



Selling the Public Liberal Arts  
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### Abstract

This paper was born out of a desire to understand how varied economic situations affect public liberal arts colleges, specifically, how such schools change how they present themselves to prospective students and parents to fit market demands. This paper attempted to further investigate this particular facet of the liberal arts by attempting to answer how market demands affect the external rhetoric of public liberal arts institutions. By utilizing a combination of school mission statements fitting this description, as well as a general survey school provosts, followed by in-depth interviews with interested provosts, some conclusions could be reached: Public liberal arts colleges are increasingly focused on assuring students that their education will lead to jobs down the road. While there are many who insist this change has not been motivated by economic factors, there is an increasing amount of recognition among educators that the economy is changing how schools present themselves to an external audience. While changes have occurred, the research indicates that concepts, such as intellectual growth and tolerance of ideas, remain present and central concerns to public liberal arts schools. This implies that while care must be taken that the liberal arts are preserved at public schools, there is still a strong commitment to a traditional liberal arts education.

The liberal arts have a lengthy tradition of educating intelligent people with a wide breadth of knowledge as well as a high level of training and skills in their chosen field. Today, the liberal arts cover an expansive range of topics including the teaching of self-reliance skills and global, interdisciplinary, and select traditional studies, like the humanities and sciences.<sup>1</sup> At their core, the liberal arts teach us how to understand others and be understood in turn, as well as provide a good bank of general knowledge to complement an individual's specific expertise in one field. They create more worldly people who are holistically competent, argues Mark Roche, president of the University of Notre Dame and author of *Why Choose the Liberal Arts*.<sup>2</sup> They also give students a more complete understanding of the world, which is becoming increasingly valuable in a world economy and culture where globalization is an unending trend.

For this reason, many private liberal arts institutions in the United States exist. However, as private institutions, they only cater to a relatively small microcosm, restricting most individuals' access to an understanding of the liberal arts. Fortunately, there are twenty-seven public liberal arts colleges and universities in the United States and Canada that offer an education in the liberal arts that is available and affordable to everyone. These institutions form COPLAC, the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. Public colleges and universities as a whole face an almost unlimited number of challenges, including smaller budgets, disappearing public interest in the liberal arts, competition with vocational or professional studies, and a pervasive societal misunderstanding of the value of a liberal arts education. I argue that COPLAC schools have been forced to intensify their focus on providing their students with an education that will get them a job. At the same time attempting to hold onto the values of serving the needs of a community and providing an education that stimulates intellectual growth, which have been traditionally associated with the liberal arts. Schools' attempts to accomplish so many goals at the same time and with limited resources compromises the quality of the liberal arts education students receive. The growing focus on vocational preparation is slowly taking attention away from the liberal arts, which is the focus of COPLAC schools. Academics of all liberal arts disciplines, including writing and rhetorical studies, must take note of this change. While there must be training for real world application of the liberal arts, it is imperative that students learn to use the arts effectively if they are to gain any use from their education.

The goal of my research was to examine the relationship between COPLAC schools and rhetoric, specifically how public liberal arts schools alter their external rhetoric to attract new students during different financial situations over time. For the purposes of this research project, I define "external rhetoric" as marketing materials and other information, such as websites, mission statements, and brochures, which the schools send out to persuade students and parents of the value of an education in the liberal arts. To examine the relationship between COPLAC schools' external rhetoric and market pressures, I analyzed three sources of information through a qualitative study. While there have already been quantitative examinations of the liberal arts by university professors or other professionals who are closely tied to the liberal arts, such as those by Alemán and Salkever, Brint et al., and Ragan and McMillan, there is a lack of qualitative research into the challenges faced by public institutions specifically, and how these schools react to challenges over time.<sup>3</sup> This focus on changes over time is needed because as the demands of the market change, schools must adapt to meet those demands. As schools change what they emphasize and how they teach the liberal arts, the actual definition of the arts changes. When a school feels pressure to change their rhetoric to be more competitive with other forms of education, it is reasonable that they may feel pressure to change their content as well. These

content changes may over time lead small schools away from their early mission of providing a liberal arts education in a public setting.

