Would you advise a college-bound student to gain a broad liberal arts education or enroll in a professional program like business, engineering or nursing? Considering the escalating cost of higher education and the scarcity of jobs for graduates, there is little wonder that 68 percent of students are opting for vocational majors. Business students alone comprise 21 percent of all college majors.

But can business school graduates succeed without a liberal education in a globalized economy marked by complexity, ambiguity and cultural diversity? Not according to a Carnegie Foundation report on “Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education,” which argues that the liberal arts must be intertwined with business programs for graduates to work effectively in the 21st century.

The report cites the lack of integration of the learning experience as the greatest malady in higher education, and calls for a “reciprocal integration” of business and the liberal arts.

It notes that liberal arts programs can learn from business educators about the use of case studies, simulations, teamwork and real-world projects that pull together diverse subjects in engaging learning experiences. And business programs can learn from the liberal arts in probing underlying assumptions, giving students an understanding of multiple perspectives and developing a personal world view.

As the Carnegie report explains, by divorcing business programs from the liberal arts, we seem to have lost a sense that college is a time for undergraduate students to ask large questions, examine long-held beliefs and gain a new self-identity. College serves not just to prepare for a job but to acquire an enlarged understanding of the world, to arouse intellectual curiosity, and to take responsibility for the public good.

In founding the first business school, Joseph Wharton sought to create highly educated professionals with an interest in serving not only their businesses but also the larger society. Over time, this civic sense of business with professional managers balancing the interests of diverse stakeholders lost ground, replaced by a sense of business as economic efficiency and technical productivity, with profit for shareholders as the sole objective of the enterprise.
Now, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, business education has come under the microscope, accused of turning out graduates narrowly educated in technique and more interested in getting ahead than improving the prosperity of society.

According to the Carnegie report, business education ought to aim at developing managerial judgment, which requires an education in practical reasoning or the ability to draw on knowledge and skills in particular situations. Such an education requires more than technical proficiency; it requires a broad and critical education including integrative thinking or the art of balancing and reconciling sometimes contrary positions — a thesis that Roger Martin, the dean of the Rotman School of Management, developed in the book “The Opposable Mind” in support of bringing liberal arts thinking into business schools.

Some universities, including the University of Southern Maine, have launched imaginative general education programs that create learning communities made up of cohesive course clusters including an integrative capstone course. But the report criticizes others for offering a general education that is largely episodic and often irrelevant to the primary interest of the business major. The Carnegie Foundation does not believe that general education alone can achieve the goal of reciprocal integration.

The report points to model programs including NYU’s Stern School’s four-course liberal arts sequences and its capstone course on Professional Responsibility and Leadership, a case-based approach that exposes students to the three modes of liberal education: analytical thinking to move from the particular to the generalizable, multiple framing to see things in different contexts, and self-reflection to explore meaning, values and commitment.

The report also praises Wharton’s Huntsman program in International Studies and Business, which offers students a double major with extensive course work in international studies, economics and business, the mastery of a second language and a study abroad experience.

Students should not have to choose between liberal education and a professional program. It is incumbent upon universities to make room in their curriculums for students to take both types of programs within their four years. To achieve this objective, professional programs will have to trim back their total credit requirements for the undergraduate major to make room for the liberal arts. And it will require liberal arts programs to become more relevant to the challenges these professionals will face in their future work. Our students, their future employers and society will be the beneficiaries of this reciprocal integration.

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