

# **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FOR THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

## **KEY FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS AND COLLEGE-BOUND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

**AUGUST 2004**

**Peter D. Hart Research Associates  
1724 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20009**

## METHODOLOGY

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*From July 26 to August 3, 2004, Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted six focus group discussions for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The sessions were conducted in three locations: Indianapolis, IN; Portland, OR; and Alexandria, VA. In each location, one group was held among rising public high school seniors who plan to attend a four-year college or university, and a second session was conducted among rising college juniors and seniors at public and private institutions.*

*The discussions were undertaken to explore students' hopes, concerns, expectations, and goals regarding college. Within this context, the research sought to understand high school and college students' attitudes about and perceptions of liberal education and the degree to which they recognize the value of a liberal education and its outcomes today.*

*This initial research provides a foundation of understanding and insights to help inform the development of AAC&U's Campaign for Liberal Education. These groups enabled participants to express detailed opinions and insights about these issues in their own words and provided the opportunity for discussion and debate. Because this research is qualitative rather than quantitative, however, we caution against interpreting the findings herein as broadly representative of the country's high school and college student populations.*

## KEY FINDINGS

### FEELINGS ABOUT COLLEGE AND THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE LIFE

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**College and high school students both associate a wide array of positive emotions with college, but high school students' anticipation also is mixed with anxiety about their transition to college life.**

While some college students feel ready to face the risks and rewards of the "real" world after college, most of them recognize that their college years will be among the best times of their lives and they are reluctant to leave that chapter behind. While they enjoy a great deal of independence and responsibility, they know that life will be harder after college. Perhaps most important, however, participants are reluctant to leave their friends, social scene, and the life they enjoy at college.

High school students realize that they are about to enter a new phase in their lives—leaving the comfort and protection of home to enter a world of greater independence that offers new opportunities and challenges. They express excitement, apprehension, confusion, fear, stress, and elation about what lies on the horizon. High school participants are eager to embrace the greater freedom they will enjoy at college and express a desire to make new friends and explore new and exciting experiences beyond their hometown and what is familiar to them. Nonetheless, they also are anxious about the responsibilities that the increased independence will carry.

Among some high school participants, the feeling that they must know *now* what they will major in and what career they will pursue after college adds to their anxiety. While not all of them view college this way, some think of college as a more linear and confined path toward a job and career than as an evolving journey that helps them realize their full potential in life and in today's dynamic job market. For students who are not comfortable making these decisions about their future, the transition from high school to college is seen as an overwhelming experience, as expressed by one student,

**"It's daunting to have to decide right now what I'm going to have to do with the rest of my life...where I'm going to go to school, what I'm going to study, who I involve myself with. It is all encompassing about how I'm shaping my future, what I'm going to do with my life, how I'm going to make money for the rest of my life. It's just daunting."**

**—High school student, Indianapolis**

Nonetheless, not all high school students believe that they map out their major and career choice before entering college, and most college students soundly reject this concept. During their years in college, most participants have discovered their interests (and disinterests) through their exposure to several disciplines. While some entered college knowing exactly what they wanted to major in, many participants say that they arrived at their major through exposure to a variety of disciplines, people, and experiences. Some are glad that they were able to redirect their interests and change their majors.

**High school students feel uninformed about and unprepared for the opportunities and challenges they will face in college. But few high school students are concerned about becoming better prepared, as they expect that all incoming freshmen will be in the same boat. College students' memories of entering college are reminiscent of high school students' naiveté.**

While many feel uninformed about and unprepared for college, high school students' approach can be described best as a "wait and see" attitude. With the exception of a few participants, mostly in Portland, high school students are not actively searching for answers about college. In fact, most do not even really know the questions or types of information to ask for. The information that seems most pertinent to them at this stage—academic expectations and requirements for gaining admittance to college, guidance on deciding where to apply, and application deadlines—is conferred to them by parties on all sides (parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and colleges and universities).

**"I think that college is expecting you to not know what's going on. The whole freshman class, it's going to be a first for them. I'm not really concerned that I'm going to get behind once I get into college. Everyone is going to be in the same situation. I'm sure they . . . expect you to have problems."**

**—High school student, Alexandria**

When pushed to think about the issue of how to prepare for college, high school students say that the information they are most interested in relates to how to prepare for college life both academically and socially. While they clearly are excited about the greater freedom they will enjoy, they also recognize that they will not benefit from the same safety net they have at home and at high school. To the degree that they would like some guidance, they express the most interest in getting advice on how to meet the challenges that will come with their increased autonomy. Specifically, they are most interested in receiving guidance on time-management, determining their course load, navigating the responsibilities of

their new independence, and knowing what to expect from the social environment. While these questions exist for many high school students, the majority either is not overly concerned about finding answers or is unaware that there are resources available to them.