To conduct this study, I gathered and analyzed three different forms of data. First, I examined the mission statements of COPLAC schools, which were coded for factors such as the liberal arts as useful to careers, as useful to creating intellectual growth, and as serving a community in some manner. Second, I surveyed the provosts of all the COPLAC schools. The purpose of this survey was to get a general sense of how schools change the rhetoric they use to describe themselves, and the role of market demands on these changes. Finally, the third stage of research was a round of in-depth interviews with selected provosts. These interviews provided more detail about how the market has driven the institutions' external rhetoric about the liberal arts, and asked about the history of these changes by asking participants how their school's mission statement has evolved over time, and if these changes were economically motivated.

### **Literature Review**

Because of their training in both classical studies and their own professional skills, liberal arts students have an edge over their non-liberally trained colleagues.<sup>4</sup> This better training provides advantages in both a small business setting and in the career long-run. In small business, which accounts for seventy percent of all new jobs in the United States, liberally trained students have the advantage of intellectual flexibility over their non-liberally trained competitors. In the long run, those with a liberal arts education are more prepared for careers as planners, technical writers, managers, or public relations specialists, placing liberal arts students into better jobs than those who were trained for vocational skills only.<sup>5</sup> The literature on the subject of the liberal arts in modern institutions makes clear the value of the liberal arts to society.

Of great value within the liberal arts is the value of learning for its own sake. When economic times get tough, however, curriculum changes to fit the demands of the market. This change is not necessarily detrimental, but care must be taken that the liberal arts are not fundamentally changed in an effort to make them attractive to the current trends. As David Breneman, a Professor of Economics in Education and the Dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, remarked in his book *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* "no curriculum remains static, nor should it ... we should only worry when the spark of learning is extinguished, a danger inherent, in a steadily growing emphasis on career and vocational studies."<sup>6</sup> This emphasis comes from a need to satisfy the financial problems liberal arts schools face. These problems include often high tuition (at least at private institutions) which must be countered with student aid that comes out of the school's pocket; a decline in federal aid for higher education; a need to fundraise when tuition is not enough to cover expenses; and competition with public schools for state funding.<sup>7</sup> While Breneman was discussing private liberal arts colleges, many of the problems at public schools are similar. Public schools must contend with low tuition that does not cover all expenses, sparse state and federal funding to supplement what can be brought in with tuition, and competition with other public schools all vying for limited governmental funding. Furthermore, Breneman warns that small colleges will see reduced support from state funding.<sup>8</sup>

There are ways for the liberal arts to compete in an increasingly market-driven education system, however. One way is to focus on the liberal arts as central to a school's mission statement, being both irreplaceable and beneficial to the school's goals. Gary Bonvillian, a member of the management faculty at Rochester Institute of Technology, and

Robert Murphy, a professor of management at the United States War College, suggest that liberal arts schools cling to their traditional values because they cannot compete with larger institutions directly.<sup>9</sup> They argue that by emphasizing the liberal arts, small schools can continue to survive. They go so far as to suggest that historic core missions at liberal arts schools create a marketable niche, ensuring the survival and security of small liberal arts schools. The key to weathering economic storms is in outreach, argue Bonvillian and Murphy. They claim that “successful small schools have become quite aggressive in their outreach to the market place.”<sup>10</sup> They suggest that by being successful, a school can continue to provide students opportunities to study the liberal arts that would not otherwise be possible if the school were to have gone out of business. Schools have to actively pursue students and encourage them to pursue the liberal arts, but the benefits of the effort are well worth it, both for the school and society at large.

### **Results and Discussion**

Comparing the mission statements of COPLAC schools, conducting a survey of provosts at those schools, and completing follow-up interviews, reflected emergent patterns. Some of the findings, such as a limited emphasis placed on the status of schools as public or the only one of their kind in the state, are interesting, but of secondary importance. Others, such as an emphasis on market demands regarding careers in external rhetoric, are important to the status of liberal arts at public schools. Lastly, findings regarding the traditional aspects of the liberal arts were surprising, but reassuring.

#### *The Importance of being a Public Institution*

The importance of the schools’ public status was mentioned repeatedly in the mission statements of these schools, yet despite this repetition, the public aspect of the school was not the primary focus of the mission statements. Of the twenty-five schools examined, only nine mentioned their public status. When it was mentioned, it was usually in conjunction with the school being unique in the state, such as when Ramapo described itself as “New Jersey’s Public Liberal Arts College.”<sup>11</sup> Some schools discussed the public aspect repeatedly in their mission statement, like Keene State College, first claiming to be “the public liberal arts college of New Hampshire,” and then mentioning the inclusiveness of the college by emphasizing that “as a public institution, [they] provide educational opportunities for all qualified students....”<sup>12</sup> Even when an institution’s status as public was mentioned, it was rarely elaborated upon or mentioned again. This suggests that the public aspect of COPLAC and its member schools is not their primary focus.

