

Professional majors strengthen the mission of liberal arts colleges

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Faced with declining enrollment and rising costs, some small liberal arts colleges have added professional and vocational majors, a decision University of Iowa researchers say has strengthened rather than undermined the mission of the schools.

In fact, students at liberal arts colleges realized virtually the same educational gains, no matter their major, according to the UI report released earlier this month. The only differences were liberal arts major expressed a greater interest in literacy while professional majors scored higher in leadership skills.

"Essentially, the students are reaping the benefits of a liberal arts education - small class size, general education curriculum, high contact with professors and a residential campus," says Graham Miller, a second-year doctoral student and first author of the report. "Those things might be more salient characteristics of a liberal arts education than just strictly a major field or discipline."

Miller and the other authors of the report, "Abandoning the Liberal Arts? Liberal-Arts Learning Outcomes of Professional Majors," will present their findings Friday, Nov. 21, at the Association for the Study of Higher Education's annual meeting in Washington, D.C.

Ernest Pascarella, a professor of higher education in the UI's College of Education and supporting author of the report, says the study, which involved 28 four-year liberal-arts colleges, was designed to test the

assumption that liberal-arts majors make greater educational gains than their classmates majoring in such fields as education, business and engineering.

The liberal-arts outcomes measured by researchers included critical thinking, moral reasoning, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, intercultural effectiveness, psychological well-being, and leadership.

"The major finding for me is the impact for liberal arts colleges may be more on the institutional level not the major level," Pascarella says. "In other words, the institution has more of an impact than the major" on a student's educational gains.

The report notes: "Liberal arts colleges have traditionally worked to cultivate good citizens through a heavy focus on teaching in the liberal arts. These disciplines comprise the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, natural sciences and physical sciences."

However, the changing landscape of [higher education](#) has prompted a number of liberal arts colleges to adopt professional and vocational programs. Some staunch supporters of liberal arts colleges worry adding such programs will dilute the schools' mission.

The UI report finds that, by and large, that isn't the case.

"Adding professional programs could be the best opportunity to protect against any further mission creep," the authors say. "Colleges are better able to provide residential education and small class sizes by drawing on the financial resources that are available thanks to professional and vocational programs. Adding these programs allows colleges to pursue their mission rather than close their doors."

The authors acknowledge some liberal arts colleges have "expanded their

programs and changed their names to enter into new prestige markets in order to compete against other comprehensive universities instead of against elite liberal arts colleges."

But other small liberal arts colleges are determined to remain true to their mission despite expanding their programs.

Miller said the next step would be to examine how these colleges implement their professional and vocational majors and how their approach not only differs from large universities but influences the educational outcome of students.

"That would give a lot more credence to the idea that these programs can be mission sustaining as opposed to mission subverting," he said. "How they are implemented could be the difference in how these students in professional majors are still getting a broad liberal arts [education](#)."

Provided by University of Iowa

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