of the value that one liberally educated business practitioner places on her degree. Thus, I

conducted an interview with Jane Miller, current CEO and President of ProYo and former CEO and President of Rudi's Organic Bakery, to glean her perspective on the role that her liberal arts education had on her success in the business world.

As a Russian major at a small, liberal arts college and as someone who has been president and CEO of multiple major corporations, Miller has seen first-hand how her undergraduate education paved the way for her success. When asked about the value of a liberal arts education, Miller stressed how the critical thinking skills and foundational knowledge that she acquired in college prepared her for a career in business. Miller feels that the liberal arts give graduates a framework for thinking more broadly outside of business, and such an education sets up graduates for how to think about and deal with the world, an ever-important skill as we face global changes at an unprecedented pace. According to Miller, a liberal arts education gives graduates the ability to "connect the dots" in different ways, a skill that will differentiate students on the job market.

With regard to success on the job market, when asked which skills are most important for students to possess, Miller pointed out that technical skills and rote knowledge will not make students stand out to recruiters. Instead, she noted that business schools can differentiate themselves and their students by educating their students to "think bigger." Miller sees the role of undergraduate education as providing students with an environment to grow and learn—to learn what they wouldn't learn otherwise and to learn about themselves. The undergraduate years provide an opportunity for students to engage in self-exploration and to figure out what they like and don't like. Miller urges students to learn as much as they can about as many things as they can.

Miller also assesses the liberal arts from the perspective of an employer (and of someone who is prolific in dispensing career advice for recent graduates—see her blog, http://JaneKnows.com/). According to Miller, citing a recent white paper by researchers at Bentley University, employers are looking to hire millennial graduates who possess strong soft skills versus technical skills.[19] Among those most important soft skills are integrity, professionalism, and a positive attitude.[20] Miller notes that much of her education wasn't black and white but grey. Her courses engaged her in dialogue that challenged the way she thought. She and her fellow classmates discussed major dilemmas and how people face big decisions in life (dialogue clearly relevant to the business world). Miller argues that individuals must know how to *think* about issues before getting to the tactics. She sees a major role of educators as helping to train students' minds. Therefore, marketing professors, for example, should teach students how to think about the big picture rather than whether to use Facebook versus Twitter in a specific marketing campaign. As Miller explains, Facebook is a tactic, and graduates can learn about it if they go work for Facebook. According to Miller, the business landscape—the world itself—is changing so quickly that students need to learn how to embrace change and how to ask questions. A liberal arts education instills in students an intellectual curiosity and a desire to learn. As the Bentley University paper warns, if students don't become lifelong learners, they'll become irrelevant.[21]

Clearly, Miller, an accomplished businesswoman, sees the value of a liberal arts education. But what about parents who are paying tens of thousands of dollars each year to send their children to college so that they can secure jobs after graduating? What advice does Miller have for communicating the value of a liberal arts degree to parents who often send their children to business schools in order to acquire the skills needed to land a good job? Aside from the fact that employers are looking for the kinds of skills that a liberal arts education provides, Miller says that parents shouldn't be overly critical of the job that their child gets right out of college. Miller argues that an undergraduate education should provide students with an experience that sets them up for the future—the long-

term future and not just their first job. In fact, although companies may need to invest more time up front training liberal arts majors, those same hires are more likely to advance more quickly in the middle of their careers.[22] Miller says that if students have built the right skills, they'll find the right job—students just "need the tools in their toolboxes." Despite common assumptions about the ability of liberal arts graduates to get jobs, Miller argues that a liberal arts education "opens doors;" it isn't limiting.

Miller also points out that business education itself isn't so black and white. When asked about the type of education that business schools should deliver, Miller noted that what we're faced with is not so much a dichotomy between the liberal arts and technical skills but rather the task of bridging foundational knowledge with the practicality of the real world and what is happening in business. What this means for educators is bringing in guest speakers with real world experience (or sharing our own real-world experience in the classroom). Educators must provide an environment for "big thinking" *and* bridge that way of thinking to real world applications.

