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### **Why at least one liberal arts college will never change**

By George S. Bridges

June 20, 2008

A recent article in *The Sun* noted that two more local colleges, Loyola and Villa Julie, are soon to become universities. Both are examples of a national trend in higher education.

In Washington state, a similar drift is occurring. Whitman College, where I am president, is the lone remaining liberal arts college in Washington. We view this as a great honor and an abiding responsibility.

Are traditional liberal arts colleges at risk or in peril? Four years ago, the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education listed fewer than 100 liberal arts colleges with no graduate school where 80 percent or more of all graduates majored in liberal arts and sciences rather than in career-track disciplines. Other surveys show that as many as three out of four students cite career training as their reason for enrolling in college.

Should we at Whitman, a classic liberal arts college, rethink our educational mission? The answer, unequivocally, is no. Schools whose foundation is the liberal arts and whose essence is close, collaborative education, where students are viewed as cohorts, must continue and enhance what we do.

"Never" has the ring of absoluteness that runs counter to the first principle of learning that occurs at a liberal arts college. But Whitman College, now 126 years old, will never become a university. We will not need to in order to thrive.

Universities have enviable resources for pre-professional training (pound for pound, so do small schools such as Whitman), but liberal arts colleges have the greatest intellectual property of all: exceptional teaching. Our purpose - to endow undergraduate students with an intense liberal education that applies to any profession or occupation in life - is clear. High faculty-student ratios are anathema to us. Classes taught by graduate students are unknown to us. Close dialogue and collaborative research between faculty and students are an imperative for us. Our model must be working, or "honors" colleges would not be a current trend among universities.

Liberal arts colleges offer great breadth over specialization. Our design and curriculum enrich the minds of our students, enhance their character and stir their individual spirit. And what better time for this to occur than when they are coming into adulthood, discovering who they are as humans and members of a society?

The refrain still surfaces about a degree from a liberal arts school: "What do you intend to do with it?" If I were a graduating senior from Whitman or Williams College or St. John's College, my short answer would be: "Anything and everything." Students in a liberal arts college setting learn for the sheer delight and discovery of knowledge.

The value of that learning extends well beyond the acquisition of skills (just as gathering information does not guarantee gaining wisdom). The practicality of knowing thyself, the core of the liberal arts experience, is indisputable. It informs every facet of our lives, from personal preferences to career choices.

The practical outcomes of a liberal arts education are myriad. Of our own recent graduates, Thuy Dao, a meticulous researcher in our biochemistry, biophysics and molecular biology program and the first person in her family to graduate from college, just completed the first year of a doctoral program at the Johns Hopkins University on her way to becoming a scientist. Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg, a politics major, is the founder of a scholarship program for young Kenyan women. Michael Wert, a double major in economics and BBMB, works for a major brokerage house in San Francisco.

And then there is an alumnus from Whitman's Class of 1971 who interviewed for the Foreign Service shortly after he graduated. In the interview, the group threw him a curve. They suggested that there was no such thing as American culture and asked the young scholar to respond. He promptly reminded them that the French poet Charles Baudelaire was greatly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe. He went on to explain, without a hint of indignation, how Baudelaire was influenced by Poe. His information was brilliant, but his manner and presence of mind were even more exemplary.

That student is Ryan C. Crocker, ambassador to Iraq and former U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, Kuwait, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. His major at Whitman was English literature. That represents why Whitman College will never become a university.

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