#### *Career Preparation*

Of greater importance in the external rhetoric of COPLAC schools is the ability of the liberal arts to provide students with the skills necessary to succeed in a career. Thirteen of the twenty-five mission statements read in this study claimed that the skills that students could expect to receive from a liberal arts education could prepare them for a career and that they would get students jobs. Furthermore, when career preparation was discussed, it was heavily emphasized. For example, in Midwestern State University’s mission statement, careers were mentioned multiple times. The school claims that its curriculum provides students with “rigorous undergraduate and graduate education in the liberal arts and the professions” and “prepares its graduates to embark upon their careers or pursue advanced study,” preparing them to “contribute to society through their work and through their private lives.”<sup>13</sup> Midwestern State University repeatedly presses the point that the liberal arts can prepare students for a career and get them jobs. The repetition of this theme suggests that administrators at Midwestern believe

this is what prospective students and their families want to hear; in response, Midwestern has made an effort to emphasize career preparation as one of its central goals.

Similarly, Sonoma State University makes it part of its mission that students “are capable of pursuing fulfilling careers in a changing world” and argues that it provides them “opportunities for specific career preparation.”<sup>14</sup> Preparation for careers is an oft-repeated, and therefore important, aspect of the external rhetoric of COPLAC schools. There is little space for non-critical information in the competitive market for higher education, and repeated emphasis on career preparation on the part of administrators suggests that it is felt by them to be worth the effort.

In their surveys and follow-up interviews, many provosts claimed that there has been a conscious effort to emphasize the preparation of students for careers in response to market demands. While half of the provosts surveyed did not claim that their school has changed what it emphasizes over time, half said that they felt that there was an increased focus on the liberal arts preparing their students for careers and providing employment advantages. This change in emphasis is present in the marketing materials sent out by schools. While there is the traditional emphasis on how a liberal arts education can benefit a student intellectually, there are also (as one provost mentioned) “implicit connections between the liberal arts experience and future employment, community leadership skills, etc.”<sup>15</sup> While there is still an emphasis on the intellectual aspects of the liberal arts, this research shows that there is definitely a trend to emphasize how the liberal arts can help the student get a job.

#### *Economic Influences*

There seems to be less agreement on if this emphasis on career preparation was economically motivated, however. While two schools claimed that there was an increased focus on employment of their students and a greater focus on the financial potential of a liberal arts education in general, only one school made the direct connection that these changes have been motivated by economic need. This school’s provost claimed that both parents and students view the liberal arts as an investment. Prospective students and their families want to see the liberal arts give them a tangible financial return. This appears to be especially true when times are trying, such as now. As one provost explained, “it is up to us to articulate the importance of a liberal arts education; if we fail at that articulation then, yes, the market will respond negatively.”<sup>16</sup> The way schools articulate the importance of a liberal arts education is by promising to teach skills that will be used in the workplace.

One provost explained that there was an emphasis on preparation for job skills, and a definite focus on the liberal arts as “an economic advantage as opposed to just reading the great philosophers.”<sup>17</sup> This provost claimed that much of this pressure to drive liberal arts students in career preparation seems to come from legislators. These pressures have caused a definite focus on tying the liberal arts to employability in marketing materials.

However, another provost, while agreeing that economic pressures did have an influence, said they were not the driving force behind marketing changes. As this provost explained, the status of the economy is frequently changing and cyclical.<sup>18</sup> Schools are more concerned with tying the theory and practice of the liberal arts together, which tends to be a more stable concern than the at times fickle market. Despite economic pressures, there is still an emphasis on how a person stands to benefit intellectually in the materials as well.

#### *Intellectual Growth*

Despite the growing importance of the job market in mission statements and other marketing materials, much of public liberal arts schools’ messages focus on how students will

grow mentally from an education in the arts. For example, the mission statement of the University of North Carolina Asheville claims that their approach to the liberal arts “emphasizes life skills including critical thinking, clear and thoughtful expression, and honest open inquiry.”<sup>19</sup> They claim that students gain these skills through “concentrated study in one area while simultaneously developing an understanding of the connections among disciplines.”<sup>20</sup> Multiple mission statements make similar mention of developing critical thinking and communication skills in a multidisciplinary setting.