College students echo similar sentiments when they remember their freshman year, saying that they felt unprepared and unaware of what to expect of college. They say that they also did not receive much guidance on how to prepare for college, but they confirm that the “wait and see” attitude was the norm for them. Given that no two students are alike and that the academic rigor of high schools varies, it is not surprising that some found that the education they received in high school provided them with the foundational tools to succeed in college, while others felt more overwhelmed. To a large degree, however, they feel that it is up to individuals to be motivated and mature enough to juggle demands of college life and their studies.

One factor that gives high school students a feeling of preparedness is if they have taken advanced placement classes in high school. Students who have taken these classes believe that the more demanding curriculum and heavier course load reflects the academic rigor of college. College students’ evaluation of AP classes varies, however, with some believing that core college courses simply were a rehash of what they already learned in high school while others felt unprepared for the demands of some college classes, despite having taken AP classes in that field of study.

#### **SOURCES OF COLLEGE INFORMATION**

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**When asked whom they would turn to for answers about college, high school participants cite siblings as the most helpful and trusted resources, as they have the most current experience with college life.**

An older brother or sister—or even a slightly older friend—who has had recent college experience is seen as providing valuable advice about what to expect. Participants recognize that colleges and universities change, as do their requirements, and they therefore look to those who can most closely relate to their own situation. Siblings are viewed as especially reliable resources because participants feel that their brothers and sisters will deliver the most honest and forthright guidance and advice.

When asked about other members of their family, some participants mention their parents as a resource, but many consider their parents’ perspective to be outdated and thus less helpful. They trust recent college attendees most to provide useful and valuable guidance.

College counselors are seen as useful resources for basic information to help high school students make decisions about and gain admission to a college or university. Students value the advice that their college/guidance counselors offer about the application process and their recommendations about institutions that might be appealing to them. On the other hand, students do not perceive college/guidance counselors as playing a significant role in preparing them to hit the ground running when they arrive on campus.

Some students indicate that their teachers do more to scare them about the workload that awaits them at college than give them practical and specific guidance on how to prepare. They say that their teachers mostly stress that they will need to buckle down and study a lot, and that students will not be able to depend on others for help. Beyond the actual course work that they teach, however, students say that their high school teachers provide little concrete advice about how best to prepare for the academic challenges of college.

Last, when probed about the role that higher education institutions alone play, students indicate that colleges and universities mainly communicate with them via their marketing efforts. Just as students' top concern before entering college is to get into the school of their choice, participants recognize that colleges' and universities' top priority in communicating with students is to attract applicants and sell the school to them. To the degree that they receive direction from these institutions about how to prepare, it is mostly through campus tours; but their comments suggest that on the whole they do not get much guidance from colleges and universities in this area beyond receiving information regarding academic requirements for gaining admittance.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION**

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**A college degree is universally recognized as a basic requirement for achieving professional success in today's competitive job marketplace.**

High school and college students alike focus on the importance of a college education for professional success. They recognize that they will be at a distinct disadvantage if they enter the job market without a college degree, as most of the applicants against whom they will be competing will be college graduates. Furthermore, they believe that a college diploma is not only important for obtaining a job but also for career advancement and success down the line.

On the other hand, students readily admit that earning a college degree does not guarantee a desired job. With college today now considered the logical and expected "next step" on the path toward landing a job, both college and high school students recognize that graduating from college does not mean what it once did. Indeed, in terms of the types of jobs and careers they hope to gain, they view a college degree as a base level requirement, and many recognize that a post-graduate education is becoming increasingly important.

**Students' opinions vary about the degree to which the primary objective of a college education is to achieve the end result (i.e., get a diploma to get a job) versus to experience the full educational process (i.e., gain knowledge, skills, and experience that will enhance the potential for success).**

While most participants agree that a college degree is essential for achieving professional success, students have different interpretations of why a college education is important. There is no consensus among either group of students: while more of them (especially college students) value the educational process, participants in each group believe that the purpose of a college education is mainly to get the "piece of paper" that is a basic requirement for getting a job.

- *Some students feel that the primary objective of a college education is to get a diploma to get a desired job.* Participants who feel this way argue that college is just another step on the way to getting a job. Consequently, they view a degree not in terms of the overall experience and skills acquired, but simply as a certificate representing their achievement.

**"I want the degree to back me, to get me in the door. I think that is what it takes. Once you get in the door somewhere and you have that degree to back you, then that takes you there. I just feel that with the world we're living in today, a degree is really important."**

**– College student, Indianapolis**

**"I don't think it means much of anything, it's just a piece of paper. But that piece of paper will get you the interview at whatever job you want."**

**–College student, Alexandria**

- *But in these sessions more participants believe that the primary objective of a college education is to gain knowledge, skills, and experience that will enhance their potential for professional and personal success.* These participants recognize a college degree as a necessary means to getting their foot in the door with an employer, but they recognize that a college education means much more than that. Academic and social interactions with professors, students, and other members of the college community provide exposure to new and different experiences and disciplines and are perceived to be important factors in students' growth and development. And those who are actually in college are more likely to value their college education for the overall journey and view the diploma as representative of the many contributing factors to that experience.

