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## Liberal Arts: A Ticket To Anywhere

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When parents ask me about the value of a liberal arts degree vs. a more technical program, I tell them a good liberal arts education is the best preparation for any career - in any job market. And when students ask, "What can I do with a degree in history?" I tell them it took me from the Peace Corps to Wall Street to leadership roles in academia.

At this time of year, when high school seniors and their parents are making their top choices for colleges and universities, I urge them to include a close look at a liberal arts education. Top-notch liberal arts colleges can be found in just about every part of the country, and some of the best ones are right here in New England.

Parents expect a college education to prepare their child for a career and for life, and they recognize this education as a serious investment of money, energy and time. For these reasons, and because the job market is continually changing, I recommend a degree in the liberal arts and sciences. A degree in history, biology, English, sociology or any of a broad range of programs teaches students how to learn. The process, more than the subject, provides the intellectual faculties that easily transfer to new careers and new life challenges.

In fact, Connecticut College graduates are in senior management at many businesses such as Federated Department Stores, Google, Estee Lauder and Forbes. In addition to high-level business roles, Connecticut College graduates are in leadership roles in every sector of society, including law, medicine, nonprofits, education, sciences and the arts.

Articles in top business publications regularly discuss the value of a liberal arts education as a foundation for professional life. My experience proves it. As a global investment banker, and vice chairman at Salomon Brothers during the fast-paced 1980s, I managed several high-profile, complex mergers. My success in these endeavors was due, in part, to my ability to analyze problems and issues from a multidisciplinary perspective - a skill ingrained in me as a liberal arts college student.

Years later, these same types of skills have helped me move into leadership positions at some of the finest higher education institutions in the country. Here, as in business, solutions depend upon a holistic approach.

In addition, there's no question that having a diverse group of individuals around a table leads to broadened consideration of an issue - critical for obtaining agreement. In the academic world or in business, this is important, and it's a learned skill of a leader.

Adaptability is essential in our complex, ambiguous and expanding sphere of work, influenced by an uncertain economy and world politics. Liberal education provides students qualities needed to succeed: higher-order thinking, effective and persuasive communication skills, an action-oriented approach, leadership and team-building aptitude, and a developed sense of self.

In my own case, as a history major, I learned the past is not meant to make us think of old models, but instead helps us look at issues with fresh eyes. Each situation today is less about what we've

done before and more about re-thinking an issue from different perspectives. Liberal arts majors can think in different ways to see connections and derive solutions a technical major may not.

In many ways, technology has made our lives and careers more complicated because it brings with it unfiltered access to information. Business executives have a wealth of data at their disposal, but they can't blindly accept it. Instead they succeed when they recognize useful information, apply a broad base of knowledge and experiences to translate it into solutions, and then effectively communicate those solutions.

Constantly challenged to explore ideas outside their comfort zone, liberal arts students assess their own views, create an ethical base from their own personal values, discover their passion and find where they can make an impact. They are encouraged to seek balance in their lives. Broader perspectives and interests can result in the kind of innovative thinking that led Wesleyan graduate Herb Kelleher, former CEO of Southwest Airlines, to connect NASCAR pit crews to improved airline turnaround times.

Asking the right questions, hearing the answers and constructing solutions from information across disciplines - these are the tools a liberal education provides. A strong return on investment, a degree in liberal arts and sciences is an ideal starting place for career and life.

*Leo I. Higdon Jr. is president of Connecticut College. His inauguration as the school's 10th president is Saturday. A graduate of Georgetown University with a degree in history, Higdon got an MBA from the University of Chicago. After serving in the Peace Corps, Higdon spent 20 years with Salomon Brothers and then became dean of the University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business Administration. Subsequently, he was president of Babson College and the College of Charleston.*