

Business and the Liberal Arts

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By [Edgar M. Bronfman](#)

Because of my experience as former CEO of the Seagram Corporation, young business students and aspiring entrepreneurs often seek my advice on the best way to navigate the complex and daunting world of business. As college students begin to think about selecting their majors, they may be influenced by the many reports coming out this time of year that tell them which majors provide the highest post-college earning potential. Last month, PayScale released its 2013-2014 report, lauding math, science and business courses as the most profitable college majors.

My advice, however, is simple, but well-considered: Get a liberal arts degree. In my experience, a liberal arts degree is the most important factor in forming individuals into interesting and interested people who can determine their own paths through the future.

For all of the decisions young business leaders will be asked to make based on facts and figures, needs and wants, numbers and speculation, all of those choices will require one common skill: how to evaluate raw information, be it from people or a spreadsheet, and make reasoned and critical decisions. The ability to think clearly and critically -- to understand what people mean rather than what they say -- cannot be monetized, and in life should not be undervalued. In all the people who have worked for me over the years the ones who stood out the most were the people who were able to see beyond the facts and figures before them and understand what they mean in a larger context.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, there has been a decline in liberal arts disciplines and a rise in pragmatically oriented majors. Simultaneously, there was a rise of employment by college graduates of 9 percent, as well as a decrease of employment by high school graduates of 9 percent. What this demonstrates, in my mind, is that the work place of the future requires specialized skills that will need not only educated minds, but adaptable ones.

That adaptability is where a liberal arts degree comes in. There is nothing that makes the mind more elastic and expandable than discovering how the world works. Developing and rewarding curiosity will be where innovation finds its future. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, attributed his company's success in 2011 to being a place where "technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities ... yields us the results that makes our heart sing."

Is that reflected in our current thinking about education as looking at it as a return on investment? Chemistry for the non-scientist classes abound in universities, but why not poetry for business students? As our society becomes increasingly technologically focused and we build better, faster and more remarkable machines, where can technology not replicate human thinking? In being creative, nuanced and understanding of human needs, wants and desires.

Think about the things you love most in your life and you will likely see you value them because of how they make you feel, think and understand the world around you.

That does not mean forsaking practical knowledge, or financial security, but in our haste to get everyone technically capable we will lose sight of creating well-rounded individuals who know how to do more than write computer programs.

We must push ourselves as a society to make math and science education innovative and engaging, and to value teachers and education. In doing so, we will ensure that America continues to innovate and lead and provide more job and economic opportunities for everyone. We must remember, however, that what is seen as cutting-edge practical or technological knowledge at the moment is ever-evolving. What is seen as the most innovative thinking today will likely be seen as passé in ten years. Critical to remaining adaptable to those changes is to have developed a mind that has a life beyond work and to track the changes of human progress, by having learned how much we have changed in the past.

I also believe that business leaders ought to be doing more to encourage students to take a second look at the liberal arts degree. In order to move the conversation beyond rhetoric it is important that students see the merits of having a liberal arts degree, in both the hiring process and in the public statements of today's business leaders.

In my own life, after studying history at Williams College and McGill University, I spent my entire career in business, and was fortunate to experience success. Essential to my success, however, was the fact that I was engaged in the larger world around me as a curious person who wanted to learn. I did not rely only on business perspectives. In fact, it was a drive to understand and enjoy life -- and be connected to something larger than myself in my love of reading, learning, and in my case, studying and learning about Judaism -- that allows me, at 84, to see my life as fully rounded.

Curiosity and openness to new ways of thinking -- which is developed in learning about the world around you, the ability to critically analyze situations, nurtured every time we encounter a new book, or encountering the abstract, that we deal with every time we encounter art, music or theater -- ensures future success more than any other quality. Learn, read, question, think. In developing the ability to exercise those traits, you will not only be successful in business, but in the business of life.

Bio

Edgar M. Bronfman was chief executive officer of the Seagram Company Ltd. and is president of the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, which seeks to inspire a renaissance of Jewish life.