At the culmination of the experience, the diploma represents the acquisition of a variety of learned skills, a broad knowledge base on which to build, and the development of interpersonal skills, all of which are essential to meeting the expectations of the professional world.

**"Well I just think that it's about the journey, like the whole process... you have to have all these general requirements to making you that well-rounded person...And the whole process of going through it, establishing your work ethic, becoming a better thinker, just to prepare yourself, I guess. I think it's more the process rather than the piece of paper."**

**–College student, Portland**

**"I think that college is about becoming a more well-rounded person, knowing, gaining. I go to a liberal arts school, so I know all about this. But getting a wide variety of facts and knowledge about the world to become a better individual and a better citizen. And I think the piece of paper that you get at the end is something that tells your future employer, whoever, they can work hard, they can complete a project. So I think it's valuable for being in the workforce. But I think it's, perhaps, more valuable for personally gaining knowledge and understanding."**

**–College student, Portland**

## **REASONS FOR ATTENDING COLLEGE**

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High school and college students view the college experience as a period of self-development and maturation, and first and foremost they say they want a college degree to give them a strong sense of achievement.

College is viewed as a rite of passage for young people today—a period of transition in which students gain greater independence, freedom, and responsibility while still receiving some help from their parents and the support network at their colleges. While they express excitement and anxiety about their increased independence, students also recognize that as they continue to develop academically and socially throughout their college years they remain somewhat sheltered from the everyday realities of the working world.

**"It's also just kind of like a stepping stone. If I were to go straight from high school where I'm pretty sheltered, don't have to do much for myself, straight into the real world where I have to get a job and pay my own rent and everything, I think it would be kind of hard. This is like a transition."**

**— High school student, Alexandria**

**"I guess it's more of like a personal experience. I think it's a place where people become mature and sort of find themselves, and where you don't have all of the responsibilities that you're going to if you drop out of college and have a job."**

**— College student, Alexandria**

When asked why going to college was important to them, one of the first things that high school and college students mention is that earning a college degree will give them a sense of accomplishment. They feel that this important achievement will prove to prospective employers, family, friends, and society in general that they are reliable, committed individuals who will work hard. These sentiments all enhance students' feelings of confidence and self-worth.

**The reasons that these students rate as the most important motives for going to college all specifically include some reference to enhancing their potential for success in the workforce. Participants place only moderate emphasis on becoming a more critical thinker and problem-solver, and learning about people from other cultures and preparing for a life of civic responsibility and leadership are considered low priorities.**

During the discussion sessions, participants were provided with 10 reasons that people may give for attending college, and they were asked to select the ones that were most and least important to them personally. The reasons break out into the three groupings below in terms of their level of importance, and there are not notable differences between the priorities of high school and college students. (Students' specific ratings of these reasons are included in Appendix A.)

**Students' top-tier reasons for going to college:**

1. *A college education will bring more career choices and a greater number of job opportunities.*
2. *A college education will provide the specific skills and knowledge required in the field in which I hope to work.*
3. *College will help me gain more knowledge that will be helpful throughout life—both on and off the job.*
4. *A college education will provide me with the knowledge, capabilities, ethics, and values that are essential to having professional success.*

This exercise illustrates the degree to which a college education is seen first and foremost as the gateway to getting a job and achieving career success. The two top-ranked reasons for going to college are the more narrow goals of gaining access to more job opportunities and getting the specific knowledge and skills for a particular field. Nonetheless, many students also recognize the broader benefits of a college education that are summarized in the third and fourth statements above.

It is important to note that, despite student's belief that a college education is a requirement for career and professional success, the discussion sessions reveal that many participants do not expect that a college degree will equip them with the specific skills needed for their first job. And neither do they believe that employers expect them to know how to do the jobs before they are hired. They believe, rather, that college graduates develop the foundational knowledge and skills that enable them to learn and responsibly execute specific skills on the job and to work with others. As a college student in Indianapolis notes, "I probably won't know 90% of what I'm going to do when I get out. That is stuff I'm going to learn when I get out there." As discussed earlier, however, some students believe that they get more relevant knowledge and skills from their college education than do those who are more focused on simply getting their degree so they can get a job.

**Student's mid-tier reasons for going to college:**

5. *Attending college will give me the opportunity to meet new and interesting people and experience new social situations.* Students are more divided on this as a priority. While they leave no doubt that they will or already do greatly value the social interactions and friendships with their peers at college, some simply do not see this as a top-tier reason to go to college when compared with other, more important reasons. Regardless of how students rate it, however, it is an outcome that participants expect will occur naturally.
6. *A college education will help me be a more critical thinker and problem-solver, better able to adapt in today's ever-changing society and economy.* High school and college students are somewhat divided in their ratings of the importance of a college education for developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Most high school students do not believe that individuals learn these skills in college, but instead view them as already developed by the time a student reaches

college. Indeed, there is a failure among high school students to make the connection that development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills are a fundamental outcome of the college curriculum.

