

# Are liberal arts colleges disappearing?

October 10 2012

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Michigan State University scholar Roger Baldwin argues the decline of liberal arts colleges threatens to diminish America's renowned higher education system. Credit: Michigan State University

Liberal arts colleges continue redefining their historical missions or flat-out disappearing – a trend that threatens to diminish America's renowned higher education system, argues a study co-authored by a Michigan State University scholar.

Of the 212 liberal arts colleges identified in a landmark 1990 study, only 130 remain in their traditional form – a 39 percent reduction, according to the new research.

While some liberal arts schools have closed or become part of larger universities due to financial problems, Roger Baldwin, MSU professor of educational administration, said many others have changed their focus so dramatically they no longer retain a liberal arts identity.

"The diversity of U.S. [higher education](#) is widely regarded as one of its strengths," Baldwin said. "But American higher education will be diminished if the number of liberal arts colleges continues to decline."

An American institution since the late 1700s, the liberal arts college is known for a curriculum based primarily in the arts and science fields (such as English, history and chemistry); small classes; and a strong emphasis on teaching and student development. Common goals of a liberal arts graduate include developing a meaningful philosophy of life or helping promote tolerance or understanding among diverse groups.

But many liberal arts colleges are evolving into career-oriented "professional colleges" where a large number of students major in professional fields such as business and nursing. The trend was highlighted in a 1990 study by David Breneman – a University of Virginia professor and former president of Kalamazoo College, a liberal arts college in Michigan – and replicated this year by Baldwin and colleagues.

"The trend Breneman first pointed out more than 20 years ago is continuing," the new study finds. "An increasingly smaller number of liberal arts colleges have been able to maintain a dominant arts and science emphasis."

The researchers urge U.S. academic leaders, policymakers and others to work toward saving liberal arts colleges.

"We should renew and reinvigorate these valuable institutions," the authors argue, "before liberal arts colleges disappear from the higher education landscape or shrink to the status of a minor educational enclave that serves only the elite."

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Are liberal arts colleges disappearing? (2012, October 10) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-10-liberal-arts-colleges.html>

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