**Oral Communication is Central to the Goals and Outcomes of Liberal Studies**

**Sean Decatur (2016), The Myths and Realities of a Liberal Arts Education, June 30, 2016**

<http://www.aspenideas.org/blog/myths-and-realities-liberal-arts-education>

[*Sean Decatur*](http://www.aspenideas.org/speaker/sean-decatur) is president of Kenyon College, a position he has held since July 2013. He spoke at the Aspen Ideas Festival on June 30th on a panel called "Myth or Reality: If You Want a College Education, You Can Get One."

Below, Decatur describes the benefits of a liberal arts education.

News headlines and political debates paint a bleak picture of the state of American colleges and universities: graduates are unable to find jobs; curricula is out of alignment with the needs of employers; campuses are torn apart by clashes on issues such as race and sexual assault; and free speech is under attack. Put all of this in the context of rising tuition costs and stagnant growth in family incomes, and the nation’s colleges and universities — once a symbol of America’s intellectual and economic strength — seem to be in crisis.

Private liberal arts colleges such as my institution, Kenyon College, attract particular scrutiny — how does study of the traditional liberal arts, at a price of about $60,000 per year, in a rural setting in Ohio, have any relevance to the fast-paced, technology-driven, globally-connected economy?

But the national discourse on the value of study at a private liberal arts college is based on myths, not reality.

**Myth 1:** Vocational and career-focused education is more relevant in today’s economy than a traditional liberal arts degree.

**Reality:** The relationship between the liberal arts and career success has been studied extensively. [reports](http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/Re8097abcombined.pdf) by the [Association of Colleges and Universities](http://www.aacu.org/leap/public_opinion_research.cfm) point to the value that employers give to hiring employees with proven writing and communication skills, the ability to learn and integrate new material, a broad understanding of the humanities, natural and social sciences, and analytical skills — which are all hallmarks of a liberal education. Moreover, high-impact pedagogical practices — seminar-style learning, undergraduate research, community-based learning, internships, etc. — enrich students with characteristics that employers report to be highly desirable in prospective employees. Study after study demonstrates that an education in the liberal arts and sciences is excellent preparation for success in a range of careers.

**Myth 2:** Campus protests in the past year are evidence that students and institutions are out-of-touch with the values of the real world.

**Reality:** Liberal arts colleges do much more than prepare students for careers. A complete college experience primes students for lives of active, ethical citizenship in a civil democracy. The student protests of the past year remind us that our campuses are classrooms and laboratories for the practice of citizenship, responsibility, and democratic leadership. In other words, they are important learning opportunities, and educational leaders should neither immediately reject nor thoughtlessly capitulate to demands, but rather engage with students by putting issues in broader contexts, listening, at times challenging student concerns, and modeling civil, democratic discourse.

**Myth 3:** A liberal arts education just isn’t worth the cost — there are other ways to get the same economic return on investment.

**Reality:** The economic argument on the value of a liberal arts education is clear. Data shows that philosophy majors, so maligned in the presidential debates in early 2016, out-earn business majors on average in the long term. But economic return on investment is only part of the story. A liberal arts education also has a positive effect on one’s general sense of well-being. This is harder to quantify, though studies such as the [Gallup-Purdue study](http://www.gallup.com/services/185924/gallup-purdue-index-2015-report.aspx) are helping us understand the elements of the college experience that have the biggest impact, including close mentoring relationships, meaningful experiences outside of the classroom, and opportunities for leadership in clubs or activities. But, even beyond that, a liberal arts education develops strength of character, deepens a sense of compassion, and enhances students’ understanding of the workings of the universe and their places within it.

In other words, a degree from a liberal arts college may bring you a career with earning power to justify the investment, a stronger sense of well-being, and a life richer with meaning. Worth it? Definitely.

**Association of American Colleges & Universities/ Hart Research Associates,**

**“Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success”**

<https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2015employerstudentsurvey.pdf>

The majority of employers continue to say that possessing both field-specific knowledge and a broad range of knowledge and skills is important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success. Very few indicate that acquiring knowledge and skills mainly for a specific field or position is the best path for long-term success. Notably, college students recognize the importance of having both breadth and depth of skills and knowledge for their workplace success.

Echoing findings from previous Hart Research employer surveys, employers say that when hiring, they place the greatest value on demonstrated proficiency in skills and knowledge that cut across all majors. The learning outcomes they rate as most important include written and oral communication skills, teamwork skills, ethical decision-making, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings. Indeed, most employers say that these cross-cutting skills are more important to an individual’s success at their company than his or her undergraduate major.

However, employers feel that today’s college graduates are not particularly well prepared to achieve the learning outcomes that they view as important. This critique applies to all of the 17 learning outcomes tested, including the cross-cutting skills that employers highly value.

Employers value the ability to apply learning in real-world settings and broadly endorse an emphasis on applied learning experiences in college today.

* 88% think that it is important for colleges and universities to ensure that all students are prepared with the skills and knowledge needed to complete an applied learning project.
* 73% think that requiring college students to complete a significant applied learning project before graduation would improve the quality of their preparation for careers.
* 60% think that all students should be expected to complete a significant applied learning project before graduating.
* Large majorities say they are more likely to consider a job candidate who has participated in an internship, a senior project, a collaborative research project, a field-based project in a diverse community setting with people from different backgrounds, or a community-based project.

College students are closely aligned with employers on the importance of key learning outcomes, and, like employers, they believe that applied learning experiences are an important preparation for career success.

College students are notably out of sync with employers in their perception of their preparedness on a wide range of skills and knowledge areas, however. Students express much greater confidence in their level of preparedness in all areas than employers indicate they see demonstrated.