It is encouraging that college students, especially those in Portland, are more likely to recognize college curriculum as contributing to the development and honing of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, even many college students believe that most of critical thinking and problem-solving skills are developed before a student goes to college.

7. *A college education will help ensure that I make better, more informed decisions about my future, which will enhance my life in the long run.* This goal does not resonate with many participants as either most important or least important. It is so broad that it does not elicit much reaction from these students either way.

**Students bottom-tier reasons for going to college:**

8. *A college degree will help to ensure a higher paying job.* There is no doubt that in ranking reasons to attend college, financial considerations are *not* simply relegated as back-burner concerns. Students are aware of the many responsibilities of adulthood and the consequent importance of a well-paying job to “make a good living and provide for your family.” On the other hand, some participants recognize that a gratifying career is not linked to an inflated income but can be the result of pursuing something that brings them pleasure and a feeling of self-worth. They recognize that a college degree provides them with more job options and better opportunities to secure jobs that they want to do and are interested in pursuing, but that it does not automatically guarantee them a higher paying job.
9. *Attending college will give me an opportunity to learn about and from people and cultures that are different from my own.* Although participants identify college as a place where they will meet people and experience new social situations, they do not consider exposure to new and different cultures to be one of their top goals for attending college. High school students believe that their experiences prior to college provide a great deal of cultural exposure, and are skeptical that the college environment will expose them to anything that they haven’t already experienced in their high schools or hometown. With the exception of a few students, college students validate these perceptions, saying that their colleges’ environments are more homogeneous and sheltered from the outside world than their high schools were.
10. *A college education will prepare me for a life of civic responsibility and leadership.* Neither high school nor college students believe that preparation for a life of civic responsibility and leadership is an important reason to get a college education. These are not things they intend to seek or have sought at college. Taken to a further extreme, some students go so far to say that they approach their college experience as a time to focus on themselves and their individual academic achievement and social experience rather than on making a contribution to society.

Participants indicate that the main reason they do not see this as an important reason for going to college is because they believe that a sense of civic responsibility and leadership are qualities that individuals are either born with or learn at an early age from their parents and family. There is little recognition of the role that a college education can play in furthering these qualities and values. And while many recognize that colleges foster an environment in which students can be civically active and take on leadership roles, they feel that the motivation and responsibility lies with the student and is thus something that comes from within. It seems that these types of opportunities are not unique to college campuses—that those who seek them can find opportunities for civic engagement and leadership outside the college setting.

## **OUTCOMES OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION**

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**When it comes to the specific outcomes of a college education, students place the greatest priority on gaining a sense of maturity, time-management skills, strong work habits, self-discipline, and teamwork skills. With the exception of teamwork skills, however, students do not recognize these skills as being direct outcomes of the college curriculum as much as they view them as products of students' ability to handle the greater independence, freedom, and responsibility they gain at college.**

Participants were asked to select the most critical and least critical results of a college education from a list of 16 possible outcomes provided. An outline of students' ranking of the outcomes follows. (Students' specific ratings of these outcomes are included in Appendix B.)

### **Most important outcomes:**

1. A sense of maturity and how to succeed on your own.
2. Time-management skills.
3. Strong work habits.
4. Self-discipline.
5. Teamwork skills and the ability to get along with and work with people different from yourself

### **Mid-tier outcomes:**

6. Tangible business skills, and a specific expertise and knowledge in your field of focus
7. Independent and critical thinking/reasoning skills.
8. Strong writing and oral/speaking skills
9. Improved ability to solve problems and think analytically.
10. Exposure to the business world.
11. Leadership skills.

### **Least valued outcomes:**

12. Sense of values, principles, and ethics.
13. Tolerance and respect for people of other backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and lifestyles.

14. Competency in computer skills and software.
15. Expanded cultural and global awareness and sensitivity.
16. Appreciation of your role as a citizen and an orientation toward public service.

Most students recognize a college or university as an ideal place to mature and to hone the important skills of time-management, strong work habits, and self-discipline. The challenge facing AAC&U, however, is that participants, even when pushed, are unable to produce specific examples of how the college curriculum yields these results. Indeed, many students feel that ultimately it is up to the student to improve him or herself in these areas.

**I think the school can only do so much. You look at half the stuff up here and it's all got the word self in it. I mean, someone said earlier that it's more what you make out of it yourself. They'll give you the tools, but it's up to you to use those and get the most out of it.**

**—College student, Indianapolis**

On the other hand, students can more easily recognize how a college curriculum yields some of the mid-tier outcomes, including tangible business skills, independent and critical thinking/reasoning skills, strong writing and oral/speaking skills, and an improved ability to solve problems and think analytically. But the challenge here is that students do not rank these outcomes as being as important.

Evidence of the disconnect between students' view of college and AAC&U's vision of liberal education is illustrated by the low priority that students place on gaining values and ethics, tolerance and respect for people of other backgrounds and races, expanded cultural and global awareness, and an orientation toward public service.

