

The Atlantic

Why America's Business Majors Are in Desperate Need of a Liberal-Arts Education

Their degrees may help them secure entry-level jobs, but to advance in their careers, they'll need much more than technical skills.



Business school students at UCLA pose for an orientation video in 2014

Lucy Nicholson / Reuters

YONI APPELBAUM

JUN 28, 2016 | IDEAS 2016

TEXT SIZE



Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [the Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

American undergraduates are flocking to business programs, and finding plenty of entry-level opportunities. But when businesses go hunting for

CEOs or managers, “they will say, a couple of decades out, that I’m looking for a liberal arts grad,” said Judy Samuelson, executive director of the Aspen Institute’s Business and Society Program.

That presents a growing challenge to colleges and universities. Students are clamoring for degrees that will help them secure jobs in a shifting economy, but to succeed in the long term, they’ll require an education that allows them to grow, adapt, and contribute as citizens—and to build successful careers. And it’s why many schools are shaking up their curricula to ensure that undergraduate business majors receive something they may not even know they need—a rigorous liberal-arts education.



Dispatches from the [Aspen Ideas Festival/Spotlight Health](#)
[Read more](#)

They’re trying to solve a rapidly growing problem. Almost one in five bachelor’s degrees earned in the United States is a business degree, according to the [latest statistics](#) from the Department of Education. And that may actually understate the growth of business education—it doesn’t account for undergraduate minors, nor for the students who major in economics at schools where business degrees aren’t on offer. But a panel of educators moderated by Samuelson at the Aspen Ideas Festival, which is co-hosted by the Aspen Institute and *The Atlantic*, emphasized the need to ensure that these degrees provide a robust education. (The panel was drawn from participants in the [Aspen Undergraduate Business Education Consortium](#), an initiative that’s promoting the tighter integration of the liberal arts into business curricula.)

There’s good reason for their concern. Put simply, business majors seem to be graduating with some of the technical skills they’ll need to secure jobs, but without having made the gains in writing or critical-thinking

skills they'll require to succeed over the course of their careers, or to adapt as their technical skills become outdated and the nature of the opportunities they have shifts over time.

A 2014 [study](#) of the Collegiate Learning Assessment test—administered to some 13,000 undergraduates as they entered and exited university—found that business, health, and education majors substantially underperformed students in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, and engineering. The authors then adjusted their results to account for the academic abilities of students entering these majors—and found that business and education majors still showed substantially lower gains in writing, complex reasoning, and critical thinking by the time they'd graduated.

Those are the weaknesses that a liberal-arts education can address.

“Liberal arts majors ... are the students who have the active minds, who are asking the big questions,” said Erika Walker, an assistant dean at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business. That, she said, was a mindset that all students require. “What we need to strive to achieve for the students who aren't asking the big questions is: challenge yourselves.”

Finding workers who ask those questions can pay off—literally—for businesses. “We have become so myopic in solving business problems that we don't think about those problems from the perspective of other disciplines,” said Charles Iacovou, dean of the school of business at Wake Forest University. And that sort of context offers a critical competitive edge, even if not all undergraduates understand that. “More reflective education is the kind of thing they push back on,” Walker said. “But this is what businesses are telling us they need.”

Businesses want workers who have “the ability to think, the ability to write, the ability to understand the cultural or historical context of

whatever business decision they're making," added Rachel Reiser, assistant dean at Boston University's Questrom School of Business. If undergraduates want to find success, they need to master those skills. "We're trying to help them understand there may be so much more to a business education," Walker said.

And beyond the career advantages that these skills confer, there's a broader case for offering a liberal-arts education to the hundreds of thousands of students who graduate every year with business degrees. It doesn't just increase their economic competitiveness, it also strengthens their ability to contribute to the broader society, and to lead fulfilling lives. "We as educational institutions have two jobs: to prepare them to enter the profession but also to prepare them as human beings and as citizens," Iacovou said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



YONI APPELBAUM is a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, where he oversees the Politics section.

 Twitter  Facebook