**National Association of Colleges and Employers: Definition of Career Readiness and Competencies**

<http://www.naceweb.org/knowledge/career-readiness-competencies.aspx>

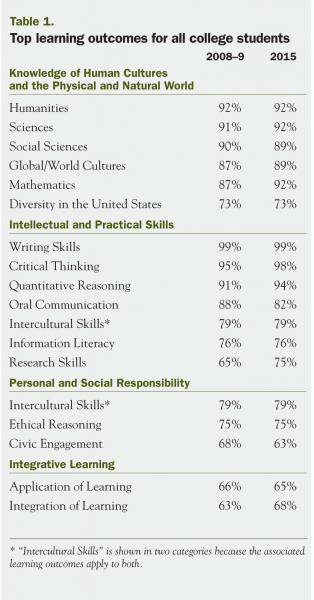
#### Career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace.

These competencies are:

* **Critical Thinking/Problem Solving:** Exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems. The individual is able to obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data in this process, and may demonstrate originality and inventiveness.
* **Oral/Written Communications:** Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization. The individual has public speaking skills; is able to express ideas to others; and can write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports clearly and effectively.
* **Teamwork/Collaboration:** Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints. The individual is able to work within a team structure, and can negotiate and manage conflict.
* **Information Technology Application:** Select and use appropriate technology to accomplish a given task. The individual is also able to apply computing skills to solve problems.
* **Leadership:** Leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals, and use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others. The individual is able to assess and manage his/her emotions and those of others; use empathetic skills to guide and motivate; and organize, prioritize, and delegate work.
* **Professionalism/Work Ethic:** Demonstrate personal accountability and effective work habits, e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time workload management, and understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional work image. The individual demonstrates integrity and ethical behavior, acts responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind, and is able to learn from his/her mistakes.
* **Career Management:** Identify and articulate one's skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position desired and career goals, and identify areas necessary for professional growth. The individual is able to navigate and explore job options, understands and can take the steps necessary to pursue opportunities, and understands how to self-advocate for opportunities in the workplace.

**Debra Humphreys (2016). Progress and Prospects for the Reform of Undergraduate Education: Results from the Latest Survey of AAC&U Members. Liberal Education, Summer.**

<http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2016/summer/humphreys?utm_medium=email&utm_source=lesu16&utm_campaign=lesu16>



**Neil Kokemuller. The Importance of Communication Skills in Oral Presentations**

<http://work.chron.com/importance-communication-skills-oral-presentations-2139.html>



Visual aids can greatly enhance oral presentations.

Communication skills are among the intangible skill sets most valued by employers. The ability to communicate effectively, especially during oral presentations, can boost your marketability and viability for work in a variety of careers. To develop strong presentation skills, you need to consider both the verbal and nonverbal factors involved in delivering your message.

## The Message

The ability to present an effective message with useful content is obviously important to a good oral presentation. This requires planning for your presentation, and doing research to make sure your message is well-constructed. You want to deliver a message that considers your audience and the goals of your presentation. An oral presentation without good substance will accomplish very little.

## Body Language

A major component of the message your audience perceives is based on your body language. Your posture, facial expressions and gestures affect the way your message is received. Consistent eye contact with members of your audience; a calm, confident posture; and relaxed arms and hands held near your side are among body language techniques that deliver positive vibes. Folding your arms, avoiding eye contact, frowning, and nervous movements can signal nervousness, indifference or worse.

## Vocal Tone

How you say something carries a lot of weight. Speaking in a clear, confident and assertive tone helps project your message and keep your audience engaged. Emphasizing specific points and varying your rate of delivery brings out key points in your presentation and attracts your audience's attention. Avoid speaking in a low voice or a monotonous tone.

## Awareness

Your communication skills in a presentation can also help you understand how well your message is hitting home. By observing the body language and feedback of audience members, you can adjust your approach. If audience members are sitting back in their chairs, not paying attention or distracted by other things, your message probably is not getting through. Consider projecting yourself more and finding ways to better engage the audience. It helps to ask audience members questions and keep them involved. If your presentation is lengthy, you might need to take a break.

**M. Sue Hetherington (1982). The Importance of Oral Communication. College English.**

**Vol. 44, No. 6 (Oct., 1982), pp. 570-574.**

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/377273.pdf?_=1471887819239>

When in 1980 I administered a survey intended to find out what faculty members at the College of Charleston, recent graduates of the college, and employers think about college education in communication, I did not expect that most respondents outside the college would strongly testify to the need for training in oral communication. But that is what happened. When I queried the faculty of the college, excluding those in English, about the writing skills needed by graduates, I did not offer any opportunities to deliver opinions about whether and how well students were helped to present themselves and their ideas effectively when they had to talk rather than write. But when I queried alumni who had graduated in the preceding five years, and employers in business, industry, and the professions in the tricounty area surrounding the college, I did include items on the questionnaire that invited opinions about "speaking." The reply was a shout. Out of the eighty possible answers in the alumni survey and the sixty-five on the questionnaire sent to employers, only four or five dealt with

oral communication. That the highest percentages of agreement among all the answers should fall on some of these few was quite unexpected; the surprise emphasized for me the neglect of conscious training in the use of spoken language that is common today in English departments.

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Alumni felt so strongly about the importance of oral communication that some of them voluntarily recommended a requirement in public speaking. A registered nurse wrote in the space for comments, "Public speaking should be required for graduation-geared to informal and media presentations- this in addition to present requirements." A research consultant added, “most students do not realize the importance of being able to write well and, therefore should be required to study writing *as well as* oral communication, since they will probably not elect to take [such] courses" (the italics are mine). From an instructor of industrial management came this: "The ability to communicate English orally and in written form is extremely important and must be stressed highly.” The choice of these examples from among several illustrates not only the conviction of the alumni but also the ubiquitousness of the demand for oral communication skills.