#### **STUDENTS' FAMILIARITY WITH AND IMPRESSIONS OF LIBERAL EDUCATION**

**Neither high school nor college students have heard the term liberal education. To the extent that a few participants discern some of the key values and principles of the concept of liberal education, they associate it with liberal arts colleges.**

When asked to define what liberal education means to them, most of the participants, high school and college alike, cannot provide an accurate definition. And even those few that do have some sense of it have not actually heard of liberal education but rather seem to deduce a definition of it based on a variety of associations that they make.

Participants in both groups offer a wide array of interpretations of liberal education. Some associate liberal education with the relevant values and qualities of being "well-rounded," "a foundation," "breadth of focus," "encouraging critical thinking," and "promotes individualism." Some also link it to the arts and humanities rather than the sciences, drawing upon their familiarity with the term "liberal arts." However, no one understands that the curriculum of liberal education comprises *both* broad exposure to multiple disciplines and in-depth study in at least one field of study. All of the discussion centers on the general education element.

Some participants' perceptions and associations are further off base. Some of them believe that a liberal education is an education that is in some way politically skewed to the left. A few others think that it provides students total freedom and latitude in selecting their courses and fulfilling their requirements or that it is an approach to education in which there are no right answers or wrong answers. (Participants volunteered definitions of liberal education are included in Appendix C.)

**The concept of liberal education is appealing to most participants, especially high school students. College students are more skeptical of the execution of liberal education, however, as many have been frustrated and disappointed with the general education requirements at their institutions.**

The following was provided to focus group participants:

*Liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility. A liberal education comprises a curriculum that includes general education that provides students broad exposure to multiple disciplines and more in-depth study in at least one field or area of concentration.*

When presented with a brief definition of liberal education, high school students, who have not experienced liberal education directly, are more positive towards the idea with most of them expressing a preference in attending a college that offers a liberal education curriculum. As a Portland high school student states, "it's the liberal art education that provides you with the knowledge to actually be someone other than a working drone who does nothing but their job." Many high school students are not clear whether most colleges and universities currently offer a liberal education or are only just making changes to incorporate it into their curriculum. Most—though not all—college participants, on the other hand, believe their schools are currently offering this type of curriculum.

While most high school students react favorably to the concept of liberal education and hope to have the chance to receive a liberal education, college participants have a divided opinion.

College students who like the idea of a liberal education value diversity of the curriculum for two main reasons. First, while this approach emphasizes broad exposure, it also allows individuals to focus on the areas that are of greatest interest. Many participants attribute discovering their interests as a result of being exposed to a variety of disciplines and some even changed their majors because of it. Further, students argue that having a broad foundation of knowledge compliments the skills they are learning in their major. A college student who is pre-med explains how general education is applicable,

**"I don't want to take Spanish or French, but I realize that there is going to come a time in a hospital when a woman who speaks nothing but Spanish is going to come in. If I've had three years of background Spanish, then I'm going to do my job better for every class that I take."**

**—College student, Indianapolis**

Second, college participants who subscribe to this approach recognize that, as in their education, life is filled with diversity and an essential component to success in life is the ability to adapt to new and different environments, whether they are in the professional or social arenas. Participants believe that a broad education empowers them with the ability to change and the tools with which to take on new challenges and opportunities.

**"I can't think of anything, where you just do one thing and have no other skills . . . involved. It's all intertwined in whatever you do. You're going to have to interact with people. You're going to have to give reports. You're going to have to type something up. You're going to have to learn how to interpret data or whatever...You can't just take one specific thing and ignore everything else completely".**

**—High school student, Indianapolis**

The most significant point of difference in the reactions of high school and college students relates to general education requirements and the way in which these core requirements impact an individual's area of focus. The issue that general education requirements detract from a student's major, rather than enhancing it, surfaces again and again. The discussions suggest that many colleges have not been effective in illustrating general education requirements' relevance and connection to specific majors. Indeed, for the most part, rather than seeing general education courses as complementary to and interconnected with their major, several college students are critical of general education courses as having no relevance or applicability to their area of concentration and thus taking them away from courses they would rather be taking.

**"Then there are other people like myself. We know what we want to do. We want to get in there and focus on what we want. We want to stay in that one alley. I kind of feel like college doesn't really offer that. I go to Purdue, which is a big school. You don't get a choice. You have to take all these random classes like psychology and history. I'm an engineer. I probably won't use that stuff. Maybe if they offered a choice . . ."**

**—College student, Indianapolis**

**"I went into school knowing exactly what I wanted to do. And I've always been that kind of person. Once I make a decision, that's it. And so when I was in freshman and sophomore year, when I had to take all the liberal arts curriculum, I just thought it was the biggest waste of time, ever."**

**—College student, Alexandria**

The above criticisms are offered most often by students who see their college education as a means to getting the degree that will get them a job; but even students who take a more broad approach to their education and are favorable toward general education in theory have been disappointed with it in practice. They believe that improvements can be made in the execution of general education at their schools. They echo the criticism that general education requirements often seem irrelevant to their interests and field of focus. And some suggest that structuring the curriculum so that most general education classes must be taken in freshman and sophomore years leaves less chance to link general education classes to their major.

