THIRD EDITION

"THEY SAY / I SAY"

The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing

WITH READINGS

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The New Liberal Arts

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HARD ECONOMIC TIMES inevitably bring scrutiny of all accepted ideals and institutions, and this time around liberal-arts education has been especially hard hit. Something that has long been held up as a uniquely sensible and effective approach to learning has come under the critical gaze of policy makers and the news media, not to mention budget-conscious families.

But the critique, unfortunately, seems to be fueled by reliance on common misperceptions. Here are a few of those misperceptions, from my vantage point as a liberal-arts college president, and my reactions to them:

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Misperception No. 1: A liberal-arts degree is a luxury that most families can no longer afford. "Career education" is what we now must focus on. Many families are indeed struggling, in the depths of the recession, to pay for their children's college education. Yet one could argue that the traditional, well-rounded preparation that the liberal arts offer is a better investment than ever—that the future demands of citizenship will require not narrow technical or job-focused training, but rather a subtle understanding of the complex influences that shape the world we live in.

No one could be against equipping oneself for a career. But the "career education" bandwagon seems to suggest that shortcuts are available to students that lead directly to high-paying jobs—leaving out "frills" like learning how to write and speak well, how to understand the nuances of literary texts and scientific concepts, how to collaborate with others on research.

Many states and localities have officials or task forces in charge of "work-force development," implying that business and industry will communicate their needs and educational institutions will dutifully turn out students who can head straight to the factory floor or the office cubicle to fulfill them. But history is filled with examples of failed social experiments that treated people as work units rather than individuals capable of inspiration and ingenuity. It is far wiser for students to prepare for change—and the multiple careers they are likely to have—than to search for a single job track that might one day become a dead end.

I recently heard Geoffrey Garin, president of Hart Research Associates, suggest that the responsibility of higher education today is to prepare people "for jobs that do not yet exist." It may be that studying the liberal arts is actually the best form of career education.

Misperception No. 2: College graduates are finding it harder to get good jobs with liberal-arts degrees. Who wants to hire somebody with an irrelevant major like philosophy or French? Yes, recent graduates have had difficulty in the job market, but the recession has not differentiated among major fields of study in its impact. A 2009 survey for the Association of American Colleges and Universities actually found that more than three-quarters of our nation's employers recommend that collegebound students pursue a "liberal education." An astounding 89 percent said they were looking for more emphasis on "the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing," and almost as many urged the development of better "critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills." Seventy percent said they were on the lookout for "the ability to innovate and be creative."

See Chapter 4 for tips on explaining why you disagree.

It is no surprise, then, that a growing number of corporations, including some in highly technical fields, are headed by people with liberal-arts degrees. Plenty of philosophy and physics majors work on Wall Street, and the ability to analyze and compare literature across cultures is a skill linked to many other fields, including law and medicine. Knowledge of foreign languages is an advantage in all lines of work. What seemed a radical idea in business education 10 years or so ago—that critical and creative thinking is as "relevant" as finance or accounting—is now commonplace.

Misperception No. 3: The liberal arts are particularly irrelevant for low-income and first-generation college students. They, more than their more-affluent peers, must focus on something more practical and marketable. It is condescending to imply that those who have less cannot understand and appreciate the finer elements of knowledge—another way of saying, really,

that the rich folks will do the important thinking, and the lower classes will simply carry out their ideas. That is just a form of prejudice and cannot be supported intellectually.

Perhaps students who come with prior acquaintance with 10
certain fields and a reservoir of experience have an advantage at the start of college. But in my experience, it is often the people who are newest to certain ideas and approaches who are the most original and inventive in the discussion and application of those ideas. They catch up quickly.

We should respect what everyone brings to the table and train the broadest possible cross section of American society to participate in, and help shape, civil discourse. We cannot assign different socioeconomic groups to different levels or types of education. This is a country where a mixed-race child raised overseas by a stuggling single mother who confronts impossible odds can grow up to be president. It is precisely a liberal education that allowed him to catch up and move ahead.

Misperception No. 4: One should not, in this day and age, study only the arts. The STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—are where the action is. The liberal arts encompass the broadest possible range of disciplines in the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. In fact, the historical basis of a liberal education is in the classical artes liberales, comprising the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). Another term sometimes substituted for liberal arts, for the sake of clarity, is "the arts and sciences." Thus, many universities have colleges, divisions, or schools of arts and sciences among their academic units.