But what about educating learners who are not 18-22-year-old first-time college students? After all, a number of Jesuit institutions such as Loyola University Chicago, Regis University, and Saint Joseph's University, serve a large proportion of students who are in degree completion programs and/or who are older than the students who are entering full-time undergraduate programs right out of high school. When asked whether the liberal arts are relevant to all students, Miller stressed that the importance of a liberal arts education is not exclusive to 18-22-year-olds; critical thinking and intellectual curiosity are paramount regardless of students' age. Technical skills are helpful, but as employees move up in their careers, decisions are still not black and white. A liberal arts education provides the tools to help graduates better perform technical skills and get a job. According to Miller, the liberal arts and practical business "go hand-in-hand." Business is just one application of a liberal arts education.

As Miller points out, business and the liberal arts are clearly complementary, and together, mastery of industry-specific- and soft-skills best set up graduates to be successful (and ethical) business leaders and informed, responsible citizens. The question still remains, however, what kind of institution of higher learning is best suited to provide the kind of education that Miller promotes? In the following section, I will argue that business colleges at Jesuit institutions are aptly positioned for such an endeavor.

The Liberal Arts at Jesuit Business Schools

Various models for combining business education with the liberal arts have been pursued. For example, liberal arts schools, seeking to address criticisms over their lack of career preparation, have started awarding degrees in professional fields, and they have been progressively incorporating programs for experiential learning such as internships and study abroad.[23] Conversely, business schools have been implementing myriad techniques for incorporating the liberal arts. For example, some universities provide an option to double major in the liberal arts, while others offer a one-off course in the liberal arts or a program with a few core requirements that situate business within a larger societal context.[24] Few business schools, however (Bentley University, the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, Stanford's Graduate School of Business, and Georgetown being a few notable exceptions), have truly taken an integrated approach, weaving the values of a liberal education (e.g., critical and integrative thinking and ethics) throughout the business school curriculum.[25] Instead, most business schools continue to treat the liberal arts and business as distinct areas of education, as exemplified by their tendency to require business students to spend time in the liberal arts and sciences before matriculating to their business programs.[26] In turn, this divided structure sends the message to students that there is

also a difference between liberal arts courses and business courses in terms of their relevance to the real world and to students' future careers.[27] According to Miller, this disparity in relevance is simply not true.[28] As her interview made clear, the liberal arts are not only relevant to but essential for a successful career in business.

Yet, despite the importance of the liberal arts for business majors, a recent report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that undergraduate business education is often narrow.[29] Such a failure of traditional business schools to integrate the liberal arts into their curricula across the board opens the door for a new model to emerge. I would argue that colleges of business at Jesuit universities are aptly positioned to take this charge. I believe that this is true for two main reasons: 1) the current market is more conducive to incorporating the liberal arts in business programs than it is to introducing professional programs at liberal arts schools; and 2) liberal arts values are compatible with, if not explicitly part of, the missions of Jesuit universities.

Firstly, why might the current landscape of higher education be more conducive to business schools teaching the liberal arts than to liberal arts colleges teaching business? It's all a matter of marketing. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the most popular B.A. in the nation is business.[30] Conversely, fewer than 10 percent of all majors fall within the humanities and liberal arts.[31] As students and parents increasingly opt for a degree that they believe will promise the return of a profitable job after graduation, it becomes the responsibility of those sought-after programs to deliver an education that will not only land its graduates jobs but also that will train its students to be conscientious members of society and to live personally fulfilling lives.

Secondly, when it comes to training students to be conscientious members of society and to live personally fulfilling lives, Jesuit colleges and universities have a long tradition of emphasizing service learning and *cura personalis*, care for the whole person. Liberal arts values and outcomes are not just a box to be checked for Jesuit colleges and universities; rather, they are an integral part of Jesuit schools' DNA. In other words, a Jesuit education *is* a liberal education. From teaching through questioning in the style of the Socratic method and challenging students' assumptions to emphasizing adaptability and intellectual flexibility, and from training students to take multiple perspectives to taking time to reflect, a Jesuit education is infused with the values of a liberal education. According to Robert A. Mitchell, S.J.:

> [a major] characteristic of Jesuit colleges and universities is the study of the humanities and the sciences no matter what specializations may be offered. These institutions want their students to be able to think and speak and write; to know something about history, literature, and art; to have their minds expanded by philosophy and theology; and to have some understanding of math and sciences. They want students prepared for living as well as for working—to have a liberal education, if you will. The kind of education I suggest is even more important today than it has ever been, despite the demand for increased technological training in today's world. We need engineers who have read Shakespeare and computer scientists who understand the history and roots of our civilization.[32]

I would also add that there is a strong need for liberally educated business people. Given the immense power that corporations and businesses have over our globe and society, these institutions take on a great responsibility to consider their environmental, human, and social impact. A liberal arts-focused business school could be the new model, delivering the professional preparation that students, parents, and policy-makers desire along with the foundational knowledge and way of thinking that serves society and that, according to Miller, sets up students to be successful in their careers. Moreover, establishing such a model at Jesuit institutions

would help differentiate Jesuit business schools and graduate business leaders who think more broadly and ethically.

So, how can Jesuit business schools integrate business and the liberal arts? In addition to capstone experiences, one method that has been successfully utilized by Birmingham-Southern College is designing courses that draw on classical philosophy and the fundamental learning outcomes of a liberal arts program: written and oral communication skills, critical and analytical thinking, examining multiple points of view, taking a global perspective, and stressing values and ethics, while maintaining relevance to the real world and business practice.[33] Such courses provide a context for the role of business in society and create dialogue around ethical issues and corporate social responsibility. Another model comes from one of my colleagues at Regis University, Susan Jacobson, Ph.D., who has her finance students write memos, solving current ethical dilemmas related to the course content.[34] With the liberal arts playing such a central role in Jesuit education more generally, integrating the liberal arts in the curricula of Jesuit colleges of business would be a fairly seamless process.

Conclusion

Despite increasing pressure from students, parents, and policy-makers to emphasize a more vocationally-based education, academics and, now, leaders in business, such as Jane Miller, are coming to the defense of the liberal arts. Especially when it comes to business education, a liberal arts framework is indispensable.

As a contemporary case study, Regis University in Denver, Colorado is currently in the process of launching its College of Business and Economics (CBE). Such an endeavor provides the opportunity to redefine the mission of the programs and to reexamine the type of education that will be offered at the new college. One major component of that discussion is the extent to which the liberal arts will be integrated within the CBE. Noting the importance of a liberal arts education in developing students who will become leaders and advance throughout their careers, the CBE is focusing on a Liberal Arts Plus Model; in other words, a model that merges a liberal arts and business education in a way that teaches graduates to think critically and analytically and that allows them to bring career-specific skills to the job. Future research will have to examine how this model of education is carried out at the Regis CBE and assess the effect that it has on student outcomes.

In his book, *The Signal and the Noise*, Nate Silver states that humans have few natural defenses. "We are not all that fast, and we are not all that strong. We do not have claws or fangs or body armor. We cannot spit venom. We cannot camouflage ourselves. And we cannot fly. Instead, we survive by means of our wits. Our minds are quick. We are wired to detect patterns and respond to opportunities and threats without much hesitation."[35] Developing the minds of future generations is precisely the goal of a liberal arts education. It is the foundation of a strong society and of progress. The financial crisis of 2008 was a failure of prediction, not of education; and it is precisely a liberal arts education that will better equip future graduates to make such predictions. Especially at a business school, where we are developing business leaders who will have a profound influence on the global economy, on the environment, and on society, it is imperative that we teach our students how to think.

As Nate Silver further points out in his book, being able to make accurate predictions depends on our ability to separate the signal, or the truth, from the noise. Now that we have entered the digital age, we are faced with an overload of information (we are generating 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day), and we must be able to critically evaluate and analyze all of the data. Especially as business people, we must learn to interpret that data in order to make educated decisions. As Silver writes, "[t]he numbers have no way of speaking for themselves. We speak for them. We imbue them with meaning."[36] Thinking critically and

analytically are the skills at the core of a liberal arts education. We must teach our students to be informed citizens, and we must teach them to be educated and compassionate leaders. In the words of Silver, "[b]efore we demand more of our data, we need to demand more of ourselves."[37] And it is at Jesuit institutions that we learn to demand the *magis*, "the more."

Notes

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

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