Many are also dissatisfied with the limited options their colleges offer for fulfilling general education requirements. They would like more freedom to choose classes that are interesting to them and not be

limited to general education classes that mainly large 100-level lecture courses. Finally, as mentioned above, some who took AP classes in high school feel that some of their required general education classes did not teach them anything they hadn't already learned in high school.

**"I had all the broad general education [in] high school. I expected something more from college. When I got there, I felt like I was repeating the same things that I had learned in high school. Not a whole lot was tailored to what I want to do with my life. It was kind of disappointing."**

**—College student, Indianapolis**

## **Appendix A**

<b>RATING REASONS PEOPLE HAVE GIVEN FOR GOING TO COLLEGE</b>
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	<u><b>Most important</b></u>	<u><b>Least Important</b></u>
	<b>#</b>	<b>#</b>
<b>A college education will bring more career choices and a greater number of job opportunities.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	15	1
Rising college juniors & seniors	21	2
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>36</b>	<b>2</b>
 <b>A college education will provide me with the specific skills and knowledge required in the field in which I hope to work.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	17	2
Rising college juniors & seniors	13	7
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>30</b>	<b>9</b>
 <b>College will help me to gain more knowledge that will be helpful throughout life—both on and off the job.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	13	2
Rising college juniors & seniors	13	3
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>26</b>	<b>5</b>
 <b>A college education will provide me with the knowledge, capabilities, ethics, and values that are essential to having professional success.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	11	1
Rising college juniors & seniors	14	5
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>25</b>	<b>6</b>

<b>RATING REASONS PEOPLE HAVE GIVEN FOR GOING TO COLLEGE</b>
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	<u>Most important</u>	<u>Least important</u>
	<u>#</u>	<u>#</u>
<b>Attending college will give me the opportunity to meet new and interesting people and experience new social situations.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	13	10
Rising college juniors & seniors	11	9
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>24</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>A college education will help me to be a more critical thinker and problem-solver, better able to adapt in today's ever-changing society and economy.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	4	4
Rising college juniors & seniors	12	2
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>A college education will help to ensure that I make better, more informed decisions about my future, which will enhance my life in the long run.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	11	5
Rising college juniors & seniors	3	2
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>A college degree will help to ensure a higher paying job.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	7	15
Rising college juniors & seniors	6	14
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>13</b>	<b>29</b>

<b>RATING REASONS PEOPLE HAVE GIVEN FOR GOING TO COLLEGE</b>
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<u><b>Most important</b></u>	<u><b>Least Important</b></u>
<b>#</b>	<b>#</b>

**A college education will prepare me for a life of civic responsibility and leadership.**

Rising high school seniors	5	10
Rising college juniors & seniors	3	21
<i>All participants</i>	<b>8</b>	<b>31</b>

**Attending college will give me an opportunity to learn about and from people and cultures that are different from my own.**

Rising high school seniors	1	16
Rising college juniors & seniors	7	7
<i>All participants</i>	<b>8</b>	<b>23</b>

## **Appendix B**

<b>IMPORTANCE OF SELECTED OUTCOMES OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION</b>
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	<u><b>Most critical #</b></u>	<u><b>Least critical #</b></u>
<b>A sense of maturity and how to succeed on your own.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	22	1
Rising college juniors & seniors	23	0
<b><i>All participants</i></b>	<b>45</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Time-management skills.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	20	0
Rising college juniors & seniors	19	0
<b><i>All participants</i></b>	<b>39</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Strong work habits.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	20	1
Rising college juniors & seniors	17	3
<b><i>All participants</i></b>	<b>37</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Self-discipline.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	15	1
Rising college juniors & seniors	20	0
<b><i>All participants</i></b>	<b>35</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Teamwork skills and the ability to get along with and work with people different from yourself.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	16	0
Rising college juniors & seniors	16	2
<b><i>All participants</i></b>	<b>32</b>	<b>2</b>

<b>IMPORTANCE OF SELECTED OUTCOMES OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION</b>
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	<b><u>Most critical</u></b> #	<b><u>Least critical</u></b> #
<b>Tangible business skills, and a specific expertise and knowledge in your field of focus.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	15	0
Rising college juniors & seniors	12	5
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>27</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Independent and critical thinking/reasoning skills.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	7	0
Rising college juniors & seniors	17	1
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>24</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Strong writing and oral/speaking skills.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	7	3
Rising college juniors & seniors	12	1
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>19</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Improved ability to solve problems and think analytically.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	6	3
Rising college juniors & seniors	11	1
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>17</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Exposure to the business world.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	8	3
Rising college juniors & seniors	6	10
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Leadership skills.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	9	3
Rising college juniors & seniors	4	2
<i><b>All participants</b></i>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>