To be sure, there is much concern about whether America is keeping up with China and other rising economies in the

STEM disciplines. No evidence suggests, however, that success in scientific and technical fields will be greater if it comes at the expense of a broad background in other areas of the liberal arts.

Misperception No. 5: It's the liberal Democrats who got this country into trouble in recent years, so it's ridiculous to continue indoctrinating our young people with a liberal education. A liberal education, as properly defined above, has nothing whatsoever to do with politics—except insofar as politics is one of the fields that students often pursue under its rubric. On the contrary, because of its inclusiveness and its respect for classical traditions, the liberal arts could properly be described as a conservative approach to preparation for life. It promotes the idea of listening to all points of view and not relying on a single ideology, and examining all approaches to solving a problem rather than assuming that one technique or perspective has all the answers. That calm and balanced sort of dialogue may be out of fashion in the American public arena today, when shouting matches are in vogue and many people seek information only from sources they know in advance they agree with. But it may be only liberal education that can help lead the way back to comity and respectful conversation about issues before us.

Misperception No. 6: America is the only country in the world that clings to such an old-fashioned form of postsecondary education as the liberal arts. Other countries, with more practical orientations, are running way ahead of us. It is often difficult to explain the advantages of a liberal-arts education to people from other cultures, where it is common to specialize early. In many places, including Europe, the study of law or medicine often begins directly after high school, without

any requirement to complete an undergraduate degree first. We should recognize, however, that a secondary education in some systems—say, those that follow the model of the German Gymnasium—often includes much that is left out of the typical high-school curriculum in America. One need only look in on a student preparing for the baccalaureat examination in France to understand the distinction: Mastery of philosophical and scientific concepts is mandatory.

Further, in recent years delegations from China have been visiting the United States and asking pointed questions about the liberal arts, seemingly because they feel there may be good reason to try that approach to education. The Chinese may be coming around to the view that a primary focus on technical training is not serving them adequately—that if they aspire to world leadership, they will have to provide young people with a broader perspective. Thus, it is hardly a propitious moment to toss out, or downgrade, one element of higher education that has served us so well.

Misconception No. 7: The cost of American higher education is spiraling out of control, and liberal-arts colleges are becoming irrelevant because they are unable to register gains in productivity or to find innovative ways of doing things. There is plenty wrong with American higher education, including the runaway costs. But the problem of costs goes beyond individual institutions. Government at all levels has come nowhere close to supporting colleges in ways that allow them to provide the kind of access and affordability that's needed. The best way to understand genuine national priorities is to follow the money, and by that standard, education is really not all that important to this country.

Many means exist to obtain a liberal education, including at some large universities, public and private. The method

I happen to advocate, for obvious reasons, is the small, residential liberal-arts college, usually independent, where there is close interaction between faculty members and students and, at its best, a sense of community emerges that prepares young people to develop high standards for themselves and others.

Efficiency is hardly the leading quality of liberal-arts colleges, and indeed, their financial model is increasingly coming into question. But because of their commitment to expand need-based financial aid, the net cost of attending a small liberal-arts college can be lower than that of a large public university. One can only hope that each institution will find ways to cut costs and develop distinguishing characteristics that help it survive through the tough times ahead.

The debate over liberal education will surely continue through the recession and beyond, but it would be helpful to put these misperceptions aside. Financial issues cannot be ignored, but neither can certain eternal verities: Through immersion in liberal arts, students learn not just to make a living, but also to live a life rich in values and character. They come to terms with complexity and diversity, and otherwise devise means to solve problems—rather than just complaining about them. They develop patterns that help them understand how to keep learning for the rest of their days.

Joining the Conversation

1. Summarize in a few sentences the seven misperceptions that Sanford Ungar discusses. These of course are all things that "they say"—and that he uses to launch what he wants to say. How does calling them "misperceptions" affect the way you read his argument? Would you read it any differently if he instead called them "common assumptions"?
2. See paragraph 6, where Geoffrey Garin suggests that "the responsibility of higher education today is to prepare people 'for jobs that do not yet exist.'" Thus, according to Ungar, "It may be that studying the liberal arts is actually the best form of career education." How would you respond to this claim?
3. Misperception 5 relates liberal education to political affiliation. What does Ungar have to say on this issue, and what do you think about his response?
4. On what specific points do you think Ungar would agree with Charles Murray (pp. 234–54)? On what points would he be likely to disagree?
5. Write your own essay listing and explaining five assumptions about college education. Follow Ungar's essay as a model, and use the "they say / I say" pattern to organize your essay, with each assumption as a "they say" that sets up what you want to say.