Close the Gap Between the Liberal Arts and Career Services

R ECENT ECONOMIC EVENTS have forced colleges and universities to streamline their academic offerings congruent with a more pragmatic cost-benefit approach, usually at the expense of their liberal-arts programs. When a foreign language or philosophy department graduates only a few students per year, there is no financial argument to be made for keeping the department intact. Traditional reasoning about the enrichment of the “student as future citizen” can only go so far when parents who pay the tuition or students taking the courses can’t see a bottom line in the form of a lucrative job after graduation.

Reducing the liberal arts’ enrollment problems to a lack of career development is simplistic, and no silver bullet exists. But the absence of a clear career path is an important factor in decreasing enrollment in the liberal arts that hasn’t been adequately dealt with by most colleges. As things stand now, students are asked to take a leap of faith that what they learn will ultimately reveal its value. At what point, I wonder, will academic deans and faculties consider career development an integral part of a liberal-arts education?

Having worked in career services since the 80s at three institutions of higher learning, and consulted at many more, I have encountered dangerous mind-sets that solidify the chasm between liberal-arts education and career services. When I completed my doctorate, a professor congratulated me, then said, “So when are you going to find a real job?” I have consulted with deans who say they really want to improve their career-services programs—but no, they can’t offer career courses for credit, their professors aren’t interested in supervising internships, and they must tread lightly around anything that might be seen by the faculty as encroaching vocationalism. It quickly becomes apparent that career-related changes would be cosmetic at best, designed for admissions (i.e., to bring in students) or alumni (i.e., to get them to donate) purposes.

I have also heard from numerous professors, “Our good students go to graduate school. We don’t need to focus on those who are looking for jobs.” I have also been told, “The professors are too busy teaching to worry about how the students will use their knowledge. It’s not their job.” And I’ve had more than one faculty member confess to me that they really aren’t sure how what they teach applies in the nonacademic world. In all fairness, it’s no wonder that professors look askance when careers are discussed. Some career courses are little more than strung-together workshops with no academic depth or integration into the curriculum. Such courses promise to teach needed professional skills but instead highlight the lack of real career knowledge provided in the classroom.

It’s time, instead, to provide the kind of integrated career support that will teach students to value the attitude of what they are studying and how that education applies to the workplace. A liberal-arts education can actually be quite serendipitous—but such courses don’t exist. When careers are discussed, many professors would support integrating career development into the curriculum—whether in the form of creative new classes, service learning, volunteering, or internships—if they received financial support, release time from committee work or other obligations outside of class, and tenure-track advancement.

This is not a call to change the liberal-arts curriculum: Let’s keep its breadth and depth intact. But we must help students find the relevance of Greek mythology in 2009 (Wall Street, anyone?)! And contrary to fears that a career class will detract from the educational mission, my experience has been that students approach their other liberal-arts classes with newfound enthusiasm when they understand why they are there.

Never underestimate the power of liberal-arts graduates who know the value of their degrees. I have worked with too many disgruntled and frustrated economics majors who wished they were business majors—an attitude I immediately tackle in my “Economics Major in the Workplace” course. By the end of the course, I usually receive numerous comments about their newfound appreciation for an economics major, how they no longer feel like second-class citizens, and, oh, by the way, they just landed great jobs in their fields of interest.

If more liberal-arts faculties and career experts got together, watch out—the results could be amazing. Philosophy departments might just have to limit their enrollment and send their rejected students, disgruntled and frustrated, to the business schools.

Katharine S. Brooks is director of liberal-arts career services at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of You Majored in What? Mapping Your Path From Chaos to Career (Viking, 2009).