IMPORTANCE OF SELECTED OUTCOMES OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION		
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	<u>Most critical #</u>	<u>Least critical #</u>
<b>Sense of values, principles, and ethics.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	4	2
Rising college juniors & seniors	5	4
<i>All participants</i>	9	7
<b>Tolerance and respect for people of other backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and lifestyles.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	4	4
Rising college juniors & seniors	5	4
<i>All participants</i>	9	8
<b>Competency in computer skills and software.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	5	10
Rising college juniors & seniors	2	15
<i>All participants</i>	7	25
<b>Expanded cultural and global awareness and sensitivity.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	1	13
Rising college juniors & seniors	5	7
<i>All participants</i>	6	20
<b>Appreciation of your role as a citizen and an orientation toward public service.</b>		
Rising high school seniors	1	16
Rising college juniors & seniors	1	14
<i>All participants</i>	2	30

## **Appendix C**

### **VOLUNTEERED DEFINITIONS OF "LIBERAL EDUCATION"**

#### ***Indianapolis rising high school seniors***

Liberal education is a free education. It's the type of learning where you don't have to learn about what you want to go into, but where you can learn other things.

It's creating your own degree and paving the way for yourself. You learn more than just what the books can give you. You are independent.

Liberal equals political.

I have no idea. It's a level of education.

I have no clue, maybe a political party.

Everyone has the right to an education.

It's easier to get into. There are broader classes and arts classes. It's a type of college.

I don't know education as a whole. It's like a percentage.

What the heck? Is it John Kerry's teaching?

It's maybe something to do with politics.

I think maybe it has something to do with learning about the government in some way.

#### ***Indianapolis rising college juniors & seniors***

A liberal education to me would be one, in which, the class structure, the classes you take, are not rigid. A liberal education would give one a variety of choices to complete a major.

There are a wide variety of majors and minors you can learn. Within that major or minor there are different areas of study that the school makes you learn about. It becomes general information, and it's not really important.

Foundation. General. Overall.

It's general, open, and broad.

It's education with choices. You have the freedom to gain knowledge.

A liberal education is an education that emphasizes, or at least acknowledges non-normative values, issues and subjects. It's also an education that is more directed by the student.

They are small private schools. There's a greater focus or education in the arts, such as the liberal arts or language arts.

A liberal education is focusing on a choice. There are a variety of classes that may or may not be specific to a certain subject. It's a general education.

It's an education involving basic communication skills needed to relate to everyday society.

It's politically correct. Everything is right or okay. There is no wrong answer. All points of view are brought to the table or class.

You need to take General Education classes.

### ***Portland rising high school seniors***

It's an education that is necessary to be successful in life. It's education that teaches both sides of the spectrum.

It's an education given out to anybody. It's like high school where anyone can go and get a decent education. It's kind of there for everybody. It gives you the knowledge you need. It's not closed-minded. You learn in different ways.

It's kind of like high school in that you learn things in all sorts of subjects. Just because you are an art major, doesn't mean you don't take math and science classes. But if you went to an arts school then you might not have to take math. There are all kinds of people there too. Like liberal arts, right?

Liberal Arts? Reed College. It's balanced and non-specific. There's psychology, English, and history and not as much science, biology and engineering. The school is not specialized. There are departments within a University. It's an opportunity to interact with all types.

Options. Open-ended.

It's about liberty and freedom. There's free education for all. It's an education with little cost but none too heavy to bear. It's an education that requires you to go but you don't necessarily have to.

It's a broad strokes education. It's an education, which does not dive into one topic, but rather gives you a little bit of everything. It teaches you about many different things and prepares you to be a person who knows something about everything, as opposed to someone who knows everything about something.

I associate it with a broad education and openness to different things. It's an education that will prepare me for what I need to know either at the present time in my life or for my future. It's a good point that you take what you can from it.

Teachers can teach what they want in the way that they want to.

A liberal education to me would be learning without influence. You wouldn't pick apart what you are learning as opinion or truth. It's being free to learn what you want to learn.

It's to become and be taught with much. It's being able to gain and grow on your own with help from others. Free education. Education for everyone. Not specialized. Open-minded. Methods of learning.

### ***Portland rising college juniors & seniors***

It's a well-rounded education that exposes you to a variety of ideas, disciplines, and fields. It encourages appreciation and awareness of a variety of fields. It helps create a well-rounded individual who is knowledgeable about a variety of things. Life is interdisciplinary and so is a liberal education. Thus, this type of education is valuable both personally and professionally. It also allows a person to find and focus on what they truly love to study.

It's an undecided major. Creative individuals. Broad spectrum of major classification. The first two years you explore possibilities. It's limited when they try to enter a different major.

Well rounded. Cultural. It's focused on development and personal growth, not just career preparation. You develop ethics and values.

Diversity in everything. Open-mindedness. The norm. Broad topics.