This focus on multi-disciplinary critical thinking is at the front of administrators’ minds as well. One provost, when asked what one skill their school wanted students to understand above all others was to be able to “think creatively and flexibly about problems.”<sup>21</sup> Another provost agreed with this focus on flexible thinking, claiming that “a liberal arts education allows you to look at complex ideas and critically think about them, to step back, to be tolerant of others, to be able to work in a team even coming from different vantage points.”<sup>22</sup> This implies that part of the value of critical thinking is drawn from its facilitation of work; such thinking is traditionally one of the major aspects of the liberal arts, and is not a response to immediate market demands.

#### *Tolerance of Ideas*

The tolerance of others’ ideas was also a frequent focus in the marketing materials. Several mission statements mentioned tolerance and respect for the values of others. The University of North Carolina Asheville encourages students to “clarify, develop and live their own values while respecting the values of others,” while explaining the goal of the liberal arts in their mission statement.<sup>23</sup> Respect for differing opinions was also espoused by provosts as one of the goals of their liberal arts mission.

One provost, when asked what the most important thing their school attempted to teach students was, replied immediately “tolerance of other people’s ideas.”<sup>24</sup> When asked why this was such an important concept to make sure that students understood, the reply was that tolerance indicates listening, which in turn is the “groundwork for the best decision making.”<sup>25</sup> However, expressing the importance of tolerance in marketing materials is easy. Implementing it can be another matter entirely. When asked how her school attempted to ensure tolerance, the provost responded, “We can do that better. I think that the passion to the mission [of tolerance] at the individual faculty level, it’s there. What we need to do better is to have a very intentional, collective, purposeful assessment of how we’re doing that and we’re developing that.”<sup>26</sup> Despite the difficulty, tolerance of other’s ideas and opinions is something that public liberal arts must focus on.

It would be the epitome of hypocrisy for liberal arts, which are, at their core, about multi-disciplinary and flexible thinking, to be intolerant of the multiplicity of ideas that naturally comes about when people come together to express solutions to problems. Intolerance is not only bad business, but bad thought, and the marketing materials of COPLAC schools make it clear that an attempt to establish tolerance is one concept that their students can expect to find in the curriculum.

The marketing materials of COPLAC schools, as well as conversations with the provosts through surveys and interviews, revealed a narrative where studying the liberal arts will change the student for the better. This narrative showcased that students who have been educated in the liberal arts are admitted to prestigious graduate programs and go on to distinguished careers. Another aspect of the narrative that emerges, albeit with less intention, is the increasing focus of these schools to train students for jobs, potentially at the expense of traditional studies. These

materials weave a story in the minds of potential students at liberal arts schools where the liberal arts are idealized as the first step to a prosperous career. While this is certainly desired for the future of students, the narrative needs balancing: There needs to be an emphasis on creating a more holistically educated person as well. COPLAC schools do include this aspect in the narrative that the external rhetoric creates, but the role seems to be diminishing.

### **Conclusion**

As with all studies, this research has its limitations. Only the most recent mission statements of COPLAC schools were read, and reading previous statements may grant a deeper historical understanding to future research. Also, the numbers of responses to both the general survey and phone interviews were limited. While these surveys and interviews provided productive information, future researchers may seek to interview more people, including students, to further expand the amount of information available on this subject. This study was meant to be only the beginning of a greater conversation, and so the small sample pool does not interfere with its objective. If there is to be further conversation, more research must be done to expand the discussion beyond a few schools. That is not to say, however, that this study did not yield useful results.

After reading the mission statements of COPLAC schools, conducting a survey of provosts at these schools, and conducting follow-up interviews, a few important patterns emerged that revealed how the narrative of the liberal arts is shifting in the twenty-first century. There is a growing trend of emphasizing the economic benefits of a liberal arts education. While this may be a good way for schools to boost their admissions, it also suggests that schools may be drifting towards vocational training in not only their external rhetoric, but also in the curriculum. We must take care that, in an effort to make students better trained for a job, we do not fail to give them a genuine liberal arts education. Another revelation of this research is in answer to this concern. There is still a strong dedication to teaching students interdisciplinary and communication skills that have been the traditional hallmarks of a liberal arts education. We must continue to place these skills at the forefront of our efforts, but there is certainly much to be optimistic about the future of public liberal arts schools and the unique benefits that they offer.