It's broad. It encourages critical thinking and evaluation. There's an emphasis on non-marketable knowledge and skills that is sometimes wasted on students. It's often overly relativistic and subjective. There is too little emphasis on facts, truths, and knowledge. "I'm okay, you're okay" can go too far. It should be more rigorous. It can be beneficial for many students concentrating in sciences et cetera, if they are themselves.

There's a large breadth of focus. It's not overly specific, but offers more diverse perspectives. There's a wide range of study and knowledge, and an opportunity to learn more from more people. It's fundamental learning versus professional skills.

Well-rounded. Free thinking. Exposure. Critical thinkers. Lots of general courses. Biased views. Private. Small school. World awareness.

Is this opposed to a conservative education? Is this something that Rush Limbaugh and the college Republicans would ridicule? Or maybe it refers to education given liberally, lots of variety et cetera. Perhaps since liberal is an adjective related to the freedom to choose a liberal education may be one, in which, one may choose the way in which he or she accomplishes the final objective of obtaining a degree. If so, I think instituting such a program would be beneficial, fomenting skills that we have previously discussed, such as critical thinking and problem solving.

Critical thinking. Sharing thoughts and opinions. Exploring knowledge. Learning new things due to contemplate. Self-growth due to a new found sense of self-exploration. Generating ideas. Learn from others' ideas, opinions, and actions.

"Touchy-feely" classes. A little bit of everything. Less focus. Choices for the undecided. Less job potential. Very popular.

Many global views. Open to new ideas. It strays more from tradition. It consists of other non-major subjects. It's opinionated. You can speak freely of your own ideas and not be discriminated against, but rather, it's an open environment for conversation of opposing, as well as similar values, opinions, and ideas.

It's straight forward, strict, general, and difficult. There is a large quantity of classes.

### ***Alexandria rising high school seniors***

I have no idea. It sounds like an education that you get in one area and you learn everything about it.

The freedom to choose and learn. Broad education. It's not focused on one specific field. It's a privilege rather than a right, and offers an open door.

You get as much education as you choose to get out of it. It's the basics of an education and the base of your knowledge.

I'm not sure at all what a liberal education could mean. I don't have a clear definition of liberal. Although I do know that in the pure form, liberal is a positive thing, in a lot of cases when liberalistic ideas are implemented into everyday life it does not work out realistically. It seems almost shallow and closed-minded, but for liberal education I really can't have an informed opinion. I am only thinking in the political sense.

It takes on different teaching and learning approaches. Liberal arts schools generally have similar types of people. It's more modern and opinionated.

You have the freedom to learn what you want and have the right to that education. It gives you the ability and right to choose what you do in life and how you get there.

Broad topics are studied and it's less focused.

Literature, writing, and art. It's about freethinking, but it's not very important for today's most popular careers. It will give you more knowledge, but won't make you smarter.

High school is sometimes called mandatory education. College is opened to everyone, everywhere; whether you go or not is up to you. What you do there is up to you. No one is going to stay on your back and always tell you what you should do. While high school is sometimes called mandatory education, college is strictly by choice and you have a lot more freedom there.

### ***Alexandria rising college juniors & seniors***

It's about the arts and anything that is not technical. You have the ability to choose your coursework.

It's not religious or political. It's about free choice, protest, and options. There are limited rules. Berkeley, college radio, and anti-war.

It's a waste of time. It's like high school. You lose the focus. There can be fun classes. It's like freshman year. You don't take them seriously.

You get exposure to a diverse set of subjects. It's non-conservative. There are counter culture views. There's the potential for the erosion of morality and truth. If everything goes, how do you determine what is right and what is wrong? It can be scary, but it can also help you get a well-rounded education.

A liberal education could mean being taught with a left-leaning analysis of issues or ideas. Liberal education could mean being taught in more liberal arts areas of education, such as art, literature, and music.

It brings up both liberal arts, which, to me, means a broad education not involving the hard sciences. It also means a politically liberal education, which is the way a lot of colleges are. The professors teaching are often liberal, and I think that usually people come out of college more liberal than when they came in.

It's well rounded and non-business oriented. To me the term liberal education is synonymous with a well informed, well balanced idea of the world by teaching a more in depth view than is taught in high school.

You have the freedom to choose what you want to study. The arts, writing and literature. Creativity. There's a smaller pool of job opportunities without higher education. It's a broader, more general field of study. It's interesting and pleasurable but more for free time not for college.

It's about open-mindedness, questioning tradition or breaking it even, and thinking beyond the box. It promotes individualism. It's multi-faceted, not focused. It's about acceptance and pushing the envelope.

It's about reading, writing, expressing thought, speaking, communicating, teamwork, and being well rounded and balanced.

There are lots of ideas thrown at you. It's a full spectrum. Progressive versus traditional thought. It teaches the student to think for himself and liberates his thinking. It puts learning much more in the students' hands. It's doing your own thing with the help of a guiding hand.

It's exposure to anything and everything. It's well rounded. It's uncensored learning.

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