Care must be taken to ensure that the dominant narrative of the liberal arts, particularly in the public sector, is balanced and does not lean too heavily on vocational benefits. The liberal arts and their educational benefits must remain the focus of these schools. Public liberal arts institutions must not, in seeking to become like other larger schools that train students for specific careers, lose their broad-spectrum and interdisciplinary mission. They must not lose their emphasis on critical thinking or communicative skills, nor close off the discussion of multiple perspectives that makes the liberal arts what they are. There is a growing trend toward career training and narrowed focus at COPLAC schools, and while this focus can be beneficial, the situation may be poised to go too far. We must take care that in competing with other, non-liberal arts schools, we do not lose what makes our institutions unique. If we lose what makes us unique, we will not be able to compete at all with these larger schools that have bigger budgets and stronger programs of narrow focus.

This study aimed to examine the value of the liberal arts at public institutions of higher education, specifically by looking at the dominant narratives that emerge from the rhetoric of mission statements these schools provide to students and families. Examining these dominant narratives allows those of us in public liberal arts schools—both administrators, faculty, and students—to better understand our mission and therefore adequately defend and justify ourselves in the face of changing economic times. It is not enough to know that the arts are valuable, and

that students stand to benefit greatly from such an education. Public liberal arts institutions must understand what potential students, as well as their parents, are looking for in an education; they must also better understand what legislators expect of public liberal arts schools, since so much of the funding at these institutions is under the control of these governmental officials. However, we must also be wary of straying from the ideological intent of the liberal arts in an effort to make the arts more attractive to modern students. Public liberal arts schools must maintain a careful balance between modifying how they are presented to outside groups and retaining the values and traditions of a true liberal arts education.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> M. Garrett Bauman, "Liberal Arts for the Twenty-First Century," *The Journal of Higher Learning* 58, no. 1 (January-February, 1987): 40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1981389> (Accessed April 19, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> Mark William Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ana M. Martínez Alemán and Katya Salkever, "Mission, Multiculturalism, and the Liberal Arts College: A Qualitative Investigation," *The Journal of Higher Education* 74, no. 5 (Sep.-Oct., 2003): 579. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3648284> (Accessed April 19, 2012); Steven Brint et al., "From the Liberal Arts to the Practical Arts in American Colleges and Universities: Organizational Analysis and Curricular Change," *The Journal of Higher Education* 76, no. 2 (March-April, 2005): 151-180. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3838721> (accessed October 22, 2012); Sandra L. Ragan and Jill J. McMillan, "The Marketing of the Liberal Arts: The Rhetoric of Antithesis," *The Journal of Higher Education* 60, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec., 1989): 690. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1981948> (Accessed April 19, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Ragan and McMillan, "The Marketing . . .," 699.

<sup>5</sup> Bauman, "...Twenty-First Century," 43.

<sup>6</sup> David W. Breneman, *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered?* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1994), 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Breneman, *Thriving ...*, 15-17.

<sup>8</sup> Breneman, *Thriving ...*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Bonvillian and Robert Murphy, *The Liberal Arts Colleges Adapting to Change: The Survival of Small Schools* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Bonvillian and Murphy, *Adapting...*, 132.

<sup>11</sup> Ramapo College of New Jersey, "Ramapo Mission Statement," Ramapo College of New Jersey. <http://www2.ramapo.edu/facutystaff/hr/employee.aspx?id=7336> (accessed November 23, 2012)

<sup>12</sup> Keene State College Planning Council, "College Mission & Values," Keene State College. [http://www.keene.edu/planning/pc\\_mission.cfm](http://www.keene.edu/planning/pc_mission.cfm) (accessed November 23, 2012)

<sup>13</sup> Midwestern State University, "Mission Statement," Midwestern State University. <http://welcome.mwsu.edu/president/MissionStatement.asp> (accessed November 23, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> Sonoma State University, "Sonoma State University Mission Statement," Sonoma State University. <http://www.sonoma.edu/uaffairs/policies/mission.htm> (accessed November 23, 2012)

<sup>15</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO March 18, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO March 18, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO March 18, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO, March 18, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> University of North Carolina Asheville, "Mission Statement," University of North Carolina Asheville. <http://www.unca.edu/about/mission-unc-asheville> (accessed November 24, 2012)

<sup>20</sup> University of North Carolina Asheville, "Mission Statement."

<sup>21</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO. April 6, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO. April 6, 2013

<sup>23</sup> "Mission Statement," University of North Carolina Asheville.

<sup>24</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO. April 6, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO. April 6, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Interview by author, Durango, CO. April 6, 2013.